

LISSON GALLERY

ArtReview

February 2020

Watching Wael Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show* (2010), I found myself singing along. In the film, which uses marionettes to tell a history of the Crusades from an Arab perspective, a group of costumed puppets dance to an infectious melody picked out by ecstatic whoops and claps. In New York's MOMA PS1 I opened Shazam on my phone, but the app didn't recognise the tune and a moment later the scene changed. The song lasted less than a minute, and I haven't heard it since. But four years later, I can still recall that melody. (The same cannot be said for the intricacies of the Crusades.)

In *Musiophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (2007), Oliver Sacks offers some context on how tenacious earworms can be. In his mid-seventies, he could still hear in his inner ear a Hebrew song about a little goat, sung on Seder nights in his Orthodox childhood home. His point is not that earworms offer Proustian portals to our past but that melodies are encoded in the brain directly. While the taste and smell of a coffee-soaked madeleine might conjure memories of the past by association, music is patterned like the mind itself. If a song is sufficiently catchy – simple and repetitive – you might remember it for the rest of your life. Brushing your teeth, say, or waiting for a train, the tune can at any point erupt into your consciousness and loop uncontrollably. This is disheartening news for anyone familiar with *Axel F* by Crazy Frog.

I happened to be listening to Robyn's *Baby Forgive Me* while reading Sacks's book and, while I've had to reread chapters from *Musiophilia* to jog my memory of it, I can pull up her melancholy synth line without effort. The culmination of a neurologist's lifelong fascination with music and a four-bar loop in a synth-pop banger can't be directly compared, but, as Sacks argues and Robyn demonstrates, music and memory are intimately linked. This sensitivity can leave us vulnerable.

My brain is particularly susceptible to the kind of chipper, major-key melodies and clap-happy rhythms of Shawky's tune: a residue, perhaps, of enjoying the songs I sang in primary school assemblies. Songwriters and ad-execs know exactly how powerful a memorable line can be. I will never resent David Bowie for inscribing the riff from *Sound and Vision* into my mind, but I can't say the same for "Washing machines live longer with Calgon!" or the insidious jingle for Capital FM circa 1995, which give me the sense that, as William Burroughs warned, mass media is a virus that allows corporations to wriggle into and control our minds. However hard I try to filter my exposure, I absorb and store sonic input indiscriminately: it makes no difference to my unconscious brain if a tune is delivered by a great artist or on behalf of Cillit Bang.

Sounding off



Patrick Langley gets trapped in the music

The wall separating art from the propaganda of consumer capitalism is, on a neurological level, more permeable than I want to admit.

Sacks argues that music is 'engraved' on a 'defenceless' brain and calls the ubiquity of music in the modern age a 'bombardment'. I thought he was overstating the case until I remembered the tinnitus-induced musical hallucinations my late step-grandmother suffered from during her final years, when the theme song from *Chariots of Fire* played in her head day and night. She described her experience as 'torture'. It prompted me to think again about how dangerous earworms are, and whether I'll eventually pay the price for looping tracks like Robyn's while I wash the dishes.

For hearing people, the only way properly to legislate against the torment of a stuck song in old age is to avoid music altogether. But who among us could do that? I like to think that the art I love, in its ambivalence and complexity, mitigates against the reductive, viral forms of consumer culture that earworms help to propagate. We may be defenceless against these mnemonic devices but, as Shawky's video demonstrated, the simplest of forms can be a vehicle for open-ended and unresolved content. That they can encapsulate an issue without diminishing its complexity is due in part, I think, to repetition and in part to the fact that melody ultimately transcends language. As such, Shawky's song distilled an impossibly complex history and irresistibly simple truth: that we would do better to listen to other cultures than enter into wars against them.

Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades 111: The Secrets of Karbalaa* (still), 2010, 1110 film, colour, sound, English subtitles © the artist. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London & New York

Patrick Langley is a critic and novelist based in London

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Wael Shawky, *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbalaa* (still), 2015, HD film, colour, sound, English subtitles. © the artist. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London & New York

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Artforum
December 2019

ARTFORUM

NEW YORK

Wael Shawky

LISSON GALLERY

The sensuous impact of Wael Shawky's exhibition "The Gulf Project Camp" at Lisson Gallery was stunning, immediate. Soaring walls glistened, slicked with a pearly pink that offset the poisonously fulgent cyan of a crumbly, crenellated gypsum structure zigzagging to nowhere in the middle of the room. Then we noticed the scent—a deeply historical aroma that emanated from five grand reliefs exquisitely crafted out of hefty timber planks that were between four hundred and two thousand years old. The gallery told me the ancient cellulose was obtained from a company in Mestre, Italy, known for its vast resources, but I wondered if the wood was truly that old or if I was falling for a bit of mythmaking—which would be in keeping with the program of Shawky's "Gulf Project Camp" series, with its encrypted allusions to the history of the Arab peninsula commingled with layers of fantasy.

The first of these pieces was *The Gulf Project Camp: Carved wood* (after *Khamsa 'Five Poems' by Nizami, 1442*), all works 2019, whose title references a splendid illuminated manuscript of poems by Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209), a hero of Persian literature. Sprouting out of terra-cotta and pastel-blue rocks is a gorgeous building—its facade cut with seemingly impossible and intricately rendered patterns—replete with arches, ramparts supporting azure turrets, and a dome. The palace's various wings are depicted in a flat, stylized perspective—appropriate to the kind of art that was created in Ganjavi's era. And looming behind all of this is an enormous animal equipped with a curiously impressive nose. Its blue skin is textured with delicate carvings to indicate shaggy fur. The beast's eye is closed—so that the viewer could admire its luxurious lashes.

In the massive *The Gulf Project Camp: Carved wood* (after 'Hajj [Panoramic Overview of Mecca]' by Andreas Magnus Hunglinger, 1803), we found a dinosaur-like being with an elegant, attenuated neck and a craggy, mountainous body. It peacefully guards the extraordinary (and extraordinarily empty) holy site of the work's title. *The Gulf Project Camp: Mirror* (after Mir Sayyid Ali's 'Nightlife of the Palace',

1539–1543 CE), was one of the show's two marvelous bas-relief glass pieces manufactured by the Berengo Studio in Venice. In it, a mystical, camel-like creature presides over a monochromatic tableau in pale petal pink where the exterior of a royal dwelling has been removed to reveal a city's worth of small figures busily engaged in activities from serving bread to sermonizing. A mirror placed behind the glass allowed us to see its crystalline layers, veined with minuscule cracks and speckled with air bubbles, adding to the sense of timeworn beauty.

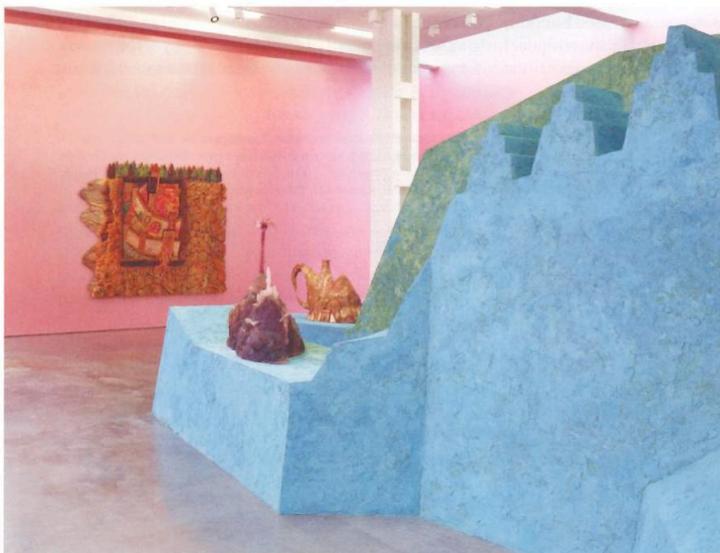
Shawky then absconded into pure reverie with a theatrical gypsum construction supporting five sculptures that are paradoxically futuristic while also belonging to some alternative past. A fuchsia palm tree and roseate architectural ruin, *The Gulf Project Camp: Glass Sculpture # 1*, seemed to glow as if extracted from a luminous computer screen, while the bronze *The Gulf Project Camp: Sculpture # 4* presented a creepily arachnoid mountain range containing a proudly erect minaret.

Shawky's projects tend to be substantial and imposing in their materiality and are sometimes accompanied by ethereal drawings, like footnotes to his slippery stories. That was the case here, too—a side gallery presented thirty-seven mixed-media paintings on cotton paper. Recognizable figures emerged (Richard Nixon's leering mug; a suspicious-looking King Faisal of Saudi Arabia), but they didn't illuminate Shawky's abstractly poetic narrative so much as interject iconography culled from numerous sources to confound a peaceful, chimerical landscape.

At the gallery's front desk was a copy of Abdul Rahman Munif's 1984 novel, *Cities of Salt*, about the discovery of oil in an idyllic oasis. In an interview about the book, the author predicted a time when "the first waves will dissolve the salt and reduce these great glass cities [of the Persian Gulf] to dust." But his book ends with the words "hope for the best. No one can read the future." Shawky, similarly, dismantles canonical histories of the region's past. His art makes room for magic, faith, and strangeness, offering us possibilities we couldn't otherwise imagine.

—Ania Szremski

View of "Wael Shawky," 2019. Background: *The Gulf Project Camp: Carved wood* (after 'Nighttime in a City' by Mir Sayyid Ali, c.1540), 2019. Foreground, from left: *The Gulf Project Camp: Glass Sculpture # 1*, 2019; *The Gulf Project Camp: Sculpture # 5*, 2019.



Pierre Soulages

LÉVY GORVY

In an homage to Pierre Soulages's indomitable spirit, this mini survey at Lévy Gorvy featured twenty of the French artist's oils made between 1954 and 2019. He is still amazingly productive and still obsessed with the color black, even at the grand old age of ninety-nine. At this stage of the human life cycle, the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson has said, the only choice a person has is to either stagnate or to keep pushing along, full steam ahead. Soulages has clearly chosen the latter. He has never stopped being generative, despite the fact that his trademark hue is "a totally dead silence . . . a silence with no possibilities," as Wassily Kandinsky wrote. The Russian abstractionist also said that "the silence of black is the silence of death," but clearly Soulages has found in it life and enormous creative possibility. Each of Soulages's canvases is like a phoenix that has risen from the ashes. His briskly varied strokes—flamboyant or calm, sharp or slapdash—are exquisitely nuanced and fresh. By comparison, Ad Reinhardt's solemn, dusky monochromes feel static, dead-end.

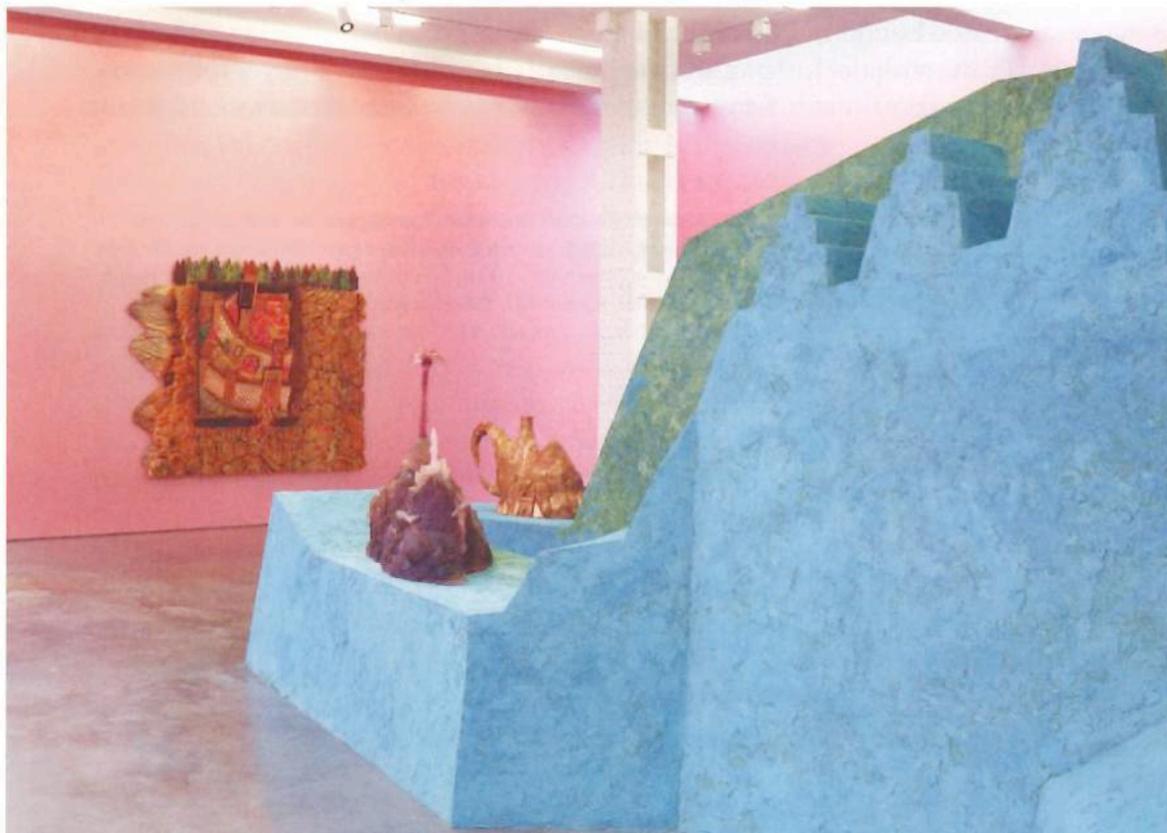
Kandinsky also stated that black is "a kind of neutral background against which the minutest shades of other colours stand clearly forward." But the creamy yellow of Soulages's *Peinture 125 x 202 cm, 30 octobre 1958* (Painting 125 x 202 cm, October 30, 1958) is slowly but surely being absorbed into the twilight, while the hints of sky blue lurking between the onyx slabs of *Peinture 130 x 97 cm, 5 mai 1959* (Painting 130 x 97 cm, May 5, 1959) all but disappear, like the straws

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from left: *The Gulf*
Project Camp: Glass
Sculpture # 1, 2019;
The Gulf Project Camp:
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Artnet
15 October, 2019

artnet® news

On View

'I'm Questioning How Much I Believe in It': Artist Wael Shawky on His Fantastical Remapping of Arab History

The artist playfully thumbs at the boundaries between history and storytelling.

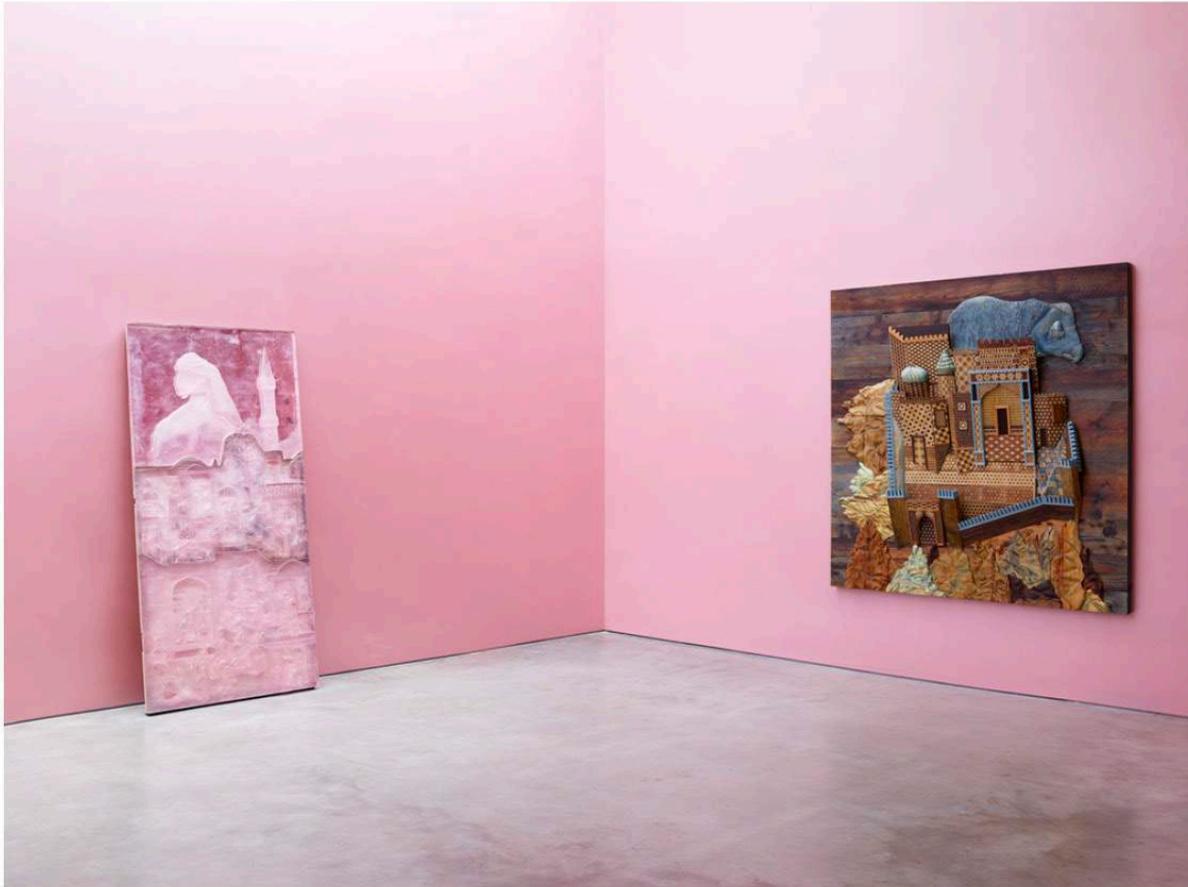
Katie White, October 15, 2019



Installation view of "Wael Shawky: The Gulf Project Camp," 2019. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

Maps are the age-old tool that help us humans orient ourselves, allowing us to conceptualize the world's terrain and land masses all the way down to our own neighborhood blocks. And, as our everyday reliance on GPS today would indicate, people trust maps.

But for Alexandria-born artist Wael Shawky, maps are better thought of as imaginary spaces—where mountains are flattened, lands are stretched and shrunk, rushing waterways marked as steady lines. All historical documents are, in his view, a mode of storytelling, and the narrators are not always so reliable.



