



Invisible Presence

By Jenifer Evans

In the old Mawlawi complex in Islamic Cairo, *Invisible Presence* was an offsite project by Mashrabia Gallery. The premise was that the body is ignored in Egyptian discourse, and its study in a local context would create a discursive platform, through commissioned works by 25 prominent and emerging artists.

It was difficult to tell if the artists agreed with this premise or not, but the most fruitful works were those that conceived of the body as inseparable from a wider context and the city, and sought not to fix meaning, but to confuse things.

One of these was a video from Shady El Noshokaty's collaborative project *Stammer*. He frantically draws a pseudo-scientific diagram on a chalkboard, fails to read theory, repeatedly screams and plays harmonica wearing washing-up gloves. In a short voiceover a man vomits ice in Tahrir Square, dissolving ranks of riot police. It speaks of futility, art's failure to communicate or affect change or dissolve police: while authoritatively enacting familiar tropes (eg. the Beuysian chalk diagram) it pokes fun at them and the inscrutability and self-dramatisation it relishes. Stammering, screaming, giving up and resorting to mournful harmonica music, all suggest the information he's attempting to communicate is either pointless or incomprehensible – but the grave precision of the piece counters its frustration.

In another piece by El Noshokaty, *Virtual*, a large sculpture suspended itself, like an oversized light fixture

Malak Helmy, *Keyword Searches for Dust*, 2010
Image courtesy of The Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo

made out of sports equipment, holding six loudspeakers, each fluorescent yellow inside with yellow padded rims. It had the same air of melancholic seriousness mixed with humour, but was more exuberant. One arm held up a glass sphere at waist height, holding a neat clump of braided black hair, a few strands escaping. The speakers made muffled urgent intercom announcements and requiem-like speaker noise. It was trying hard yet muted. The hair was sealed off like a dangerous object, or perhaps remains held out as a warning by the panicky object?

Ambiguity and a science-fiction feel also characterised Malak Helmy's *Keyword Searches for Dust*. Like a few other works in the exhibition, it used internet material: found images and clips became a video with a nonsensical voiceover. Using recycled words, it spoke of an exhibition, a building, smell, a mannequin turning into pink dust, disease and fireflies. It was concise and confidently experimental, the themes were of decay and loss: "chunks of her are moving away, going somewhere else grain by grain."

Hala Elkoussy's fragmented epic video *We're by the Sea Now* explored survival tactics in relation to other city-dwellers, against traffic noise. Possibly fictional, youthful characters tell stories that might not be their own. "I was harassing a young girl... so I got beaten up," says one. "Yesterday I was in Paris" lies a boy on a Cairo roof holding a balloon. A psychologist discusses helplessness in a big city, a lecture that sounds personal: "when I try to vent you don't give me a chance".

Mohamed Nabil showed two lists: force, duty, power, history, horror, largest, blue, etc. In small photos, twenty lone young men stood to attention for full-length portraits, diverse bodies and not-so-diverse underwear exposed. Measured against each other they have a certain awkwardness and defiance, young manhood with army rhetoric, set off by unlikely underwear: Armani, Puma, Prada, Versace.

Magdi Mostafa's piece, under the circular dance floor of the Samaakhana itself, engaged with the loaded setting. The layered, dusty spaces of the building, with its red



Shady El Nohokaty, *Stammer*
Image courtesy of The Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo

rubber dancing carpet, were empty apart from traces of the exhibition's art performances (which I did not see). The work's drips