Installation view of “Wael Shawky: The Gulf Project Camp,” 2019. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

In “The Gulf Project Camp,” Shawky’s debut exhibition at Lisson Gallery in New York, and his first show in the city since MoMA PS1’s “Cabaret Crusades” in 2015, the artist is immersing visitors in a theatrical sculptural environment that melds together antiquated European maps of the Middle East, Shawky’s own drawings, and scenes and figures from the history and lore of the Arabian Peninsula.

A mountain-like crenelated, turquoise wall installation dominates the gallery, which also serves as a stage for a few of the artist's new bronze sculptures – themselves whimsical amalgamations of animals and terrains of the region. Elsewhere are intricate wood relief carvings dated between 400 and 2000 years old, ice-like cast glass sculptures produced in Venice, and, in a smaller back room, several dozen of Shawky's new ink and oil drawings



Installation view of "Wael Shawky: The Gulf Project Camp," 2019. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

Throughout the exhibition, Shawky playfully thumbs at the boundaries between history and storytelling. This ethos is captured nicely in a wood-carving entitled *The Gulf Project Camp: Carved wood (after 'Hajj (Panoramic Overview of Mecca)'* by *Andreas Magnus Hunglinger, 1803*. The work depicts a 17th-century map of Mecca drawn by a European cartographer—an incongruous continental European mountain range fills the background. To his own version Shawky has added a creature that's part camel, part rock formation, which sits monumentally in the background, unpinning any lingering associations with a factual reality.

Curious and playful absurdities abound. Shawky has been researching and developing many of the ideas explored in the show for a forthcoming new film series titled *The Gulf Project*, which will focus on the Arab Peninsula from the 17th century to the present day, and the transformation of the urbanism and ruling families in Gulf societies. Perhaps the films will draw history in harder lines, but here at least it is presented as a plaything, acting out in costumes and colors, or like an illustrated storybook that's waiting for its newest retelling



Installation view of "Wael Shawky: The Gulf Project Camp," 2019. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

Reviews /

Wael Shawky Takes on the 'Dinosaur' of US Imperialism in the Gulf



BY MURTAZA VALI
9 OCT 2019

The artist's fantastical sculptures and bas reliefs, on view at Lisson, New York, combine prehistoric creatures with oil barons and kings

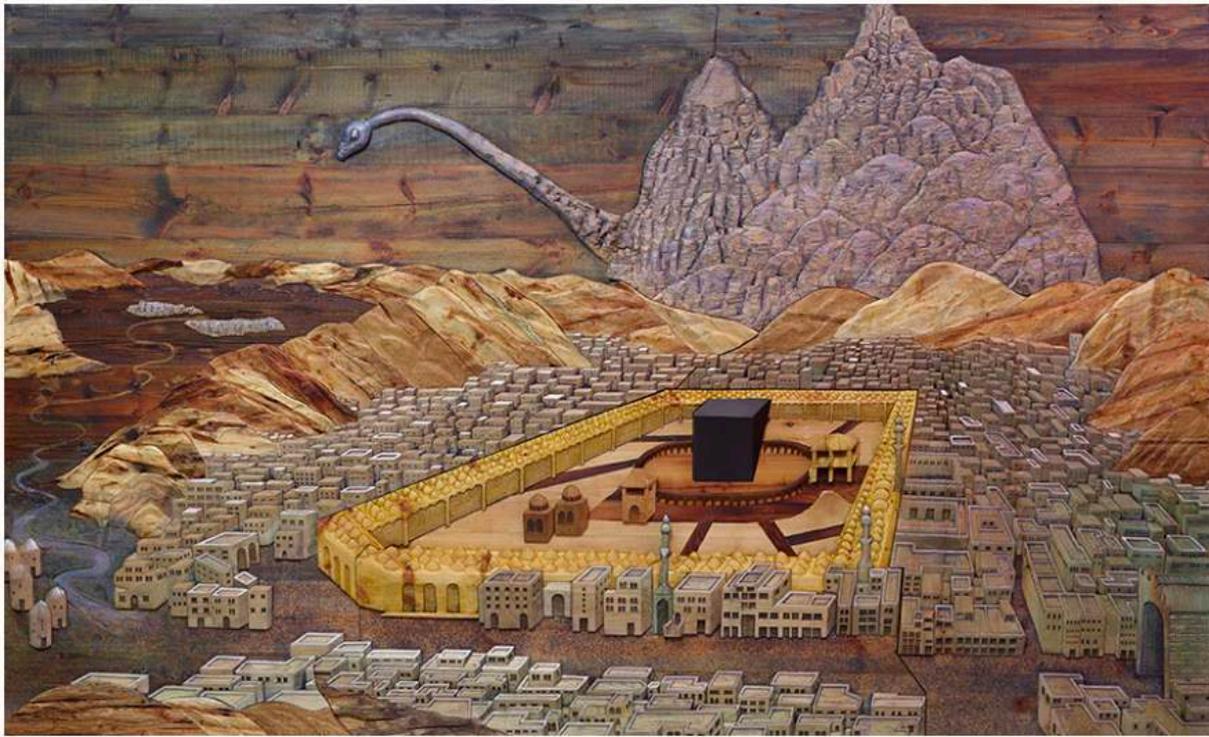


A follow-up to 'Cabaret Crusades' (2010–2015), his widely-exhibited trilogy of films narrating the Crusades from an Arab perspective, Wael Shawky's latest exhibition, 'The Gulf Project Camp', focuses on the history of the Arabian Peninsula since the 17th century. At the show's entrance, a hand-drawn map depicting historical regional powers, such as the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires, sketches out its geographical scope. If 'Cabaret Crusades' traced the origins of European colonialism in the Levant, Shawky's latest work tackles the American imperialism that followed the discovery of oil there.



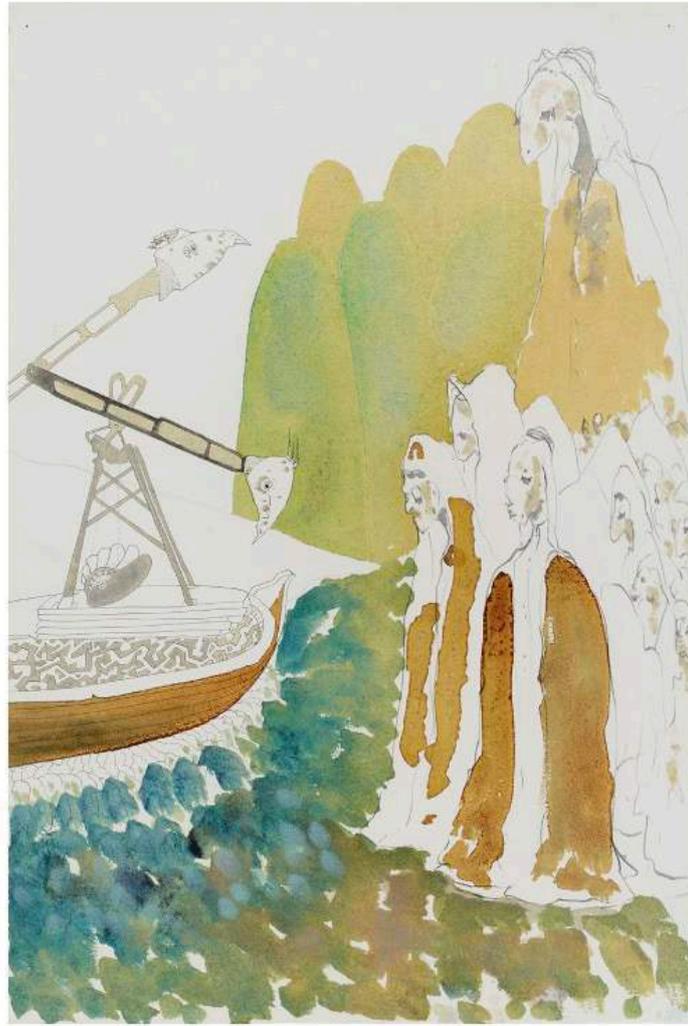
Wael Shawky, *The Gulf Project Camp: Sculpture # 1*, 2019, bronze, asphalt and tar, 96 x 190 x 65 cm. Courtesy: © Wael Shawky and Lisson Gallery

A series of large bas-reliefs draw their visual cues from the art and visual culture of the period: from the famous miniatures of Mir Sayyid Ali, active during the mid-1500s at both the Safavid and Mughal courts, to other frequently illuminated medieval texts such as the 'Khamsa' of Nizami (12th century) or Jami's 'Haft Awrang' (c.1468-1485). Shawky deftly transforms the characteristic flattened perspective of these vignettes of court life and palace intrigue into interlocking jumbles of richly patterned planes hand-carved out of antique wood or cast from translucent glass. In his monumental painted panel *The Gulf Project Camp: Carved wood (after 'Hajj (Panoramic Overview of Mecca)' by Andreas Magnus Hunglinger, 1803)* (2019), he eerily empties the view in an 1803 panorama of Mecca of its people, situating it in a time before or beyond history. The only sign of life is a dinosaur surveying the site, its long slender neck emerging from a mountain that also stands in as its body. Appearing throughout these works, such fantastical beasts are benign presences, their thickly lashed eyes closed demurely as if lost in thought or reverie. When such creatures are absent, Shawky cleverly renders the craggy terrain surrounding his cityscapes in a manner that suggests scaly reptilian skin, sublimating the mythic into the natural. This monstrous fusion of animal, architecture and landscape is most successful in the accompanying sculptures (four in bronze, one in luminous lavender glass), which suggest scenes from a post-apocalyptic future as much as some primordial past. The sculptures are displayed on an enormous zig-zagging wall, whose crenellations and faux-stucco surface recall the region's dusty architecture while its teal colour adds another touch of otherworldly whimsy.



Wael Shawky, *The Gulf Project Camp: Carved wood (after 'Hajj (Panoramic Overview of Mecca)' by Andreas Magnus Hunglinger, 1803)*, 2019, oil on carved wood, 250 x 400 x 15 cm. Courtesy: © Wael Shawky and Lisson Gallery

In the back room, a series of wonderfully playful mixed media drawings ('The Gulf Project Camp: Drawings', 2019) feels like exploratory sketches for the objects or, perhaps, a mood board for a forthcoming film. Here, historical references are more overt, featuring images of key power players who have shaped the Gulf – from the nineteenth-century Ottoman general Ahmed Mokhtar Pasha to more familiar faces, such as Ayatollah Khomeini, Richard Nixon and King Faisal. The machinery and infrastructure of oil extraction and transportation also appear: a tanker filled with cylindrical vats, a wrecked oil truck, various boats, airplanes and even a submarine. In Abdelrahman Munif's epic *Cities of Salt* (1984), one of the few literary texts that narrate the effects of oil's discovery on the region's desert-dwellers (a copy of which sits on the gallery's front desk), the natives regard such monstrous modern intrusions with fascination and fear. Shawky visualizes this apprehension: the bobbing ends of derricks are transformed into beaked avian heads, while camels in cowboy hats and suits caricature American oilmen.



Wael Shawky,
*The Gulf Project
Camp: Drawing
29, 2019,*
graphite, ink,
oil and mixed
media on
cotton paper,
57 x 38 cm.
Courtesy: ©
Wael Shawky
and Lisson
Gallery

In interviews, Shawky has discussed his use of myth, metamorphosis and the monstrous as strategies for challenging the authority of history. In these surreal drawings satire emerges as an effective mode of critique in a region where history continues to be heavily contested and is often dictated by the state. They also capture the absurd speed and scale by which the oil boom jolted nomadic communities into futuristic urbanization. Shawky brilliantly illustrates this transition – which profoundly scrambled traditional ways of living in and understanding the world throughout the Gulf region – as a chair swing ride that resembles a mechanized palm tree, or a supersized cheeseburger mysteriously floating out at the sea.

Wael Shawky, 'The Gulf Project Camp' continues at Lisson Gallery, New York, USA, through 16 October 2019.

Main image: Wael Shawky, The Gulf Project Camp: Desertscape # 1, 2019, oil on carved wood, 575 x 290 x 18 cm. Courtesy: © Wael Shawky and Lisson Gallery

LISSON GALLERY

Art in America
8 October, 2019

Art in America

REVIEWS Oct 8, 2019

Sultans, Hybrid Creatures, and Richard Nixon Mingle in Wael Shawky's Fantastical Gulf Landscape

NEW YORK

at Lisson



For Wael Shawky's exhibition at Lisson, "The Gulf Project Camp," the gallery's walls were painted bubblegum pink and the main room was dominated by a mammoth sky-blue structure. What at first suggested the venue for a turbocharged gender-reveal party was in fact a lavish installation offering a deep dive into Middle Eastern history. The works on view (all 2019) related to Shawky's forthcoming film series "The Gulf Project," which, according to the exhibition materials, will explore the physical and economic development of the Arabian Gulf from the seventeenth century to today through the lives of its ruling families. The presentation cast extensive historical research through the lens of fantasy, recalling the projects for which Shawky is best known: the film trilogies "Al Araba al Madfuna" (2012–16),

based on Egyptian writer Mohamed Mustagab's phantasmagorical short stories of rural Egyptian life, and "Cabaret Crusades" (2010–15), which reconstructs the eponymous religious wars through puppetry.

The show felt like a stage set, with props and scenery in place but no actors to interact with them. It was theatrical and impotent at once—a fitting metaphor for the Gulf, where mimesis is elevated to a state policy (build copies of other places and they will come) and frustrated ambitions of the type exemplified by Dubai's long-delayed Falconcity of Wonders, a massive real estate development with internationally themed neighborhoods and replicas of world monuments, are common. The aforementioned blue structure contributed greatly to the exhibition's staginess. Serving as a pedestal for bronze sculptures depicting chimeric hybrids of architectural models and mythological creatures of a sort you might find beautifully illuminated in a medieval bestiary, it was an elaborate construction replete with crenellated walls, steps, and an alleyway.

Five stunning reliefs carved in wood and accented with metallic paint hung on the surrounding walls. They depict views of the Gulf region's landscapes and palace life adapted from early modern sources, primarily Iranian and Indian miniatures. The largest, however, is based on an 1803 panoramic engraving by the Austrian orientalist Andreas Magnus Hunglinger that shows the inner compound of Mecca during the Hajj but without the worshippers who would usually throng this type of scene. Looming over the landscape in Shawky's version is a curiously machinelike mash-up of a brontosaurus and the Loch Ness monster, a hybrid creature that makes several cameos in the works. According to the exhibition text, the relief was carved from wood that is "between 400 and 2,000 years old." (The bombast is an extremely Gulf move.)

A suite of drawings in a back room, suggesting film storyboards, rendered key moments in the region's genealogies of power in a similarly fantastical language. *Drawing #5* depicts military helicopters awaiting a giant hamburger arriving by sea, echoing the arrival of sixteenth-century Portuguese ships seen in *Drawing #2*—a deft analogy of hard and soft power, colonists old and new. In *Drawing #16*, we see King Faisal of Saudi Arabia meeting Richard Nixon in 1971, inaugurating the cozy Saudi-US relationship that continues to the present day, their bodies blending in with their architectural surroundings.

We know that the transmission of history is arbitrary, constructed, and rife with mythmaking. But Shawky turns the fiction up to eleven, engineering a candy-colored historical topography for the Gulf that's as realistic as Agrabah in Disney's *Aladdin*. It's particularly successful since the Gulf itself effaces its past, by way of hyperdevelopment, and has an outside reputation that lends its own surrealist cast to the affair.



REVIEW - 13 APR 2018

Around Town: Sharjah March Meetings

For the three-day event in the UAE, the best works and talks were ones in which geographical and cultural hybridity shone through

BY PABLO LARIOS

It's early evening in Sharjah. I'm one of 100-odd people sitting in an outdoor square, flanked by the cubic buildings of the city's old town. Before us glows a cartoonish diorama of a Mediterranean city: red-roofed houses, a pink river, city walls and crumbling towers. On stage, around 20 men begin to tap the lulling baritone of jahlahs and clay-pot drums, singing fidjeri, the songs sung by pearl divers in the Gulf. For Wael Shawky's *Song of Roland: The Arabic Version* (2017), the foundational epic of Old French is transposed to classical Arabic and traditional song. While the original *chanson de geste* (song of heroic deeds) from c.1100 glorifies the defeat of Carolingian armies during a Basque-Qasawi Muslim ambush in the Pyrenees in 778 CE, Shawky's reversal of its Eurocentrism is biting and topical in an age of renewed fault lines between East and West, religion and secularism: 'for wrong is with the Muslims, but with the Christians right'.



Wael Shawky, *The Song of Roland: The Arabic Version*, 2018, performance documentation, Sharjah Art Foundation's March Meeting 2018. Courtesy: Sharjah Art Foundation

'Active Forms', this year's March Meeting (the eleventh edition, held at the Sharjah Art Foundation), was an impassioned three-day tangle of performances, five exhibitions and numerous discussions, mostly hinging on our globalized present in which periphery and centre are knotted. The presenters were refreshingly global, hailing from Australia, Bangladesh, the Gulf, Iraq, Japan, Lebanon, Palestine and elsewhere; from Kazakhstan, Almagul Menlibayeva spoke about her photography documenting climate change in the Aral Sea, which has all but disappeared after the Soviet diversion of its source rivers.

The best works and talks were ones in which geographical and cultural hybridity shone through in all its messiness. Mona Saudi's exhibition, 'Poetry and Form', assembled the artist's delightfully weird, formalistic, abstract stone sculptures and drawings influenced by her personal correspondence with Arab-language poets Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish. In the 'Active Forms' exhibition, Maha Maamoun's video *Dear Animal* (2006) sees a drug dealer turn into a goat-like animal (from a story by Egyptian writer Haytham el-Wardany): a compelling articulation of the ways in which myth converges with personal experience. At the heritage house of Bait Al Serkal, Cairo-based artist Anna Boghiguan presented an impressive retrospective of her life's work (which has travelled from Castello di Rivoli, Turin), seemingly set in a future-present in which the world's bees have become extinct and the boats that once carried salt for trading are beached (*The Salt Traders*, 2015). Besides wafting sails, artist books, collages and paintings (such as the 90-piece drawing suite from 2011-12, 'Unfinished Symphony', there's a life-sized representation of her Cairo studio, and a hidden room in which dead bees drip from a giant wax ear (*Tunnel of Life*, 2018), like a surreal ode to history's unreal turns.



Anna Boghiguan, *The Salt Traders*, 2018, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view: Sharjah Art Foundation, 2018. Courtesy of Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea on loan from Fondazione per l'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea CRT; photograph: Sharjah Art Foundation

Speakers pointed to our need, in the arts and elsewhere, for modes of cultural intersectionality: welcoming differences of geography, context and intention. Artists Marwa Arsanios, Dale Harding and Naeem Mohaiemen showed how terms such as Global South and Third World are in themselves conflictual: the now-derided nomenclature Third World was once associated with theorist Homi K. Bhabha's positive notion of a Third Space. Mohaiemen spoke of networks of radical South-East Asian publishers in New York in the run-up to 9/11; Harding, of museums as sites of tension and exclusion for his partly indigenous Australian family.

Reversing the dominant gaze emerged as a common concern: for example, in filmmakers John Akomfrah and Reem Shilleh's presentation about the 'militant image' or in the Kuwait-born artist Monira Al-Qadiri's talk, partly about her decade spent in Japan. Malian writer, filmmaker and theorist Manthia Diawara offered some insight into how to connect disparate lands and political activism, relating *négritude*, 1960s pan-Africanism and pan-Arab movements. Diawara followed cultural theorist and poet Édouard Glissant (who died in 2011) on a cross-Atlantic trip that ended in Glissant's native Martinique: 'I accept my opacity,' Glissant said. 'Everyone likes broccoli, but I hate it. But do I know why?'



Hajra Waheed, *Hold everything dear*, 2018, performance documentation. Courtesy: Sharjah Art Foundation

Unsurprisingly, it was the older participants who had the most to say. Reading a new essay, 'Art and Resistance' (2018), Rasheed Araeen spoke of the expectation he met in the UK, when he moved from Pakistan in 1964, that he make art representative of his identity: 'My experience of being defined by this continued imperialism was so shattering that I could not ignore it.' He penned manifestos and founded journals such as Black Phoenix and Third Text to bring these issues to the fore. 'My point', Araeen stated, 'is that imperialism has not ended and is still here, and it influences the production of art and its legitimation,' adding: 'Without resisting and confronting it we cannot produce anything worthwhile.'

It seems apt that no common language of resistance emerged in 'Active Forms'. The best artists here demonstrated that the way forward lies in encouraging hybridities and syncretism – the very 'creolization' spoken of by Glissant. If we don't embrace the strange unwieldiness of the pluralities of our time, we'll fall back into the dichotomous medievalism of 'The Song of Roland', which presaged: 'Ye are likely to fight such a battle as was never fought before.'

The 10th March Meeting, 'Active Forms' <<http://sharjahart.org/march-meeting-2018>> , 2018, ran at Sharjah Art Foundation from 17–19 March.

Main image: Zineb Sedira, Sunken Stories (detail), 2018, wooden boats, resin, stainless steel and steel reinforcement bars, dimensions variable, installation view, SAF Art Spaces, Sharjah. Courtesy: Sharjah Art Foundation

Wael Shawky, *CABARET CRUSADES, THE HORROR SHOW FILE*, 2010, HD video, color, sound, 31 min 49 sec / *KABARETTISTISCHE KREUZZÜGE, DIE HORRORSHOW-AKTE*, HD-Video, Farbe, Ton.

BORIS GROYS

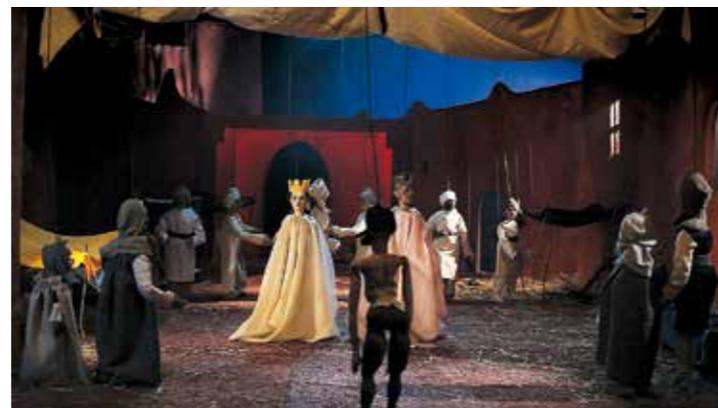
THE RETURN OF THE STRINGS

Wael Shawky's "Cabaret Crusades" video trilogy—*THE HORROR SHOW FILE* (2010), *THE PATH TO CAIRO* (2012), and *THE SECRETS OF KARBALA* (2014)—tells the story of the first Crusade. Started by a call issued by Pope Urban II in 1095 to conquer the Holy Land, it led to the establishment of the kingdom of Jerusalem by the Crusaders and ended with their defeat by the armies of Saladin nearly a hundred years later. Shawky's narrative is adapted from historian Amin Maalouf's book *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (1984), which is written from a perfectly modern, secular perspective: History is narrated as made by men who are driven by interests and passions. The videos tell the story of the violent expansion of the Crusaders into Muslim lands, of terror against the population, of treason and intrigues that dominated Muslim politics in these years and made resistance against the Crusaders almost impossible. Only very slowly did the Muslims find political and

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military unity that was necessary for liberation. In other words, on the level of narration we have here a piece of secular, modern historiography as it is generally practiced in our time.

However, on the visual level Shawky's videos plunge viewers into the atmosphere of the medieval chronicles. The principle characters of the story are represented by marionettes rather than by living actors and the "real" landscapes of the Middle East are substituted by highly artificial medieval miniatures. Medieval chronicles, including the chronicles of the Crusades, do not clearly differentiate between history and myth, acts of men and acts of God, natural and supernatural powers, men and animals, living and dead. Their true topic is the miraculous: the promise of the miracle, waiting for the miracle, experiencing the miracle, remembering the miracle. The same can be said about the theater of marionettes, which had an important place in medieval culture. The mere fact that inanimate figures could move and act as if they were men or animals or ghosts or gods was experienced by the public as a miracle—as



a momentous suspension of the opposition between life and death.

Today, puppet theater is associated mostly with children's spectacles or films. The use of puppets suggests the purely fictional character of a story and the dominance of entertainment value over content. Shawky alludes to this conventional use of puppets when he titles his trilogy "Cabaret Crusades"—cabaret being associated in our cultural imagination with light entertainment. However, in the Middle Ages, the puppet theater—even if it was mostly directed toward an unsophisticated audience—dealt with serious matters; often it demonstrated man confronting supernatural powers and challenging fate. Not accidentally, Don Juan and Faust were originally figures of the puppet theater. With the emergence of the Enlightenment, the situation changed. The use of marionettes was scorned because it demonstrated the dependence of human beings on the supernatural. Liberation meant shaking off the strings that turned men into puppets manipulated by external powers.

The phrase "no strings attached" still aptly summarizes our understanding of freedom. Shawky has reattached the strings to the characters in his videos. This return of the strings is made even more spectacular by the fact that the marionettes are no longer seen in the familiar context of the puppet theater. Shawky's strings seem to hang from nowhere—and thus the characters seem to be moved by the invisible hand of fate. The return of the strings means the return of the miraculous, unexpected, and fated. The contrast between secular, prosaic, rationally built narrative, and the visual world in which myth and the miraculous dominate creates inner tension and a dynamic that keep viewers enthralled throughout the entire cycle.

A week before I began to write this text, I saw the complete *Ring des Nibelungen* in Bayreuth, staged by Frank Castorf. I was struck by the similarity between Wagner's and Shawky's projects. Wagner also tried to tell myth by means of secular art—in his case, opera. Both *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and "Cabaret Crusades" are Gesamtkunstwerks. They show the world in its totality thrown off balance by an unlawful, criminal act fueled by human hubris. In the case of Wagner, it is the theft of the *Rheingold*. In the case of Shawky,



Wael Shawky, "Myth and Legends," installation view,
Serpentine Gallery London, 2013 – 2014 / Installationsansicht.
(PHOTO: HUGO GLENDINNING)

it is the intrusion of the Crusaders into the Middle East. Both criminal acts have the power to make time out of joint, to change the normal course of things, producing a state of chaos and causing extreme violence, treason, and suffering. And in both cases, the world comes back to its right course when this criminal act is corrected: The *Rheingold* is brought back to the Rhine; the Crusaders are driven from the Holy Land.

The concept of the right course of things is probably the oldest concept that mankind has created to explain the human condition. The Chinese called it *Dao*; the Romans called it *fatum*. The biblical religions, questioning this concept, substituted *fatum* with the will of God. But as time went by, the concept of *fatum* reemerged. Not accidentally, both Wagner and Shawky have chosen the Middle Ages as the setting for their works. The Middle Ages reasserted faith in the right course of things—and also the belief that the attempt to act against the *fatum* will inevitably be punished. But why did Wagner return to the idea of the right course of things in the nineteenth century? And why does Shawky do it now?

Wagner wrote his *Ring des Nibelungen* at the time of the Industrial Revolution, which created a rupture, a break with the traditional way of life. Gold seemed to give unlimited power to those who owned it. At the end of the *Ring*, the gold disappears again into the waters of the Rhine. But that does not necessarily mean a return to the pre-capitalist past; it means simply that gold loses its magic, its promise of absolute power. It is interesting in this respect that Castorf stages the *Ring* as a revolutionary, Marxist, Communist epic. Here not capitalism but, rather, the revolutionary Marxist movement is presented as a manifestation of human hubris. The flow of the Rhine becomes the flow of capital. Onstage, the Rhine is substituted by the New York Stock Exchange—and it is the place to which the Daughters of the Rhine bring the gold that was variously stolen by Marxist revolutionaries, Russian oil tycoons, and revolutionary adventurers. The *Ring* is staged as a failure of anti-capitalist revolution instead of a metaphor of the failure of the capitalist revolution. In both cases, the world comes back to its course, after its violent interruption comes to an end.

If Castorf radically modernizes Wagner's cycle to demonstrate its universality and relevance for our own time, Shawky practices aesthetic archaization by substituting actors with puppets. But, of course, both of these works belong to our contemporaneity. In the case of Shawky's videos, this connection is obvious enough—one needs only to watch the news from the Middle East. But there is, of course, a deeper connection of the work to the contemporary condition. In recent decades, we have been confronted with a chain of revolutions and counter-revolutions all over the world, including Egypt. These events show that the course of things can be violently interrupted at certain points in time, but this interruption cannot be stabilized. Revolutions are followed by restoration, intrusions by resistance. No historical force is forceful enough to put the course of things under its control.

In a somewhat paradoxical way, this insight leads to a new evaluation of the role of personality in history. Instead of classes and nations, which were understood as collective historical subjects that could dominate the world, individuals now reappear on the historical scene. Some of these individuals, Nibelung or Crusader, try to take fate into their hands, to define the course of history, to take the place of the invisible puppeteer. Like Don Juan and Faust, these hubristic actors move inexorably toward catastrophe and defeat. Other individuals know their limits and become successful within them. This view of history is neither progressive nor reactionary, neither critical nor affirmative. It accepts the status quo—but it accepts it as a flow that inevitably changes everything. In Shawky's videos, history is shown at once as a narrative describing the actions of real men with real interests and passions and as a stage on which these men hang from strings operated by fate. It is, actually, a very contemporary view of history that in recent times has manifested its miraculous and fateful dimension.

Wael Shawky, *CABARET CRUSADES*, DRAWING, 2013,
metallic paint, gouache, and pencil on paper, 11 3/4 x 8 1/4" /
KABARETTISTISCHE KREUZZÜGE, ZEICHNUNG,
Metallfarbe, Gouache und Farbstift auf Papier, 29,8 x 21 cm.





Wael Shawky, *CABARET CRUSADES, THE SECRET OF KARBALA*, 2014, marionettes, production photos / *KABARETTISTISCHE KREUZZÜGE, DAS GEHEIMNIS VON KERBALA*, Marionetten, Produktionsphotos. (PHOTOS: ARNIKA FÜRGUT, KUNSTSAMMLUNG NRW)



Wael Shawky in Milan: A cosmopolitan artistic ecumenopolis exists just behind the carnage



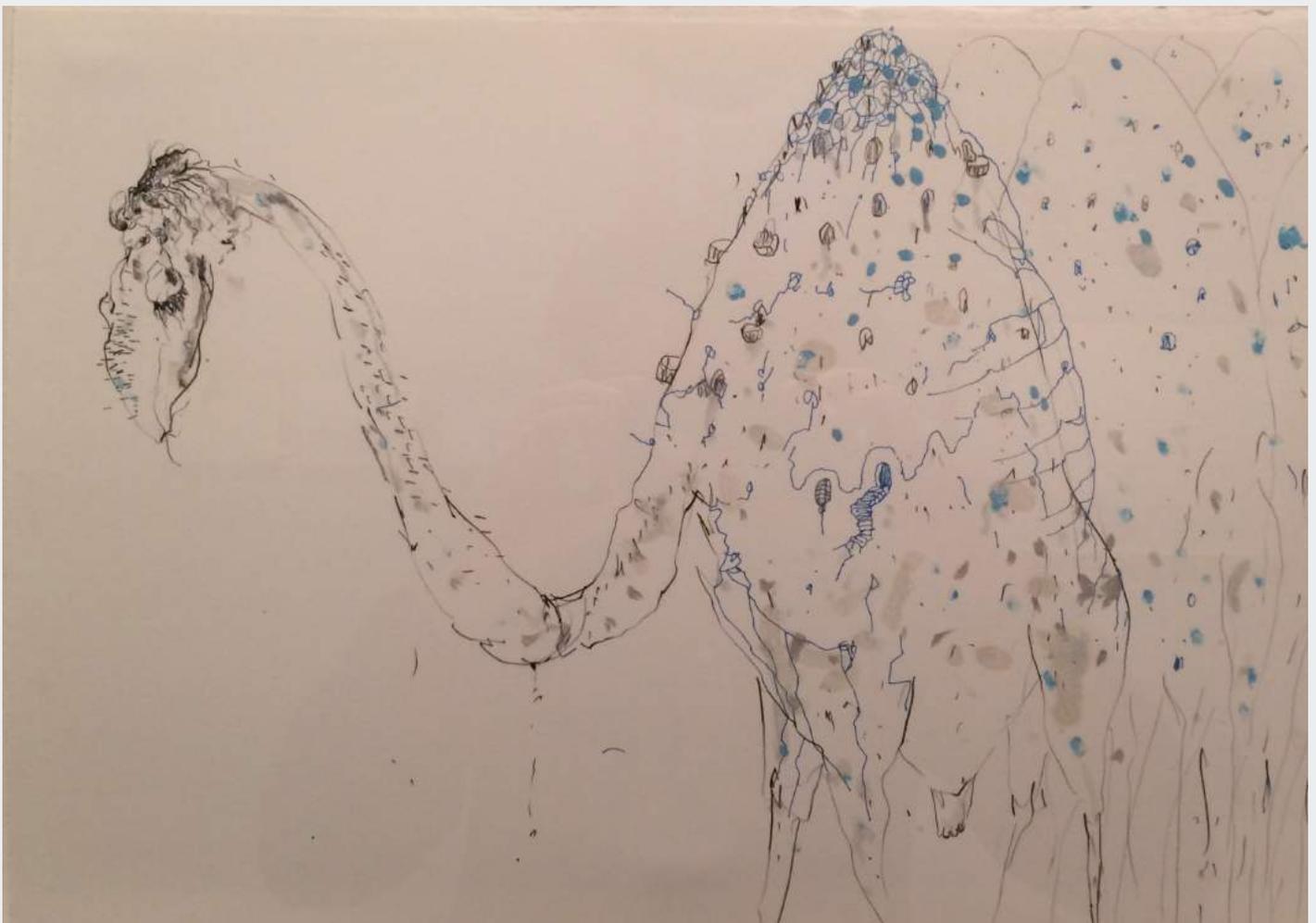
Dan Jakubowski
January 2, 2017

Wael Shawky, who has achieved global recognition for his epic video productions, is currently showing at three different galleries across northern Italy. Taken together, the shows at Castello di Rivoli, Fondazione Merz and the Lisson Gallery Milan present something of a mid-career retrospective, displaying the artist's surreal and meticulously researched re-imaginings of Upper Egyptian storytelling and the history of the Crusades. Given that Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades*, his more renowned film trilogy, portrays the Crusades as a monstrous danse macabre between Arab and European cultures, Italy avails itself as an appropriate setting. One imagines the aberrant marionettes that populate the *Crusades* films as they march through the Alps and foothills outside Milan and Turin, a brigade of murderous toys on its way to commit atrocity in the Holy Land.

The exhibition at the Lisson Gallery presents a selection of drawings Shawky made while preparing his two video trilogies, *Cabaret Crusades* (2010-2015) and *Al Araba Al Madfuna* (2012-2016). Those trilogies, which have appeared in various incarnations during the past six years, are often accompanied by immersive installations. The Fondazione Merz shows the *Al Araba* trilogy in full for the first time, projecting it in a gallery space filled with sand. Viewers watch the films while sitting on miniature sand dunes, the darkened and cool interior of the Fondazione echoing the many subterranean spaces of *Al Araba*. Nearby, at the Castello di Rivoli, are the three *Cabaret* films, installed in the cavernous top floor of the converted castle. The space is punctuated by bubblegum-pink medieval fortifications Shawky constructed for the show. Inside, the viewer finds small, cave-like projection theaters where each film plays on loop. Outside the cotton-candy ramparts, a long marble platform, gleaming white in the gallery lights, holds small bonsai trees, flowers, and members of the Murano-glass marionette cast from *Secrets of Karbala*, the third *Cabaret* film. Their grotesque, chimerical personas are offset by their fragile, effervescent materiality. Like

translucent crustacea and emaciated, masked phantoms, the puppets stand frozen alongside the films they dramatize to such eerie effect.

The least bombastic of the three shows, yet also the most illuminative of Shawky's practice, the drawing exhibition at the Lisson provides a view onto the preparatory connective tissue that links the *Cabaret* and *Al Araba* projects. During my trip across northern Italy to review the three shows, I saw the Lisson exhibition last, and its quiet, self-contained air contrasted markedly with the environmental thrill and macabre theater on display at the two larger exhibitions. There is one room, 13 small drawings and a large mirror with the map of a Crusades-era city sandblasted on its surface (*Cabaret Crusades, Map 3, 2016*). For what the show lacks in showmanship, it more than makes up for in the gentle sense of mystery that surrounds the drawings, as well as the opportunity to divine some of the connecting strands that bridge and unite the two trilogies. These larger projects have dominated Shawky's career during the past half-decade, continuing his earlier engagement with the ways historical narrative necessarily alters what it seeks to document, the unfolding of human events in time. These drawings bear witness to an artist playing with ideas and forms as they make the transition from his whimsical handling of graphite, ink and loose pigment to the high drama and disturbing undertones that define his films. They also show Shawky's interest in transformation and the grotesque, two concepts that permeate his film projects and frame his approach to the practice of history. Finally, most notably in the mirror work, this show helps flesh out what I think of as Shawky's career-spanning project of artistic ecumenopolis – a city that covers the entire surface of a world – in which he freely borrows from the material and visual culture of the Levant and the Western Mediterranean to give fleeting, barely recognizable form to a cosmopolitan community of artists and artisans indebted to history, even as they give searing representation to its atrocities.



The drawings, all made in 2015, are directly related to the *Al Araba* trilogy by their names. They show strange, distended creatures that are part man, part animal, and sometimes part inanimate object. In one

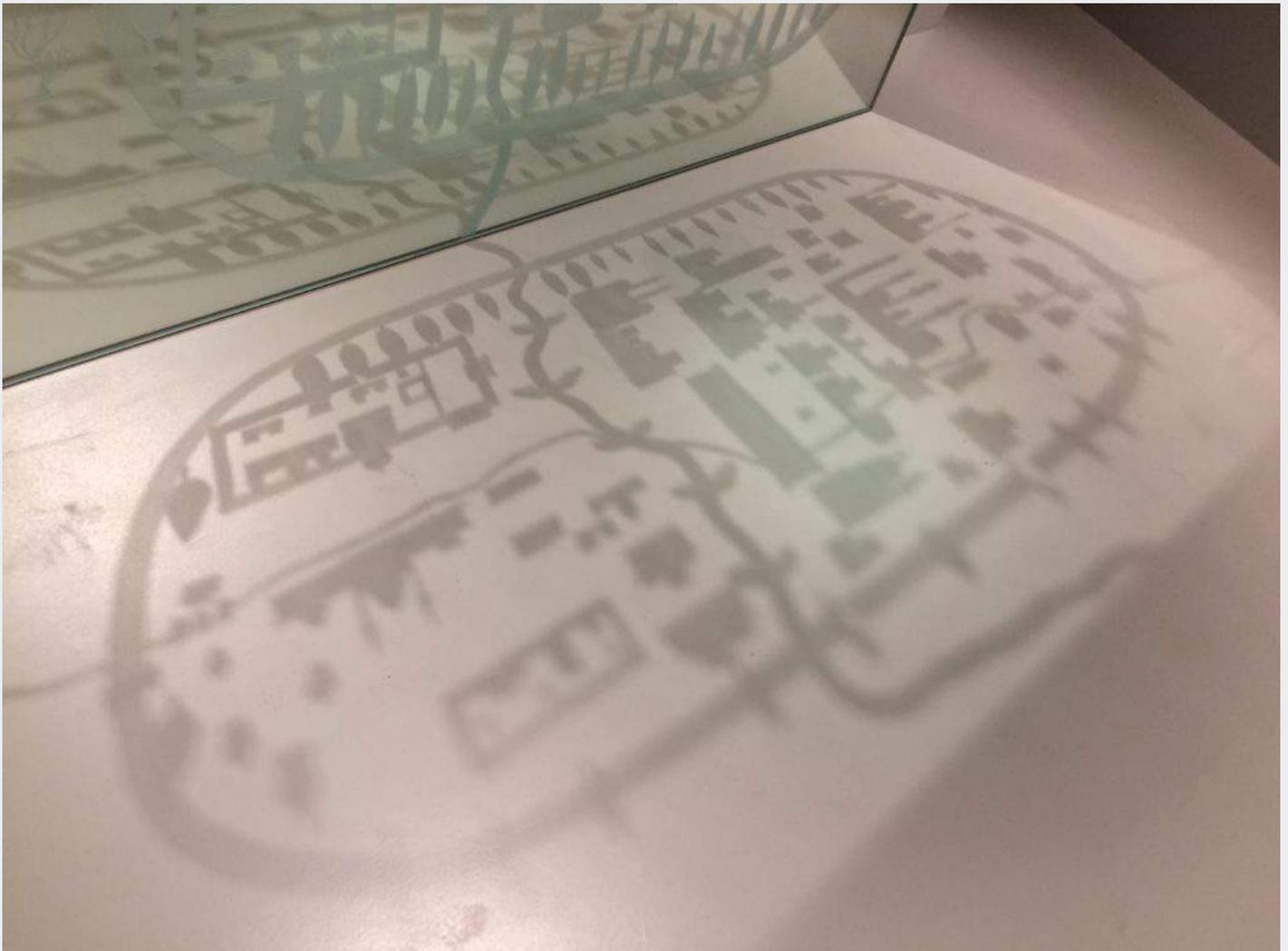
drawing, two gargantuan turtle-like beings lay asleep, their noses touching in the barest suggestion of a kiss. A city sprawls out on the shell of one of the creatures, the buildings delineated in thin lines of ink. Minarets sprout out of the turtle-thing's flank, and, further back in the drawing's landscape, a cyclopean ruin stands, all right angles and straight lines, in stark contrast to the biomorphic, gestural quality of the turtle-cities. In another, an orange and pink longboat glides over a colorfully speckled sea, its front end a parrot's head. The boat seems to contain a small human settlement, with the suggestion of people brought forth by tiny dots of pigment. A delicate palm tree springs out of the stern. Three more colorful drawings bear the obvious influence of Pharaonic visual culture, their flattened depth of field mimicking wall reliefs in ancient Egyptian tombs. One shows the jackal-headed Anubis, an Egyptian god associated with mummification and the afterlife, tending to a royal sarcophagus, the outline of his rigid body standing out against a solid background of saturated orange gouache. All of the drawings have been sprinkled with shrewd amounts of metallic glitter, their surfaces sparkling gently.



The narratives of the *Al Araba* films are each adapted from short stories by Egyptian author Mohamed Mustageb. These stories tell tales of small Egyptian villages that undergo watershed changes due to shifts in tradition or mystical intervention. *Al Araba Al Madfuna I* (2012) is based on the story *The J-B-Rs*, which recounts how a hamlet takes up a series of animals as their main source of material welfare. As they change from camels to mules to, finally, the forbidden pig, the townspeople find that their bodies undergo bizarre metamorphosis to become more like their animal of choice. *Al Araba Al Madfuna III* (2016), based on Mustageb's *Sunflowers*, tells the story of a village that adopts the sunflower as its principal crop, only to have their fortunes turn when the irrepressible plant overtakes their farms and invades the very heart of the village itself.

Shawky's drawings show the fanciful results of similar transformations. A building morphs into a monitor lizard. One side of a hill stretches out to become the neck of a sad-eyed brontosaurus. Minarets turn into writhing snakes. Crowds of people gather peacefully under the body of a multi-limbed, faceless monster.

The ways communities interact and change one another through war and material culture has been a perennial concern for Shawky throughout his career, and he wields the grotesque as a powerful symbolic mode in his latest films and drawings as a way to represent the transformations wrought through conflict, border-crossing and material exchange. According to the American art historian Frances Connelly, the grotesque is a playful, impure and hybrid mode of expression, one uniquely suited to a globalizing world in which local tradition is always already mingled with alien cultural forces. While ostensibly located in historical or mythical realms, the grotesques of Shawky's films and drawings have much to say about the globalization and cultural mixing that began, the artist's work seems to suggest, far before the modern era, during events like the Crusades. In Shawky's work, the grotesque is a signature of cultural contact and transformation, two unfoldings that are inextricably linked.



Finally, there is the meter-tall mirror, which sits on the Lisson's floor, leaning against the gallery's back wall. It presents the round form of a Crusades-era city map, buildings walled in by a circular fortification and bisected by a river. The image of the map is projected on the floor as a shadow by the mirror's reflection. Appropriations of the historical material and visual cultures of the Levant, the Middle East and the Western Mediterranean is a central part of Shawky's *Cabaret* trilogy. The puppets that occupy the films' roles were made by European artisans using centuries-old techniques. *Path to Cairo*, the second film, features ceramic marionettes created by French santonniers (Nativity scene sculptors), while the third film has a cast of 300 glass marionettes made by glass-workers in Venice. During a conversation with the artist in 2013, Shawky told me that he referenced Giotto's frescoes, Renaissance cosmograms, medieval cartography, ballads sung by Sunni pearl fishers from Bahrain and Shia prayer songs called *radouds*. The final stage of Shawky's work on the Crusades was another act of cultural appropriation: He reimaged, with woodworkers from Italy's Veneto region, the Crusades paintings of Eugène Delacroix, Cornelis Claesz van Wieringen, and Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Hesse as large-scale wooden reliefs. Grotesques also populate

these reworkings. An aquatic behemoth floats alongside the battleships of van Wieringen's work, and a long-necked phantasm hovers above the drama of a court scene by Hesse. Sandblasted mirror-making is another Venetian medium.

Shawky's Crusades-centered works all emerge from these constellations of influence and networks of artistic collaboration. Even while they represent sectarian bitterness and politico-religious massacre, they exist as artworks due to the cooperation of European and Levantine artisans and the intermixing of traditions from the very geographical areas that were once beset by religious conflict. Shawky's work cuts both ways, presenting an apocalyptic vision of a world thrown into chaos that is nonetheless the product of peaceful artistic exchange. Even as Constantinople burns in *Secrets of Karbala*, the partnerships that brought this spectacle to fruition shine forth, suggesting a cosmopolitan artistic ecumenopolis that exists just behind the carnage. That the mirror work at Lisson represents a city – one shaped like a world, and that is also twinned by its own shadow version – goes straight to the heart of Shawky's project. For while there is plenty of barbarity and fearful transformation on display in his films, they also bare the traces of another way, a grotesque intermixing peaceably and reciprocally shot through with the neighbors' strangeness.

Wael Shawky shows at Lisson Gallery, Milan from November 9, 2016 to January 13, 2017.

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PULLING

The Egyptian artist Wael Shawky is best known for his series of films in which puppets act out the Crusades. He meets *Apollo* in Turin to discuss the ironies and absurdities of history

By Sameer Rahim
Portrait by Luca Campri

THE STRIINGS



1. Wael Shawky (b. 1971),
photographed in Milan
in November 2016

Shortly after Jerusalem falls to the Crusaders in 1099, a Damascene judge called Abu Saad al-Harawi arrives at Baghdad's great mosque and begins ostentatiously eating bread. It is Ramadan and an angry crowd gathers: 'How dare you eat in the mosque when other people fast?' Having got their attention, al-Harawi climbs the pulpit to sing a lament: 'We have mingled blood with flowing tears and there is no room left for pity...your brothers in Syria have no dwelling place save the saddles of camels and the bellies of vultures.'

Given current events in the Middle East, this scene from Egyptian video artist Wael Shawky's *Cabaret Crusades* feels spookily resonant. When I meet Shawky in Turin, where he has two exhibitions running concurrently until February (alongside an exhibition of his drawings at Lison Gallery in Milan; Figs. 9 & 10), he insists that when he conceived the sequence Syria was peaceful. 'I mean, seriously, there was nothing at all,' he says, in his boyish, earnest tone. By a grim twist of fate, though, the three films that make up *Cabaret Crusades* (2010–15) are set mainly between Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo – the three centres of power in the current Syrian conflict. 'This is so weird,' he tells me, shaking his head at the coincidence.

What makes it weirder is how Shawky tells the tale. Rather than real actors in medieval garb – in the style of Ridley Scott's epic *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), or the popular Arab television series *Omar* (2012) about an early caliph – *Cabaret Crusades* has intricately created marionettes playing all the major figures, from Pope Urban II to Saladin. His perspective is also unusual. Rather than using Western chronicles, he uses Muslim sources as recounted by the novelist Amin Maalouf in his *Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (1983). All three videos and 26 of the marionettes are

being shown in the atmospheric surroundings of the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea at the Castello di Rivoli just outside Turin – which, by another happy chance, overlooks a Crusader route used by local monks. Anyone catching five or ten minutes in the gallery is bound to be intrigued by *Cabaret Crusades*; but to appreciate the depth of the work requires multiple viewings. Luckily, Shawky is an artist to whom it's easy to become addicted.

Wael Shawky (the 'k' is silent) was born in Alexandria in 1971. He spent his childhood in Mecca and his work still bears the imprint of Islamic aesthetics. After graduating from art school in Alexandria in 1994, he went to Philadelphia to study for an MFA. He won an Ernst Schering Foundation Art Award in 2011, and is recognised as one of the most original video artists around. His early work shows a fondness for surreal juxtaposition. In *The Cave* (2005), Shawky filmed himself walking through a German supermarket reciting the Qur'an by heart. These days speaking Arabic in public can get you funny looks. But the passages he chose are respected by Eastern and Western traditions – the Islamic 'Companions of the Cave' are the Christian 'Seven Sleepers of Ephesus', found in the *Golden Legend*. There were also oblique parallels with Egypt under Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship. In the story, the men and their dog escape a tyrant by hiding in a cave, where God grants them slumber until a better ruler appears.

Shawky touched more explicitly on politics in 2007 with *Telematch Sadat*, in which children re-enact the 1981 assassination of President Anwar Sadat. He drew inspiration from a German television programme popular in the Arab world called *Telematch*, in which rival towns compete in a series of physical challenges, all in fancy dress and to a zany soundtrack – a bit like *It's a Knockout*.

'Wael Shawky is a master of unexpected connections'

2. *Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show File* (film still), 2010, Wael Shawky, HD video, colour, sound, approx. 32 mins



3. *Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo* (film still), 2012, Wael Shawky, HD video, colour, sound, 58 mins

The same childlike treatment of serious subject matter would become a running theme in *Cabaret Crusades*.

Shawky tells me that he chose marionettes for their endearing, naive quality, which makes them superior to actors. 'You can see yourself, project yourself on a marionette in a way that you can't with a professional actor – even if it's Al Pacino because you can never forget you're watching someone acting.' He echoes the German playwright Heinrich von Kleist, who in his 1810 essay, 'On the Marionette Theatre', has a puppeteer argue that 'where grace is concerned, it is impossible for man to come anywhere near a puppet.' (Shawky has recently illustrated the essay with his own drawings.)

For *The Horror Show File* (2010; Fig. 2), the first film in the *Cabaret Crusades* series, he repurposed 120 wooden marionettes that were rotting in the basement of the Lupi Collection in Turin. With the aid of the Pistoletto Foundation, 'we changed the costumes and fixed the mechanisms inside them'. Their peeling paint and chipped faces evoke the ravages of Justinian's Plague in 541, which opens the Prologue. It might seem strange to begin 650 years before the Crusades were launched, but Shawky takes the long view. Perhaps 50 million people died in that plague, making the Byzantine Empire ripe for Arab conquest 100 years later – a takeover that eventually prompted the Christian reconquest.

The next two films, *The Path to Cairo* (2012; Fig. 3) and *The Secrets of Karbala* (2015; Figs. 4 & 6), are more ambitious – the latter is feature-length. For them, Shawky designed his own marionettes, first using ceramics and then Murano glass (Fig. 7). Gradually, the figures become less naturalistic and more animal-like, resembling the African mask collection Shawky studied at the Met in

New York. As the wars drag on, both Franks and Arabs become more brittle and translucent, drained of humanity. Standing next to a set of the foot-high marionettes, Shawky describes the challenge of creating them. The biggest question was, 'How to find the right traditional craft to connect with the story?' He supervised the glasswork at the Adriano Berengo studio in Venice. That city plays a crucial part in the narrative, as *The Secrets of Karbala* ends in 1204 with the Venetian Doge sacking Constantinople. So Venice is a source of beauty and cruelty – a typically ironic touch from an artist who enjoys playing with conventional assumptions.

Only once in the series does a marionette entirely reflect its character's villainy: Shimr ibn thil-Jawshan has huge teeth, a skeletal head and pit-black eyes. Shimr is a notorious figure in Islamic history. He murdered the Prophet Mohammed's grandson in 681 in Karbala (that is the secret of the title), precipitating the Sunni-Shia split. While the Crusades were being fought, says Shawky, 'there was another parallel conflict between Sunni and Shia. Of course people don't talk about it a lot but it exists.' Before he retook Jerusalem, Saladin destroyed the Shia Fatimid Empire in Egypt – which he regarded, if anything, as a more significant foe than the Franks. 'It was important to start the last film with Karbala and end with the attack by the Catholics on Orthodox Constantinople. To show that this was not a religious war at all: it was absolutely about power and economics, just like when the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed was killed, it was simply for power.'

Just as with Shakespeare's histories, reading the sources helps you work out what the artist has chosen to focus on or has refashioned. At the siege of Antioch in 1097, the city's leader expels his Christian subjects in

4. *Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbala* (film still), 2015, Wael Shawky, HD video, colour, sound, approx. 120 mins



Courtesy Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg and Lison Gallery, London; © Wael Shawky

Courtesy Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg and Lison Gallery, London; © Wael Shawky / Courtesy Wael Shawky and Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg; © Wael Shawky

case they betray him. But the guilty man is one of his own, a disgruntled armorer who laughs manically as he opens his window to the Franks. (At this point the film, usually straight-faced, goes a bit *Team America*.) Look closely, though, and you notice the window is designed as an upside-down cross – a hint that the Crusaders are not exactly following in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace. As both Frankish and Arab chroniclers attest, the starving Franks succumbed to roasting and eating dead Muslims. The scene in which a marionette corpse is turned on a spit is gruesomely funny.

Initially Shawky thought he should make *Cabaret Crusades* in English to suit an international market. ‘Then I discovered this is absolutely wrong and since it’s based on the Arab historians, it has to be extremely classical Arabic, completely.’ The choice to make all the characters – sultan or pope – speak Arabic blurs the lines between the two sides, and draws a clear one to the present day. When Pope Urban II delivers his belligerent 1095 sermon calling for a crusade, he lambasts a ‘filthy race’ occupying Christian ground. He reminds you of George W. Bush calling for a ‘crusade’ for freedom after 9/11, but also Osama bin Laden, who in similar classical Arabic would condemn ‘filthy’ Westerners occupying the Muslim holy lands.

Perhaps the most ravishingly complex moment in the whole sequence features one of its few female personalities. Princess Alice, the daughter of Baldwin II of Jerusalem, is portrayed as a long-lashed camel marionette. (This is a compliment: the word for beauty in Arabic, *jameel*, is

related to the word for camel, *jamal*.) She is a second-generation Crusader gone native. ‘The people of Antioch,’ Shawky says, ‘were Muslims who loved Alice very much because she was sympathising with them more than the Crusaders.’ She threatened an alliance with Aleppo until her father quelled her resistance. She begged forgiveness. ‘I found the best way to express this was to give her some verses from the *Song of Roland*,’ Shawky tells me. Up in her tower, Alice sings a seductive passage from the medieval French epic about Charlemagne’s victory over the Muslims: ‘Not a Muslim did there remain, / But confessed was Christian or else was slain.’ Shawky explains that ‘It’s a fantastic song. It shows that the more you are cutting off heads, the closer you are to God. It’s like a Christian version of jihad!’ Like his marionettes, Shawky can be unnervingly straight-faced.

Each film has a distinctive visual language. The muddy colours of *The Horror Show File* reflect the medieval Europe where the story begins. *The Path to Cairo* borrows from brightly-coloured Islamic miniatures, especially those of the 16th-century Bosnian cartographer Matrakçı Nasuh. ‘In Aleppo we used his map as a basis, but made it more like a pop-up book.’ The pink towers in *The Secrets of Karbala*, recreated full-scale in the Castello di Rivoli, were inspired both by Matrakçı and by Giotto’s frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. Shawky is foreshadowing the Italian victory in the third film’s final scene – and the coming Renaissance.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, director of the Castello di Rivoli and the curator of the show, tells me that Shawky



5. *Al Araba Al Madfuna I* (film stills), 2011, Wael Shawky, HD video, b/w, sound, approx. 21 mins

6. *Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbala* (film still), 2015, Wael Shawky, HD video, colour, sound, approx. 120 mins



7. Marionette from *Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbala*, 2014, Wael Shawky, Murano glass, fabric, metal, 58.4x20.3x12.7cm

believes, ‘We are all like marionettes, manipulated by forces we cannot see.’ He allows the strings to be obviously visible in the films: every step and speech is controlled by a higher power – God perhaps, or the historian, or the artist. But the gravity-defying marionettes have a life of their own; their movements are never fully under the puppet-masters’ control. They are free and unfree at the same time: in other words, disconcertingly human.

At the Fondazione Merz in central Turin, Shawky has complementary sets of films. *Al Araba Al Madfuna* (2012–16; Fig. 5) is a mysterious work that brings together ancient Egyptian lore, folk-tales, and popular Arab cinema. In the three videos, children dressed as adults – boys with moustaches and turbans, girls dressed as stern matrons – sit together in their village telling each other fantastical stories. For example, the people who lose the ability to speak and invent a new sign language through clapping; or a shaggy dog story about which animal is luckiest for the village to adopt. The children mime the words with adult voices dubbed over in Shawky’s favoured classical Arabic.

The third video, premiered in Turin, was filmed near a village called Al Araba Al Madfuna, at the temple to Seti I (c. 1290 BC). ‘I had to get a lot of permissions and bribes to do this,’ Shawky says, but he says it was worth it. The Osireion, situated behind the temple, is a strange place. ‘It’s full of myth, just like the history of the Crusades, but even more complex. Because we don’t really know what it was for.’ The Book of the Dead on the walls implies it was a tomb of some kind; a waterway connects underground chambers and some speculate it was where the Pharaoh was bathed before mummification. Even the source of the water is unknown. ‘Some say that it’s coming from the river, the Nile, and many people say it’s got nothing to do with the Nile. I like the uncertainty: it’s where you make art.’

We watch the children ride into the Osireion by boat, examine the hieroglyphs, make gestures, form the shape of a scene. But at the same time, they recite a story which is not about ancient Egypt at all – instead it’s taken from the Egyptian writer Mohamed Mustagab’s 1983 collection of parables. (Once more note Shawky’s taste for weird juxtapositions.) Mustagab’s story tells how for a long time the village used sunflowers to decorate their agricultural fields. One day, a farmer discovers the flower has edible seeds which can be sold to the neighbours. The village becomes wealthy, leaves behind its old-fashioned ways and starts to import all its food.

I put it to Shawky that the modern equivalent of sunflower seeds is oil, whose discovery has enriched the Arab world and caused no end of trouble. (This is prefigured in *The Horror Show File*, when the Arabs are shown filling barrels up with thick black oil, which they use both

‘You can project yourself on a marionette in a way that you can’t with a professional actor’

Co-produced by Sharjah Art Foundation & Wiener Festwochen; courtesy the artist & Sharjah Art Foundation; © Wael Shawky / Courtesy Wael Shawky and Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg; © Wael Shawky

Courtesy Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg and Lisson Gallery, London; © Wael Shawky

in their medicine and to make Greek fire.) He allows the interpretation, but I suspect he feels it is a bit obvious. 'It also tells you how a country, for example, decided to close all its factories and just import Chinese and Turkish goods.' Another parallel with modern Egypt. In fact, the film could be set in any period, its temporal strangeness intensified by his decision to invert the colouration so that the green water of the Osireion turns purple, and the stars are dark dots in a bright night sky.

The metaphor of multiple time frames is carried into how the Fondazione Merz present the videos. Abdellah Karroum, director of the Arab Museum of Modern Art (Mathaf) in Doha and the show's curator, explains that the first *Al Araba Al Madfuna* film is the furthest away from the viewer, down dark steps and in a tomb-like basement. 'You excavate the oldest film first,' Karroum tells me, 'before going up to see the more recent ones.'

You are also encouraged to sit on artificial sand dunes, though when I am there no one is willing to spoil their designer Italian gear and instead they perch on the edges (Fig. 8). Looming over us is a bulbous yellow tower punctuated with holes. It is a replica of the towers used as a backdrop for the second film. Shawky tells me he found them in a village between Alexandria and Cairo, many damaged with their honeycomb insides exposed. They could conceivably have dated from ancient Egypt or Crusader times but, Shawky discovered, they were built in the 1930s for catching pigeons. 'But now they don't use them so it became like a ruined city...really it was surreal to see this place.' A place with a prosaic purpose – a 'factory of meat', in the artist's words – has since taken on romantic and sinister connotations. The pigeons mated in the honeycomb holes – a literal love nest – while they waited to be slaughtered. I am reminded of the towers in *Cabaret Crusades*. The Antioch tower where Alice sings so charmingly of killing the enemy; the Tower of David in Jerusalem, from which its Arab defender peers at the Frankish army; the moated citadel of Aleppo, where civilians flock for protection. Immerse yourself long enough in Shawky's work and everything seems to flow together in a stream of history and images.

Shawky is a master of unexpected connections. He once spent eight months in Istanbul reading Sufi poets; he was trying to learn 'how to kill your will and become a receiver, which means leaving yourself to God'. Struggling to put this into practice in distracting Istanbul, he booked a flight to the Kurdish borderlands. But he just missed the flight. On a whim, he took the next plane to wherever it was headed. He ended up in the Anatolian city of Konya at 2am. He asked a local man where he was. 'This city is the shrine of Rumi,' the great Sufi poet. 'Okay,' said Shawky, 'I understand why I'm here.' The best thing about his Turkey trip was the serendipitous experience in his final week. 'Art can be a way of learning,' he says, 'let us say discovering.' **A**

Sameer Rahim is arts and books editor of *Prospect*.

'Wael Shawky' is at the Castello di Rivoli, Turin, until 5 February (www.castellodirivoli.org); 'Wael Shawky: Al Araba Al Madfuna' is at the Fondazione Merz, Turin, until 5 February (www.fondazionemerz.org).



8. Installation view, 'Wael Shawky: Al Araba Al Madfuna' at the Fondazione Merz, Turin



9. *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, Drawings, 2015, Wael Shawky, graphite, pigments, ink, and oil on paper, 29.7 x 42cm

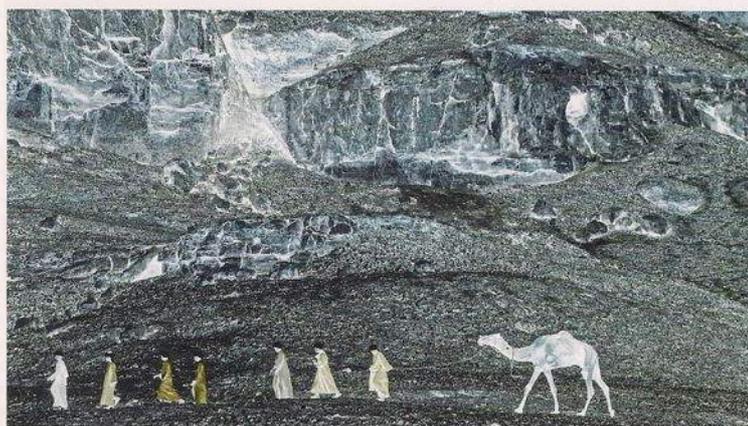
10. *Cabaret Crusades III: The Secrets of Karbala* (Drawing), 2014, Wael Shawky, graphite, ink and oil on paper, 140 x 100cm



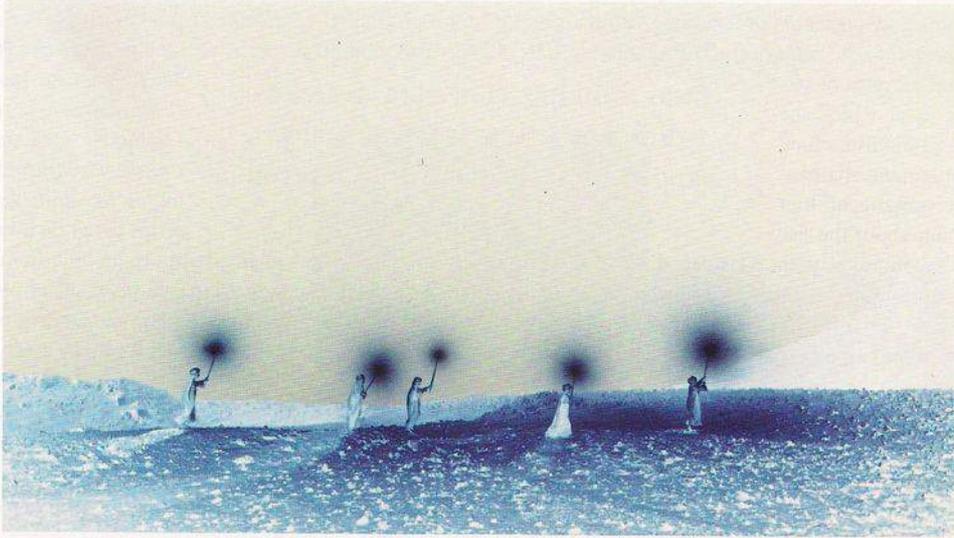
ArtReview

Wael Shawky

by Mark Rappolt



In linking fiction to fact across two sprawling film trilogies and many related works, the Egyptian artist is making his case for history to be treated as a work of art



above and facing page *Al Araba Al Madfuna* 111 (stills), 2016,
4k video, 25 min. Courtesy the artist

Right now he's nominated for the 2016 Hugo Boss art prize and one of the most celebrated contemporary artists from the Middle East, but if, for some reason, the artmaking business doesn't work out for him, Wael Shawky might find himself well suited to an alternative career as a director of horror films. Take his latest filmwork, *Al Araba Al Madfuna III* (2016), a first edit of which premiered at the Kunsthaus Zürich this past summer. The final instalment of a trilogy, begun in 2012, that will be exhibited in its entirety (together with a series of related drawings and installations) at Turin's Fondazione Merz this November (last year, Shawky won the inaugural edition of the biennial Mario Merz Prize), the film, eerily presented in negative, features a group of children going down into the ruins of the Osirion temple, part of the limestone funeral complex of Seti I in Abydos, Egypt (near which the village of Al Araba Al Madfuna now sits), to witness an enigmatic, shamanistic ritual. Along the way, the children narrate a tale in Arabic about the rise and fall of a village's economy once local farmers discover the financial rewards of growing sunflower seeds: 'Sunflowers' by Mohamed Mustagab (whose stories – all from the 1983 collection *Dayrout Al Sharif* – also form the basis of the two previous films in the series). But they do it, as is again the case in the previous instalments, in the voices of adults. It's as if they were possessed by both the past (the voices of an older generation) and the future (the voices of the adults they will become), while their present status is squeezed away. We see children in the picture in front of us, but that childhood is denied through their articulation of the words of another (Mustagab's) in the voices of yet others (the adults who read Mustagab's words). Our eyes reveal a fact and our ears reveal it to be a fiction. Or perhaps that's the other way round. Like many of the best artworks, *Al Araba Al Madfuna III* teases the mind through acts of sensory manipulation. Which is, when you're the one experiencing the manipulation, a slightly uncanny or plain creepy experience. The feeling is even more intense when you're watching children enacting something they presumably don't really understand. Perhaps it's no accident that the first instalment of the work for which Shawky is best known, the *Cabaret Crusades* film trilogy (2010–15), is titled *The Horror Show File*.

Yet the *Al Araba Al Madfuna* trilogy wasn't born as a tribute to something like *The Exorcist*; rather it was inspired by a visit Shawky made to the village in the early 2000s, where the Egyptian artist encountered tunnels that local people had dug (sometimes from under their homes) in an attempt to access the pharaonic treasures they believed to be buried on the ancient site – these villagers relying on sources that operate on a metaphysical level (magic, artworks, Biblical tales) to guide them in their quest for physical objects (gold). Fictions are linked to fact (even if the existence of treasure in this case may only be a notional fact), in a manner that questions the nature of both. "I thought, 'ok, how can I translate this entire experience into a film?'" Shawky explains when we meet in Doha (*Al Araba Al Madfuna III* was commissioned by the Qatar Museums), where the Alexandria-based artist is currently conducting research that will lead to a new project on the establishment of the Gulf States. "I was thinking, 'I need to create two different systems that are really happening at the same time, but you can't even

'I was thinking, "I need to create two different systems that are really happening at the same time, but you can't even compare them"'

'It's like trying to see human desires. You don't see it as good people, bad people, evil, I think. It's really more like human desires that are trying to survive'

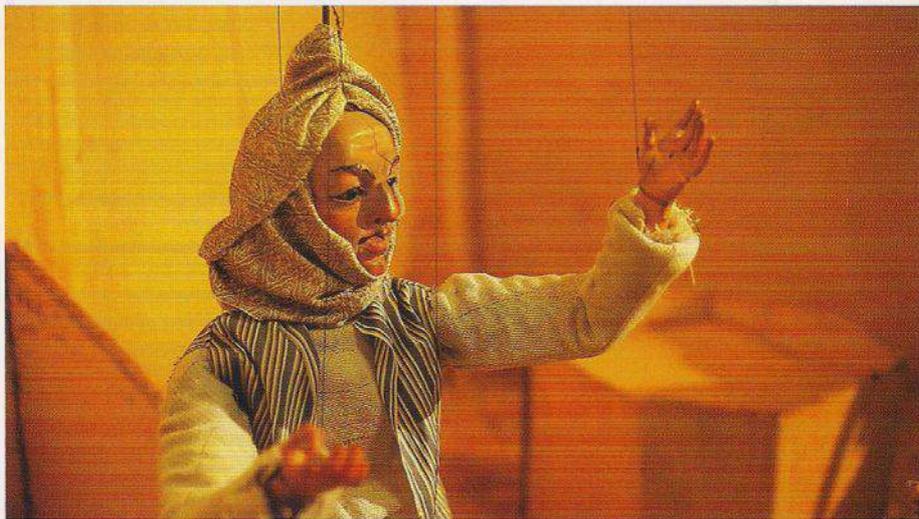
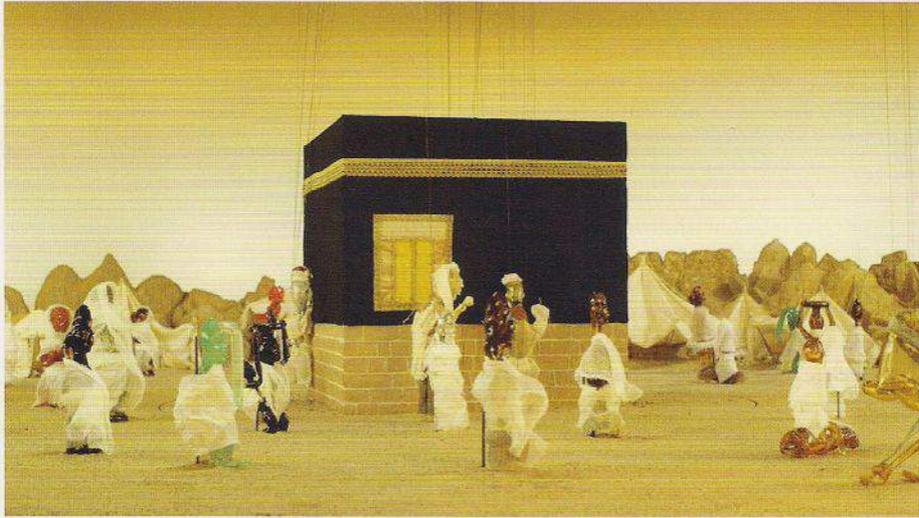
compare them.' So this is exactly what is happening. You have one story that is happening with the kids, but you hear the voice from adults, not coming from the kids. They are telling a story of something completely different from the visual." Although as a viewer, the experience of watching the film and (if you don't understand Arabic) reading the subtitles is one in which you are constantly trying to match the sense of one to the other, in order to synthesise a coherent whole. And in a way it's exactly this kind of synthetic process, perhaps in itself a human instinct, that forms one of the primary subject matters of Shawky's work to date.

Certainly it lies at the heart of his much-praised and written-about *Cabaret Crusades*, which, in addition to *The Horror Show File*, comprises *The Path to Cairo* (2012) and *The Secrets of Karbala* (2015), and is inspired by Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf's *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (1983). Drawing on Maalouf, Shawky's films use a script based on a variety of Arab historians and writers in an attempt to provide an Arab perspective on the Crusades (from 1095 to 1204) with all the complexity of infighting and betrayals that surrounded them, and more importantly to expose and deconstruct how their history is put together. All the characters are played by marionettes.

"I think the concept of the historian is part of the propaganda for the system, for the king or the sultan," Shawky explains. "For example, one of the characters that I used in *Cabaret Crusades* is someone called Usama ibn Munqidh [1095–1188]. Usama ibn Munqidh is a historian, he wrote about the Crusades' history. So I made him one of the marionettes who was playing a role inside the film, because he noticed things. But he was not only a historian, he was also the foreign ambassador of Damascus during this time. So imagine he is part of the regime, he's the foreign ambassador, he's the minister of someone called Mu'in ad-Din Unur; Unur is the governor of Damascus at this time. So can we know if Mu'in ad-Din Unur is someone similar to Bashar al-Assad or not? I mean, how will we measure this? Since the writer is part of the regime already."

The narrative of *Cabaret Crusades* starts with the 1095 speech by Pope Urban II (undocumented except in five wildly differing after-the-fact accounts) that initiated the First Crusade (1095–99) and ends with the Fourth Crusade (1202–04), which led to the sack of Constantinople, by which time much of the crusading enterprise had become a quest for cash rather than anything to do with Christians or Muslims. That last bit sound familiar? The contemporary resonances of this history are certainly evident.

Besides their obvious evincing of the sense that the protagonists in *Cabaret Crusades*, just as the children in *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, are being manipulated (of Urban's speech, the artist says, "In the end we don't know exactly what he said, but we know more about the result. We expect that this guy had amazing charisma to convince people to walk first from Germany until they reached Constantinople"), the marionettes, with their sometimes grotesque features and jerky actions, also foreground the sense that the history they enact is handcrafted and shaped. That the first film uses marionettes from a historical collection in Turin, the second marionettes made by ceramic craftsmen in the South of France and the last marionettes made out



top Cabaret Crusades 111: The Secrets of Karbala (still), 2015, HD video, colour, sound, English subtitles, 120 min

above Cabaret Crusades 1: The Horror Show File, 2010, HD video, colour, sound, English subtitles, 31 min 49 sec

both images © the artist. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London, Milan & New York

of Murano glass, locating this Arabic story in the European terrain from which the Crusades originated, further complicates any stable notions of identity or ownership.

At the heart of all this lies a sense of history as being the product of human creation rather than an accumulation of facts. Perhaps it exposes the more terrifying implications of Joseph Beuys's famous dictum 'jeder Mensch ein Künstler'. While for the German artist this meant a call for a type of social sculpture in which 'every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism', for Shawky there's a sense that every account of history or even contemporary decision-making (on a sociopolitical and economic level in particular) exists as something manufactured or manipulated. As if it were a work of art. And we can clearly see that at work in the rhetoric that surrounds everything from the US presidential elections and Brexit to the conflict in Syria and current disputes in the South and East China Seas. Is Shawky then advocating a distrust of all accounts of historical and current conflict? Should we distrust everything people say? "I think it's like trying to see human desires," he says. "You don't see it as good people, bad people, evil, I think. It's really more like human desires that are trying to survive, and really running after authority, this is really the main issue for everyone. Using religion for authority and for political-economic reasons also. This is from both sides: whether the Crusaders or the Muslims, our leaders are the same. I believe it's really about this, about the propaganda. And not only the propaganda: the authenticity and the legitimisation that is given to written history as if it's a fact, just because we have it."

Shawky is not shy either of tackling the propaganda, received wisdom and obfuscation that frequently dominate artworld discourse. *Dictums* (2013) was a live performance at that year's Sharjah Biennial for which the artist gathered 30 workers, primarily of Pakistani origin,

to chant a song made up from words derived from the event's curatorial statement, translated into Urdu and accompanied by musicians trained in Sufi ballads. Given the nature of Shawky's work and the fact that we're sitting in a large studio in Doha's Fire Station residency complex that is almost entirely empty save for some sofas and chairs, and a few drawings on a table, with the artist pointing out that everybody has left town because of the heat (it was already 30 degrees when I landed, shortly before 6am), it might be easy to assume that a logical consequence of living in a propaganda-saturated world would be to resort to some sort of ascetic, perhaps even solipsistic withdrawal from it. In an early videowork, *Cave* (2004), the artist strolls around a supermarket reciting the Arabic verses from Surah 18 of the Qu'ran from memory. The Surah concerns a group of youths who retreat to a cave to escape persecution for maintaining their faith in God in a kingdom enforcing idolatry. They return to society after 300 (solar) years. "I don't think it was even about the contradiction between a religious text and the supermarket," the artist recalls. "It was more about the idea that as a human being anyone can be that isolated, living his or her entire world in a supermarket." He continues quietly, "But you cannot isolate forever. You have to isolate to gain the wisdom, then you have to go back to the society to correct it or to make good. I think this is amazing." He's off to the library and I'm off to catch a plane. ar

The complete trilogy Al Arabia Al Madfuna will be on show at the Fondazione Merz, Turin, from 3 November to 5 February. The artist will also be the subject of a concurrent retrospective at the Castello di Rivoli, also in Turin, and an exhibition at Lisson Gallery, Milan, from 10 November to 7 January. He is nominated for the Hugo Boss Prize 2016, the winner of which will be announced 20 October



*Al Arabia Al Madfuna 1 (still), 2012, HD video, b/w, sound, 21 min.
Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg*

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26 July 2016

<http://www.dailysabah.com/arts-culture/2016/07/26/hashashin-and-crusaders-a-history-of-the-middle-east-according-to-wael-shawky>

DAILY SABAH ARTS

Hashashin and Crusaders: A history of the Middle East according to Wael Shawky

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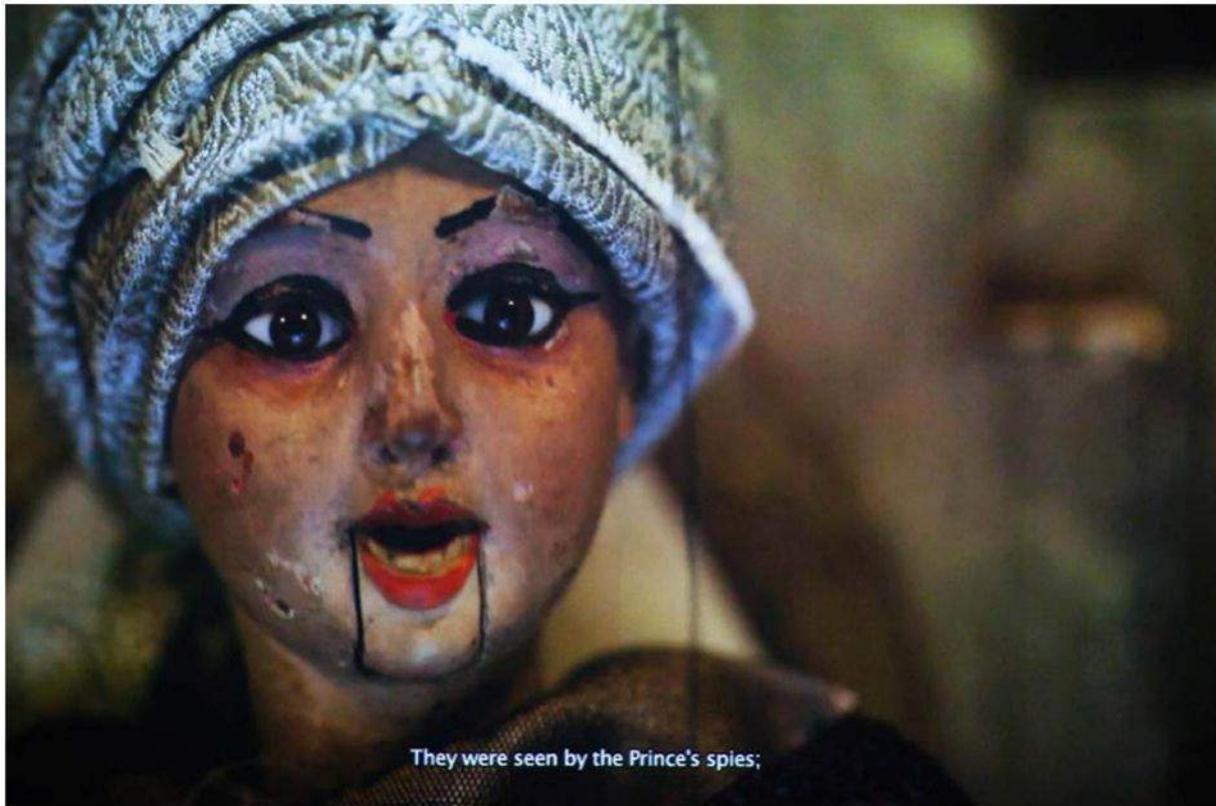
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Egyptian artist Wael Shawky's video titled 'Road to Cairo' is part of his Cabaret Crusades trilogy, based on Amin Maalouf's book, 'The Crusades through Arab Eyes' and can be seen at the Istanbul Pera Museum as part of the Jameel Prize Exhibition until August 14

I first encountered Wael Shawky's work in 2015 at the "Rainbow in the Dark" exhibition at Salt Galata. One always hesitates before committing oneself to viewing a video piece due to the fact that there is never enough time to do so at exhibitions and one tries to spend an equal amount of time in front of each artwork. It was with such reservations that I entered the chamber where I would see Shawky's video. From my first glimpse of "Road to Cairo," the second episode of his series, "Cabaret Crusades," I was hooked, staying in the chamber the entire hour and singing Wael Shawky's praises ever since.

To be honest, it's a bit unfair. Shawky takes several of my interests and rolls them into a ball of magic which mesmerizes me. He uses marionettes to act out the scenes described in Amin Maalouf's acclaimed historical book, "The Crusades through Arab Eyes." Puppetry and marionettes have long been an interest of mine, as they are a very effective form of storytelling; likely because, in my opinion, marionettes reflect the helplessness of the human condition. You can literally see the strings of fate, history or whatever name you prefer to use directing people's actions while displaying a heightened sense of inevitability and melancholy in the viewer. The marionettes in "The Road to Cairo" are made of clay; the material which is, according to the Quran, what humans are made of. These figurines also appear like aborted attempts to imitate human beings; handmade in the style of the Aubagne region of France.



The "Cabaret Crusades" trilogy is mostly a story about violent and power-hungry men but when women make an appearance, they become even more potent.

The puppets that Shawky has created to play in the roles of various amirs, knights and lords of the Middle Ages are disfigured and ugly, to the extent that some of them - Muslim as well as Christian - have animal faces. Add to this the uncanniness of the voices coming from faces and mouths that do not move and the enchanting atmosphere is complete. The way that Shawky manages to keep the faces of the puppets either devoid of emotion and stone-cold or full of passion or anger depending on narrative demands, is truly fascinating. Music, camera angle and inflection of voice are all elements Shawky uses to create the flawless performance. The marionettes, representing both European or Arab characters, all speak in Arabic. It is, for no good historical reason, disorienting to hear Christian rhetoric in Arabic, and we have the crusading Europeans in this film speaking the language - they are as it were dubbed into Arabic. It is also a reversal of our visual and cinematic memory: not Arabs speaking in English, but Europeans speaking in Arabic in the Holy Land.

The story of the Crusades, as we know from history, is one of power, anger, betrayal and violence. The videos cover a very long period of history, taking us on a geographic journey from Rheinland to Venice, Constantinople, Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem, Baghdad and Mecca. When Shawky introduces various scenes, the relevant historical date and the name of the city appear briefly on the screen, but sometimes the cut from one city and date to another is not clear. There are too many characters to keep track of but the overarching message is evident. During the Crusader kingdoms in the Middle East, both Muslims and Christians changed sides, made pacts with "the enemy" to beat their "own" and had no scruples in doing so. We see that there is enough violence and schism among Muslims without the explosive addition of the Crusaders into the mix. We see Hassan Sabbah and his hashashin in their lair, sitting in a circle with their dead marionette eyes, shaking their heads, totally under the control of their leader's suggestions (naturally with the help of drugs). We watch them sway as they sit, the camera zooms into their individual but indistinguishable misshapen faces, and then the music heightens to a rave-like intensity. Then we see them going into the mosque in Baghdad and assassinating people. The protruding animal-like mouths of the marionettes come into their own during these moments of murder and death. It is hard not to draw parallels with DAESH members detonating bombs near the Mosque of the Prophet or brainwashed Turkish officers bombing the Parliament.



The "Cabaret Crusades" trilogy is, of course, mostly a story about violent and power-hungry men but when women make an appearance, they become even more potent. There's the daughter of the amir of Aleppo who seems to be given in marriage to men several times over to procure a ruler who will strengthen the town militarily. However, the groom is assassinated each time and then we see an interminable wedding scene, with people dancing with the bride in the middle, as if there's been a glitch in the film and we're seeing the same scene over and over. There is the daughter of the King of Jerusalem who is forced to make an agreement with the Muslims who want to take back al-Quds, and who sings of her desperation from a tower. It is like a siren's song and the singer sounds not unlike Fayrouz.

The third episode of "Cabaret Crusades," which I saw at the 2015 Istanbul Biennale in a hamam in the Byzantine heart of Istanbul, Balat, is called "The Secrets of Karbala," but it deals equally with Christian internecine violence. The most dramatic scene for an Istanbulite like me is the Latin Crusaders coming to Hagia Sophia, looting it and setting it ablaze, and then setting off in sails with crosses blown to a large scale by the wind, towards Palestine. The marionettes, this time, are made of colored Venetian glass and indeed, some of the story is set in Venice.

Happily, the "Road to Cairo" returned, as it should, to Istanbul this summer with the Jameel Prize exhibition, and I readily spent another disturbed hour in a dark room contemplating history. The first episode of Shawky's trilogy, "The Horror Show Files," in which the marionettes are made of wood, has not yet made it to Istanbul. Although this is in some ways unfortunate, it's also nice to know that there is still more Shawky for me to discover. ■

Wael Shawky, *CABARET CRUSADES, THE HORROR SHOW FILE*, 2010, HD video, color, sound, 31 min 49 sec / *KABARETTISTISCHE KREUZZÜGE, DIE HORRORSHOW-AKTE*, HD-Video, Farbe, Ton.

BORIS GROYS

THE RETURN OF THE STRINGS

Wael Shawky's "Cabaret Crusades" video trilogy—*THE HORROR SHOW FILE* (2010), *THE PATH TO CAIRO* (2012), and *THE SECRETS OF KARBALA* (2014)—tells the story of the first Crusade. Started by a call issued by Pope Urban II in 1095 to conquer the Holy Land, it led to the establishment of the kingdom of Jerusalem by the Crusaders and ended with their defeat by the armies of Saladin nearly a hundred years later. Shawky's narrative is adapted from historian Amin Maalouf's book *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (1984), which is written from a perfectly modern, secular perspective: History is narrated as made by men who are driven by interests and passions. The videos tell the story of the violent expansion of the Crusaders into Muslim lands, of terror against the population, of treason and intrigues that dominated Muslim politics in these years and made resistance against the Crusaders almost impossible. Only very slowly did the Muslims find political and

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military unity that was necessary for liberation. In other words, on the level of narration we have here a piece of secular, modern historiography as it is generally practiced in our time.

However, on the visual level Shawky's videos plunge viewers into the atmosphere of the medieval chronicles. The principle characters of the story are represented by marionettes rather than by living actors and the "real" landscapes of the Middle East are substituted by highly artificial medieval miniatures. Medieval chronicles, including the chronicles of the Crusades, do not clearly differentiate between history and myth, acts of men and acts of God, natural and supernatural powers, men and animals, living and dead. Their true topic is the miraculous: the promise of the miracle, waiting for the miracle, experiencing the miracle, remembering the miracle. The same can be said about the theater of marionettes, which had an important place in medieval culture. The mere fact that inanimate figures could move and act as if they were men or animals or ghosts or gods was experienced by the public as a miracle—as



a momentous suspension of the opposition between life and death.

Today, puppet theater is associated mostly with children's spectacles or films. The use of puppets suggests the purely fictional character of a story and the dominance of entertainment value over content. Shawky alludes to this conventional use of puppets when he titles his trilogy "Cabaret Crusades"—cabaret being associated in our cultural imagination with light entertainment. However, in the Middle Ages, the puppet theater—even if it was mostly directed toward an unsophisticated audience—dealt with serious matters; often it demonstrated man confronting supernatural powers and challenging fate. Not accidentally, Don Juan and Faust were originally figures of the puppet theater. With the emergence of the Enlightenment, the situation changed. The use of marionettes was scorned because it demonstrated the dependence of human beings on the supernatural. Liberation meant shaking off the strings that turned men into puppets manipulated by external powers.

The phrase "no strings attached" still aptly summarizes our understanding of freedom. Shawky has reattached the strings to the characters in his videos. This return of the strings is made even more spectacular by the fact that the marionettes are no longer seen in the familiar context of the puppet theater. Shawky's strings seem to hang from nowhere—and thus the characters seem to be moved by the invisible hand of fate. The return of the strings means the return of the miraculous, unexpected, and fated. The contrast between secular, prosaic, rationally built narrative, and the visual world in which myth and the miraculous dominate creates inner tension and a dynamic that keep viewers enthralled throughout the entire cycle.

A week before I began to write this text, I saw the complete *Ring des Nibelungen* in Bayreuth, staged by Frank Castorf. I was struck by the similarity between Wagner's and Shawky's projects. Wagner also tried to tell myth by means of secular art—in his case, opera. Both *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and "Cabaret Crusades" are Gesamtkunstwerks. They show the world in its totality thrown off balance by an unlawful, criminal act fueled by human hubris. In the case of Wagner, it is the theft of the *Rheingold*. In the case of Shawky,



Wael Shawky, "Myth and Legends," installation view,
Serpentine Gallery London, 2013 – 2014 / Installationsansicht.
(PHOTO: HUGO GLENDINNING)

it is the intrusion of the Crusaders into the Middle East. Both criminal acts have the power to make time out of joint, to change the normal course of things, producing a state of chaos and causing extreme violence, treason, and suffering. And in both cases, the world comes back to its right course when this criminal act is corrected: The *Rheingold* is brought back to the Rhine; the Crusaders are driven from the Holy Land.

The concept of the right course of things is probably the oldest concept that mankind has created to explain the human condition. The Chinese called it *Dao*; the Romans called it *fatum*. The biblical religions, questioning this concept, substituted *fatum* with the will of God. But as time went by, the concept of *fatum* reemerged. Not accidentally, both Wagner and Shawky have chosen the Middle Ages as the setting for their works. The Middle Ages reasserted faith in the right course of things—and also the belief that the attempt to act against the *fatum* will inevitably be punished. But why did Wagner return to the idea of the right course of things in the nineteenth century? And why does Shawky do it now?

Wagner wrote his *Ring des Nibelungen* at the time of the Industrial Revolution, which created a rupture, a break with the traditional way of life. Gold seemed to give unlimited power to those who owned it. At the end of the *Ring*, the gold disappears again into the waters of the Rhine. But that does not necessarily mean a return to the pre-capitalist past; it means simply that gold loses its magic, its promise of absolute power. It is interesting in this respect that Castorf stages the *Ring* as a revolutionary, Marxist, Communist epic. Here not capitalism but, rather, the revolutionary Marxist movement is presented as a manifestation of human hubris. The flow of the Rhine becomes the flow of capital. Onstage, the Rhine is substituted by the New York Stock Exchange—and it is the place to which the Daughters of the Rhine bring the gold that was variously stolen by Marxist revolutionaries, Russian oil tycoons, and revolutionary adventurers. The *Ring* is staged as a failure of anti-capitalist revolution instead of a metaphor of the failure of the capitalist revolution. In both cases, the world comes back to its course, after its violent interruption comes to an end.

If Castorf radically modernizes Wagner's cycle to demonstrate its universality and relevance for our own time, Shawky practices aesthetic archaization by substituting actors with puppets. But, of course, both of these works belong to our contemporaneity. In the case of Shawky's videos, this connection is obvious enough—one needs only to watch the news from the Middle East. But there is, of course, a deeper connection of the work to the contemporary condition. In recent decades, we have been confronted with a chain of revolutions and counter-revolutions all over the world, including Egypt. These events show that the course of things can be violently interrupted at certain points in time, but this interruption cannot be stabilized. Revolutions are followed by restoration, intrusions by resistance. No historical force is forceful enough to put the course of things under its control.

In a somewhat paradoxical way, this insight leads to a new evaluation of the role of personality in history. Instead of classes and nations, which were understood as collective historical subjects that could dominate the world, individuals now reappear on the historical scene. Some of these individuals, Nibelung or Crusader, try to take fate into their hands, to define the course of history, to take the place of the invisible puppeteer. Like Don Juan and Faust, these hubristic actors move inexorably toward catastrophe and defeat. Other individuals know their limits and become successful within them. This view of history is neither progressive nor reactionary, neither critical nor affirmative. It accepts the status quo—but it accepts it as a flow that inevitably changes everything. In Shawky's videos, history is shown at once as a narrative describing the actions of real men with real interests and passions and as a stage on which these men hang from strings operated by fate. It is, actually, a very contemporary view of history that in recent times has manifested its miraculous and fateful dimension.

Wael Shawky, *CABARET CRUSADES*, DRAWING, 2013,
metallic paint, gouache, and pencil on paper, 11 3/4 x 8 1/4" /
KABARETTISTISCHE KREUZZÜGE, ZEICHNUNG,
Metallfarbe, Gouache und Farbstift auf Papier, 29,8 x 21 cm.





Wael Shawky, *CABARET CRUSADES, THE SECRET OF KARBALA*, 2014, marionettes, production photos / *KABARETTISTISCHE KREUZZÜGE, DAS GEHEIMNIS VON KERBALA*, Marionetten, Produktionsphotos. (PHOTOS: ARNIKA FÜRGUT, KUNSTSAMMLUNG NRW)



VULTURE

Wael Shawky's Epic Films Will Completely Change How You See the Crusades

By Jerry Saltz [Follow @jerrysaltz](#)

July 15, 2015
12:19 p.m.

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Photo: Wael Shawky/PS1

One of the more florid and unfashionable forms an artist can use these days is the epic. Of course, no one denies the greatness of Homer, the Mahabharata, Gilgamesh, *The Aeneid*, Dante, Milton, or Melville. Few would argue with Philip Glass, Francis Ford Coppola, Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, Kara Walker, and maybe Matthew Barney — though he is often castigated and snickered at for his form. Yet these days, the epic is often the domain of the overblown Hollywood blockbuster sequel, pseudo-intellectual serial television dramas, and multipart books about soft-core porn or young-adult coming-of-age or dying stories. Epics are viewed as overwrought, platitudinous, clichéd, swollen with sincerity and melodrama, a form of eras gone by. Not by me: I love epics for how their authors can claim to be channeling muses and deities who speak through them, recounting stupendous narratives. I love art that attempts to be about everything, to catalogue a moral universe, show us a thing from every side, tell a tale with so many levels that the tale is always unfolding.

Egypt-born and -based Wael Shawky inhabits the epic's structure impeccably, and in the most unexpected way possible: with puppets. In a lush, labyrinthine trilogy of films being exhibited at MoMA PS1, he uses sublimely designed, marvelously costumed ensembles of marionettes and puppets — some made centuries ago, others fashioned by the artist of Murano glass. These imaginary beings act against painted backdrops, in little built cities, citadels, and battlements; they move in surreal landscapes, speaking Arabic, dancing, singing. With his supernal sense of sound, staging, pacing, and color, Shawky uses these puppets and backdrops to transmit the horror, hate, vanity, slander, and circles of hell of the clash between civilizations known as the Crusades. We watch tragedies unfolding that cannot be stopped, waves of ever-worsening invective. Making the films more powerful and timely, everything in them echoes desperately into the present. As organized by Klaus Biesenbach with Margaret Aldredge, the show couldn't be better, or more ably installed. It is one of the best exhibitions of the season.



Photo: Wael Shawky/PS1

Cabaret Crusades gives us the crusades as seen through an Arab perspective, based as it is on essays by contemporary Lebanese historian Amin Maalouf. The first two films of *Cabaret Crusades* are *The Horror Show File* and *The Path to Cairo* — 32 and 58 minutes, respectively, made in 2010 and 2012. They are the most intoxicating, savage masterpieces of the Crusades I've seen anywhere, on film or otherwise. Each film opens with a spectacular shot. Part II begins in 1099 with Jerusalem burning. Between 60,000 and 100,000 Crusaders have taken and ransacked the holy city. The conflagration is reminiscent of the incredible opening shot of *Apocalypse Now* — Jim Morrison singing “The End” against a Vietnamese jungle erupting into fire. After a prologue scene of plague-ravaged Constantinople, Part I gives us the fateful day of November 27, 1095, and Pope Urban II in France calling on all European Christians to fight against Muslims to reclaim the holy land. “God wills it,” he proclaims. This sets in motion a story that unspools still. Even the places in Shawky's films are sickeningly familiar: Aleppo and Damascus in Syria, Mossul and Baghdad in Iraq, Mecca, Cairo, Lebanon, Palestine, and, of course, Jerusalem. Although the films only encompass a little more than 55 years, Shawky brilliantly makes this time frame feel endless, shot through with delusion, hubris, and power-mad folly.



Photo: Wael Shawky/PS1

The show includes three enormous vitrines displaying scores of the puppets used in the films. These beautiful sculptures seen en masse triggered wistful wishing that I'd spent more of my life watching puppets. In the films the figures truly come alive: Shawky and his puppeteers are masters of nuanced body language. Marionettes move almost in slowmotion, strings always visible. Yet somehow these levels of artifice become more real than actors acting. Eyes blink in 1,000-mile stares; mouths click-clack open and closed, never synched with words; hands motion in circles; animals stand looking aimlessly about. The animals are our entry points; we helplessly look on. Shawky is a connoisseur of sulking, sullenness, suffering, telling this tale of the beginning, of never forgetting, of blood libels and vengeance.

As with many epics, there are scenes recounting marriages, deaths, and ritual moments in cosmic detail; feasting; sleepless nights; celebration. Maybe only puppets can give us these things too big to grasp otherwise. There's great oratorical prowess here, too, highly stylized forms of address: elegies, epitaphs, hymns, laments, oaths, pleas, prayers, and prophecies — all would seem cheesy if delivered by actors. Best are the scenes delivered in song. The action stops as a character breaks into rhythmic dirge or ecstatic aria delivered to drums and other exotic instruments. (I imagined Wagner's "Ring Cycle" done with puppets.) Characters beseech deities, beg forgiveness, bid farewell to families, and sentence loved ones to death. Even small scenes can shatter. In one sequence, the Pope's forces march through Germany and decide to kill all Jews. So go these holy warriors.



Photo: Wael Shawky/PS1

We also witness endless Muslim plots upon other Muslims, sect upon sect, Sunni versus Shia, potentates betraying each other, sending assassins to kill leaders and children, murdering their own families, ransacking one another's cities. There are no heroes in Shawky's art of anticlimaxes, no resolutions. His is an epic of grandeur with intensity, just continuous houses of death.

Part III, *Secrets of Karbala*, is as beautiful as the first two films. But at two hours — and, seemingly, with a much bigger budget — most of Shawky's attention here looks like it went into the puppets and sets. Action becomes monotonous; the script is all stalemate; the film fizzles. I hope Shawky takes up the story one more time, if only to provide a better bookend to this otherwise brilliant series.



Photo: Wael Shawky/PS1

Two other things about this show make this exhibition pressing. The first may be banal but is important in art world circles. *Cabaret Crusades* reminds us that Klaus Biesenbach is fine at what he does best: making shows and projects like this at PS1. His surveys of Ryan Trecartin and Laurel Nakadate; his “Fassbinder Berlin Alexanderplatz”; the 2000 “Disasters of War” he organized, pairing Jake and Dinos Chapman with Henry Darger; and his 2013 group show about ecological changes were all good. But it needs to be made plain as day: Biesenbach is not a scholar or an intellect, maybe not even a curator, per se; he’s an impresario who has been given too much power at MoMA. Starting with his 2010 Mariana Abramovic show, he’s had a deleterious effect on the museum, culminating with this season’s Björk debacle. No matter, he can be good at this sort of show.

Far darker, seeing *Cabaret Crusades* made me remember how the past is never past. Watching Shawky’s characters forever recounting the reasons for their killing, I remembered a reporter once asking a Bosnian warlord how a particular skirmish began and hearing him flatly begin, “Well, back in 1385 ...” Shawky’s films remind us that only one day after September 11, 2001, George W. Bush called for a “crusade.” Almost echoing Pope Urban II, he incited the West to “defend freedom and all that is good and just in the world.” Shawky’s art makes us know this in our bones, makes us wonder if we’re addicted to and in satanic love with war. After thousands of years, the words attributed to Plato only ring truer: “Only the dead have seen the end of war.”

**A version of this article appears in the July 27, 2015 issue of New York Magazine.*

TAGS: WAEL SHAWKY | CRUSADES | MOMA | PS1 | MORE

Interview: Egyptian artist Wael Shawky on faith, oil, politics – and puppetry

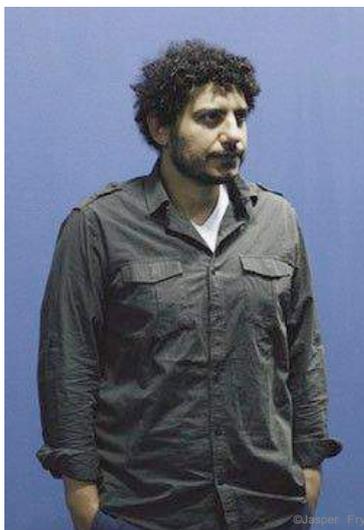
By Rachel Spence



Marionettes in an installation at the gallery, which also features the artist's films

I am less than gracious when a dawn alarm tugs me from my bed on a Saturday morning to watch the first part of *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, the artist Wael Shawky's latest film. But an interview with Shawky at 10am makes the viewing essential.

Grumpily, I press "play", and the Nile glides across the screen in monochrome. The scene cuts to a dark chamber peopled by children dressed as men. As one digs a hole in the floor, the others tell the story of a community who, on the advice of their dying leaders, devote themselves to the worship of various animals until they mutate into hybrids. A parable warning us of the perils of blind faith, it enraptures through the musical voices (which are adult); the solemn conviction on the children's faces; and the equilibrium of the images as they shift between the airless cave and the ancient river.



Wael Shawky at the Serpentine

The fact that, by the end, my imagination feels renewed owes much to Shawky's gifts as a storyteller. Nevertheless, that is just the tip of a far more complex vision. "You are watching one story but you are hearing another story. You are watching a kid but you are hearing a man, so you are focusing on two systems simultaneously," he tells me as we sit in the lobby of his Marylebone hotel, sipping coffee from paper cups.

The tale of the hybrid villagers was originally a story by the late Egyptian writer Mohamed Mustagab. It is typical of Shawky to layer one imaginative gesture on to another so the spectator is left enlightened yet giddy by the pyramid of shifting expressions.

This vertiginous vision has propelled him to the peak of the contemporary art world. The recipient of numerous awards, including the Sharjah Biennial prize this year, he has had solo shows at the KW Contemporary Art Institute in Berlin and the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. Now it is London's turn: his new exhibition, *Wael Shawky: al-Qurban*, opened this week at the Serpentine Gallery.

Shawky was born in Alexandria, Egypt, but spent his youth in Mecca, where his father worked as an engineer. "I think I was making all the drawings for every activity in the whole school," he remembers, laughing. Now 42, today dressed in a casual blue T-shirt and jeans, his easygoing manner and ready smile ensure that he retains a light-hearted, youthful air.

From the first, he possessed a subtlety of mind. Traumatized by his return to Alexandria when he was 13, he entered a “very turbulent” adolescent crisis. Solace came at 17, when he enrolled at the city’s Academy of Fine Arts. “From that moment, I don’t think I was thinking of anything else [except art].”

Lessons at the academy were “mainly drawing and painting”, he recalls. Other than the groundbreaking work being done at Cairo’s non-profit Townhouse Gallery – which gave Shawky several early solo shows – Egypt had almost no contemporary art scene. His awakening occurred on a trip to Madrid, where he saw Bill Viola’s videos at the Reina Sofia museum. “It was really, really great.” He pauses. “I hadn’t seen anything like that in Egypt at all.”

He started to visit New York every summer. Soon, a crucial influence was Joseph Beuys. “Oh my God, yes. That was the man,” he breathes. “The idea that the material itself became a vehicle for human belief was very important for me,” he continues, citing Beuys’ custom of making installations out of fat which, according to his own self-mythology, had saved him when he was shot down as a pilot in the second world war.

“In order for you to receive any information from this cube of fat, for example, you had to believe in its chemical content. For me this is a bit religious. It is [similar] to when you look at the Koran or the Bible. It’s a book which is sacred as it is, even if you don’t open it, because you believe in its chemical content.”

A flair for expressing the flawed, contradictory processes by which we arrive at faith and knowledge is the bedrock of Shawky’s vision. As a young artist, he made installations out of asphalt to reflect his childhood in Mecca – to “understand the relationship between me and my family and Saudi Arabia, which had discovered oil and the British and American oil companies were arriving. All the modernity that I lived in the 1970s in Saudi Arabia [was] based on this western arrival. The asphalt was a metaphor for oil, of course.”

Paradoxically, his gift for deconstruction hinges on his feeling for old-fashioned narrative. The work that catapulted him to the world’s attention was *Cabaret Crusades*, a two-part film in which marionettes act out the medieval struggle for control over the Middle East. A spine-tingling anti-epic, it leaves viewers appalled by the carnage yet riveted by Shawky’s meticulous mapping of the era’s Byzantine twists and turns. “I had to do a lot of research,” he agrees. A crucial source was *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (1984), a history of the period by the Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf. “It shows you that history can be told from a different angle ... from the Arab side.”

His new two-part film, *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, is also grounded in his fascination with the way that the stories we tell ourselves – uncertain, mutable, contingent – evolve into unquestioned beliefs. Its seeds were sown more than 10 years ago when a friend invited Shawky to witness a ritual in a village in upper Egypt. There, he explains, there is a ritual of digging through the floors of homes in the hope of discovering buried Pharaonic treasure. “But it is impossible to discover a tomb unless you break the spells of the Pharaohs that act as protection on the door of the chamber.” Night after night he watched as his friend, who works as a medium, engaged in his dialogue “with something like ghosts”.



Marionettes in an installation at the gallery

What fascinated him was the dichotomy between the means and the end. “They use a metaphysical system, magic essentially, to reach a material, physical system: gold.”

The second part of the film, which premieres this week at the Serpentine, turns on a rumour. “It’s set outdoors and you see one group of kids going to another group of kids spreading this story.”

Like the first film, the tale the children are telling was written by Mustagab. Entitled *The Offering*, it centres on a village of traders who, suddenly afflicted by muteness, transform themselves into entertainers who clap at parties. When a man comes to restore their voices, he disappears mysteriously. “Perhaps the villagers killed them because they didn’t want to lose the clapping.”

Given the tortuous history of Shawky’s own region and the nature of his interests – social transformation, the nature of faith, power and communication, the way our collective fantasies can tip into psychosis – how does he succeed in making work which is profoundly relevant to its political moment yet also sufficient unto itself?

“I try as much as I can not to react to current political events,” he says. “You can’t expect a revolution to happen today. I [may] be making a film about the revolution [tomorrow]: that’s changeable. Yes, the revolution will happen and we will support the army now, and the second day the army will cheat on you. You will change your mind after you made the film; this is not art, it is just reactionary activity. Art must be much bigger than this.”

We have been talking for two hours and Shawky has a plane to catch, yet he never glances at his watch or mobile phone. That lucid, scrupulous commitment to presence is the key to his art’s power. It is what compelled him to, for example, track down a particular *radood* – a Shia religious singer – to play the part of Ibn al-Khashshab, an important Shia leader with a role in *Cabaret Crusades*. “I did think: why am I being that precise? Perhaps nobody will notice the *radood*.” He pauses. “But it’s internal.”

*Serpentine Gallery, London, to February 9. serpentinegalleries.org Lisson Gallery, London, January 31--March 8 2014.
lissongallery.com*

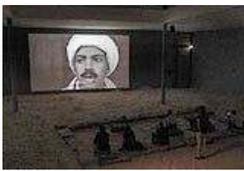
This piece has been amended since first publication to reflect the fact that Wael Shawky has had a solo show at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, not the Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis



Wael Shawky: *Al Araba Al Madfuna*

Interview about his new video work
By Pat Binder & Gerhard Haupt | October 2012

A solo exhibition by Wael Shawky is currently on view at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, one of Berlin's most important art institutions. It is part of the art prize awarded every two years by the Schering Foundation, with which the Egyptian artist has now been honored.



Wael Shawky created the new video installation *Al Araba Al Madfuna* especially for this showing. To this end, the floor of the KW's largest hall was covered with sand. The viewer can sit on stones that are arranged like the remnants of the foundations of a house in the desert. The black-and-white video shows a dimly illuminated, sparse assembly room. Sitting in it are small boys, clothed like grown men, many of them with glued-on moustaches. With the voices of adults, the children tell a story written by the author Mohamed Mustagab (see the interview). All the while, one of the boys digs an ever-deeper hole in floor of the room.



Binder & Haupt: Your exhibition in Berlin is named after your new video installation *Al Araba Al Madfuna*. What gave rise to it? What ideas and context are behind it?

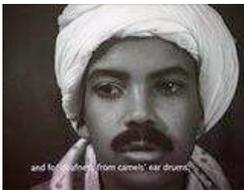
Wael Shawky: The idea goes back to an experience I had ten years ago. A friend invited me to accompany him to *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, a village in Upper Egypt. My friend claimed he could heal people and even find pharaonic treasures under the ground. Upper Egypt has a long tradition of treasure hunting; so-called sheikhs are brought in to help. They are something like shamans who call on "spirits" to find the location of hidden graves of the old Egyptians.



This metaphysical world has always fascinated me, so I accompanied him to *Al Araba Al Madfuna*. We spent ten days there, almost always in one of the typical assembly rooms reserved for men only, where we also slept and ate and where the villagers constantly came to greet us. Some of them simply sat there silently for hours. That's why I decided to shoot my film in a single room.

Binder & Haupt: Do people really dig for treasure in such rooms?

Wael Shawky: Indeed, that's what they do in many houses in this village, sometimes for years. When one of these sheikhs comes and says that he "feels" that there is a treasure there, the family begins at once. Although they find nothing even after digging meters deep, their hope persists. So they get another sheikh, and he then says his predecessor erred and they have to search just a meter to the right. Sometimes a whole generation dies and the next one has the same dream and continues, so that they can definitely dig for twenty years in the same spot.



Binder & Haupt: Do the people occasionally find something valuable?

Wael Shawky: Sometimes. And then the whole village is in an uproar and digs for the next twenty years...



Binder & Haupt: Well, it's definitely a very important archaeological zone. Al Araba Al Madfuna is on the same hill under which a temple for the ancient Egyptian god Osiris was discovered at the beginning of the 20th century.



Wael Shawky: Yes, it's really incredible to see this remote area today and remember that this is the same place where, a long time ago in ancient Abydos, one of ancient Egypt's most important necropolises was.

Binder & Haupt: Far beyond the anecdotal aspect, your film is a powerful metaphor. Why do you have the characters played by children dressed up as men and have their voices spoken by adults?

Wael Shawky: First, because I enjoy working with kids. For me, that's the best. They are the future of society, they have no dramatic memories, they don't know Mohamed Mustagab – the author of the story – and they don't know anything about the ancient Egyptian Osirion or anything that this is about. They don't have any rigid ideas yet about how things should go. When you work with kids, you don't have this complexity with gender complexity or the acting skills. Basically, it's like with marionettes. The meaning of the theme has top priority, which is why it's tremendously important to have a strong script and concept, and the kids can convey it incredibly well and without any clichés.



But in this case, working with kids was a little different. In this project, I depicted the male society of Upper Egypt, to which women have no entry. I thereby wanted to transport the experiences I myself had there. But there are additional aspects. During my stay, I not only saw how the sheikh instructed people in digging for treasures, but also how he began with his healing. Maybe because they have so intensely to do with a metaphysical world, you often meet people in these villages who are somehow "possessed". For example children who speak with the voices of older men. And "exorcists are supposed to heal such cases; the only difference is that they use the Koran instead of the Cross. I've seen it myself.



Binder & Haupt: Do these ancient shamanistic beliefs still have influence in Upper Egypt? Doesn't it really contradict the Koran?

Wael Shawky: Yes, it's against the Koran, but that's how it is with human greed. I think it's unbelievable how a metaphysical system is used for crude materialism. All these means like the Koran and magic and everything imaginable are employed for a materialistic purpose: to dig up treasure. The people know that if they find something, they can sell it for millions of dollars, and that's the whole aim. And if a find *is* made, there are established rules for dividing the windfall. A third goes to the owner of the building, a third to the sheikh using the spirits to lead the search, and the rest for the people who did the digging. And sometimes something even for the police who protected the seekers, because of course this digging for treasure is illegal.



Binder & Haupt: But the story that you have the children tell in Al Araba Al Madfuna doesn't have anything directly to do with this digging for pharaonic treasures. What is Mohamed Mustagab's parable about?

Wael Shawky: It's about how one generation inherits the ideologies of its forebears, how they believe in them, and how such ideas can be taken to extremes. In this simple story, Mohamed Mustagab speaks about a

tribe whose leader is dying and from whom the members of the tribe surrounding him ask for a "last word". Before dying, he answers, "I advise you to get a camel." Until that time, there are only donkeys in the whole settlement, and the people are knowledgeable only about donkeys. But now it was time to get a camel, and this idea grows larger and larger for them until they begin to import camels. Mohamed Mustagab describes how the camel begins to determine their entire life and how their houses, their clothing, and at some point even their own appearance adapts to the camels.

Later the new leader is asked on his deathbed for *his* final instructions, and he says, "I advise you to get a mule." And once again, a fundamental change is made. Suddenly the people feel disgusted by the camels and can no longer understand how they were ever able to live with these weird creatures. So they get mules, and the same adaptation occurs as once when they were obsessed with camels, up to the adaptation of their own bodies. The story ends with the third leader, shortly before his death, telling the members of the tribe, "I advise you to get a pig." This is a light, short, beautiful story, but I think it is extremely important in the context of a society that is built on the legacy of its forebears and that takes that too seriously.

Binder & Haupt: It's also a striking parable for the absurd degree to which a credulous society permits itself to be manipulated by its spiritual leaders.

Wael Shawky: Yes, definitely.

Wael Shawky (born in Alexandria in 1971) studied fine arts at the University of Alexandria and at the Graduate School of Fine Arts of the University of Pennsylvania (USA). In 2010, he established the studio space and study program MASS Alexandria. His works have been shown at the [50th Biennale di Venezia](#) (2003), the 12th Istanbul Biennale (2011), and currently at [dOCUMENTA \(13\)](#) in Kassel (2012), among others. Wael Shawky is among the first five artists announced by the [11th Sharjah Biennial](#), 2013.

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(English editing: Mitch Cohen)



A scene from *Dictums: Manqia I*, which focuses on the prized black camels, screening at London's Lisson Gallery. Courtesy Wael Shawky/Lisson Gallery

The UAE and majahim camels are at the centre of Wael Shawky's film *Dictums: Manqia I*

Ben East

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Black camels amble through the desert near Abu Dhabi. Silhouetted against the hot sun, they look both indignant and regal. They're certainly unlikely stars. But with a single majahim camel selling for a staggering Dh7.5 million in the past at the Al Dhafra Festival, it's not surprising the annual camel beauty pageant is beginning to capture headlines worldwide – as well as the attention of the artist Wael Shawky, who puts the majahim camels centre stage in his new film *Dictums: Manqia I*.

"As someone from Alexandria who grew up in Saudi Arabia, I found the camel beauty industry – and it is becoming an industry – interesting," says Shawky. "The black camels aren't from the Emirates. They're moved from Saudi, and so I thought it might be interesting to explore the wealth that comes from this symbol of the nomad. Most of my work has to do with the idea of a society changing from nomadism to urbanism."

The film, will screen at London's Lisson Gallery on Friday, was shot on location, near Abu Dhabi. It's a new addition to Shawky's *Dictums* series – at the Sharjah Biennale in 2013 he brought together 30 primarily Pakistani workers to make a song in qawwali, a form of Sufi devotional music. Except, the lyrics were explicitly referencing their status as migrant workers.

“I wanted to look at the concept of importing and exporting labourers in the Gulf,” Shawky explains. “I have a lot of respect for the Sharjah director [of the biennial], Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi actually, because, really, the participants were critiquing the claims the Biennial makes: that it breaks down the gaps between the contemporary art scene and the local community. “It was really touching, actually, to give these people a voice where they otherwise wouldn’t have one. It’s nice to think they were involved, rather than just criticising the situation from the outside.”

Shawky, 42, is honest enough to admit that the link between the Sharjah work, which will be displayed in documentary format at Lisson, and Manqia I is tenuous. Still, they do both look at the movement of people for work – someone has to drive the camels – and as The National noted last month, this camel industry is made possible by low-cost migrant labour, handlers from Sudan and Bangladesh living on farms and caring for the animals while the owners are at work in the cities.

But what isn’t in doubt is that Shawky has developed into a thought-provoking filmmaker. Across London at the prestigious Serpentine Gallery, another three of his films have been on show since November – and they’re quite stunning.

“I wanted to look at little sections of Arab history, because most of it is told by the West,” he says of his Cabaret Crusades series, which makes use of marionettes to re-enact key events from the Crusades. “It’s not about telling you who is wrong or right, it’s thinking about how you see the same moment in history from the other side.”

But it’s the way Shawky presents these stories that is fascinating.

In Horror Show File (2010) he used 200-year-old Italian marionettes to depict both Christian and Muslim leaders as violent and motivated by greed. Two years on, in Path to Cairo, he was working with French ceramicists to design 110 of his own intricate figures, which take on human, animal and hybrid forms. The puppetry itself is magical, the grotesque figures singularly expressive.

“The reason I like to use puppets and why children speak adult parts in my other film Al Araba Al Madfuna II, is that I like to remove the drama,” he says. “Not concentrating on an actor makes you think about the real value of the text. Even if I don’t believe everything that is said, in a way that’s the point, too, in terms of how I think history has been written. My work is always about people making their own judgements.”

All this might sound lofty, but what is impressive about Shawky’s work is his commitment to storytelling. These are not “art films” for people to dip in and out of as they make their way through a gallery. They demand – and reward – attention.

“I’d love to show them in the UAE,” he says. “I’m actually in talks with Guggenheim to work on a project with them for 2015. But don’t ask me where exactly Manqia I was filmed, because I really don’t know.”

• **Wael Shawky: Dictums is at Lisson Gallery in London from January 31 to March 8 (www.lissongallery.com). His exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, London, runs until February 9 (www.serpentinegalleries.org)**

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Wael Shawky

ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT

WRITER Kevin Jones PHOTOGRAPHER Pauline Beugnies

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Egyptian artist Wael Shawky shares his memories of growing up in Mecca – and why he's building Alexandria's first alternative art school

A black-haired man ambles through a bland Amsterdam supermarket, his pace steady, his gaze determined. Face to the camera, he rattles off an uninterrupted stream of Arabic, as if delivering an ambulant news report in monotone. Aloof, vaguely interested shoppers dart past him as he slaloms through stacks of cabbage and grazes displays of toilet rolls. In a single take, he tells the Qur'anic tale of young 'sleepers' who hid in a cave, only to wake up 300 years later, utterly out of sync with the world.

The roving narrator is Egyptian artist Wael Shawky. The 12-minute film, his 2005 work 'The Cave' (Amsterdam). This single piece (one of two in which the artist actually appears) epitomises the pedigree of this rising-star artist, whose approach is as nimble as it is challenging.

Wael Shawky's signature is that he never makes a statement in his art. He is adamantly neutral. The viewer is left to wallow in an ambient uneasiness, unsure how to resolve the questions raised by the tensions in his work – an unorthodox artistic strategy, to say the least, particularly for an artist wielding such slippery issues as spirituality, consumerism, authority and the spectacle of globalisation.



Shawky has the gentle affability that has long been an Egyptian hallmark, his broad features animated by a candid energy. His growing international acclaim has resulted in prolonged absences from his hometown of Alexandria. Yet the most telling chapter of his life unfolded not in the land of the pharaohs, but in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. 'I grew up in Mecca in the 70s,' he reveals, 'and Saudi Arabia had a huge impact on me as an artist. As a kid, I was a bit isolated, which encouraged me to use my imagination all the time, to fill in the void of social activities. Almost all of my current work contains what I experienced during this period.'



"During this year's Sharjah Biennial 11, Shawky took home one of two awards for an exceptional contribution to SB11 for 'Dictums 10:120'"

Unsurprisingly, much of this work involves religion. 'What's interesting about Wael,' Lebanese gallerist Andrée Sfeir-Semler once shared in an interview, 'and what's different about his work compared to that of other conceptual artists, is the way he takes religion into account.' Shawky himself is quick to spot a link to his formative Saudi years. Works like 'The Cave', 'Al Aqsa Park' (imagine the Dome of the Rock as an amusement park joy ride), the rarely seen 'Digital Church' (imagine The Cave set in a Catholic church) and the ongoing video series 'Cabaret Crusades' (Amin Maalouf's book 'The Crusades Through Arab Eyes' as marionette musical theatre) all manipulate religion, yet the artist's stance remains steadfastly ambiguous.

Shawky admits to being fascinated by the metaphysical world, so it seems somehow logical that magic should spark his artistic curiosity. 'Al Araba al Madfuna', a video and erstwhile installation that premiered at Berlin's KW Institute for Contemporary Art in August 2012, is a surreal tale of human greed, with a cast of confounded elders (played by children) and shamanistic treasure-hunters digging for pharaonic relics, set in the eponymous Upper Egyptian village.

Less magical and more mystical, the premier of 'Dictums 10:120' at the Sharjah Biennial 11 in 2013 was a watershed moment in Shawky's nearly 20-year career. The Sharjah Art Foundation's Witness Programme, an international residency in which the artist participated during Sharjah Biennial 10, was the initial breeding ground for the concept, articulated around the idea of the Biennial's public. Two years later, after extensive research and a timely epiphany by a Sharjah Art Foundation staffer, 'Dictums 10:120' sprang melodiously to life.

In a narrow, sun-drenched alleyway snaking between the Foundation's newly built spaces, two human columns of South Asian musicians line the walls. Dressed in crisp tunics, the 30 men sit cross-legged on pastel-coloured cushions, eyes fixed on two rock-star-status qawwals, Fareed Ayaz and Abu Muhammad, perched on the podium before them like twin leaders at the helm of a galley of musical oarsmen. The qawwals wave, the music starts. Syncopated drums are a counterpoint to the musicians' fluid hand-claps, as the qawwals' Urdu chants ricochet off the walls, echoed by the chorus of seated men. This qawwali song is the heir to a centuries-old tradition of Sufi devotional music. It is also a bold piece of contemporary art.

The lyrics of the song are in fact Urdu-translated snippets from curatorial talks held during Sharjah Biennial 10 (the 10:120 of the title mimicking the partition of sacred texts into books, verses, suras). 'The curatorial text is holy,' says Shawky, somewhat ironically, before embarking on an explanation of how workshops with the Foundation's primarily Pakistani technical crews pitted the workers against the sacrosanct rhetoric of art: they deconstructed art-speak and made a song out of it.

Much noise has recently surrounded the overuse of a particular strain of obtuse art world jargon, sarcastically labelled International Art English. In 'Dictums 10:120', this metalanguage is, for once, fully accessible to the Urdu speakers who comprise much of Sharjah's community (and who thronged to the performances), yet it was indecipherable for the assembled denizens of the art world. 'Ultimately, this is a work about power,' confides Shawky. 'The curatorial discourse is delivered by them,' pointing to the rows of South Asian singers/clappers. Clearly, the work questions institutional authority, while a verse like, 'As Jack said, we want to be as close as possible/To the street without smothering the street,' with its reference to ousted Sharjah Biennial 10 director Jack Persekian, also spotlights this Biennial's stated intention of engaging with the community.

Although he has been in the international eye of art circles for many years, 'Dictums 10:120' truly seemed to hurl Shawky even further into the limelight: 'Everyone I talk to tells me about this work. I really can't understand how so many people have seen it!' Such is the state of Shawky's rising celebrity. 'The best part about this fame is that I don't have time to think about it [laughs]. But it is a beautiful feeling – that you can speak a universal human language, escaping the limitations of locality.'

When he is in his 'locality', it is mostly to spend time with his 'students'. In 2010, Shawky founded MASS Alexandria, the first independent studio programme for young artists in Egypt. 'Essentially, I don't have a studio today. I gave it to MASS,' he explains, referencing the sacrifice of his 400 square metre basement space in the working class Miami neighbourhood to the residency programme he now runs. The idea is to have a group of students making work in the Alexandria studio space every six months. Add to this a programme of talks, lectures, seminars and a guest list of visiting artists, curators and educators that reads like a who's who of contemporary visual culture. Artist Francis Alÿs was a recent recruit from Shawky's stint in Sharjah.

According to the artist, there is no proper art education system in Alexandria. Of course, there is his alma mater, the Alexandria Academy of Fine Arts, but an indolent regime had pretty much forsaken it, letting it fade into dusty uniformity. Carefully choosing his words in what seems like a moment of self-imposed political correctness, the artist explains that MASS is not intended to replace, but to extend and enhance the traditional system. Shawky speaks passionately about MASS, likening it to a 'small academy' which seems even to have claimed its place in the community. 'Because MASS is a basement,' he recalls, 'we used it for the first days of the revolution as a bunker for the entire street. But we also had to stop the programme for two months.'

Somewhat forlorn when the programmes are interrupted, or when his travels prevent him from overseeing the artistic proceedings as closely as he would like, he nonetheless has devised a robust itinerary of international jaunts for the budding artists in his charge. 'Last year, ten students went to DOCUMENTA (13) for one month during the opening, working directly with the artists there, and of course attending all the talks and so on.' This year, a handful of industrious MASS youngsters were on hand to watch the blossoming of the Sharjah Biennial – an experience they zealously documented on their purpose-built Tumblr site. Towards the end of 2013, others will have a group show in the Sharjah Art Foundation's newly built spaces, a stone's throw from the site of their mentor's previous 'Dictums 10:120' performance.

The Egyptian cultural landscape has vastly changed, as of late. The disappearance of the non-commercial art space Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum (ACAF) has, locally at least, intensified the attention on successful initiatives like MASS. In Cairo, a spate of alternative art spaces has cropped up, such as the confusingly named, contextresponsive Beirut, in Agouza, and the artist-run Nile Sunset Annex. 'These new entities are necessary,' he agrees, 'but they need to be sustained, which is hard.'

A question about his future projects brings a glint to Shawky's eyes. He enthusiastically recounts choice morsels from the third part of 'Cabaret Crusades', tentatively entitled 'The Secret of Karbala' – a musically rich close-up on the split between Shi'i and Sunni Islam. His research in Upper Egypt for 'Al Araba al Madfuna' whet his appetite for exploring pharaonic history. So, will it be like 'Cabaret Crusades', set in ancient Egypt? 'I personally don't believe in history,' he claims. 'Only in our translation of it.' Previously, the artist-as-translator was a role he willingly accepted, even cultivated. But now he distances himself from it. 'It's not like that anymore. It is freer. A large part of it is about creation.' This shift suddenly brings to mind the tousled-haired figure gliding through the drab supermarket aisles in 'The Cave'. If nothing else, Shawky is nimble. His ambiguity is perhaps his clearest asset. It makes his art at once absorbing and frustrating. And it makes him someone who can never be accurately profiled.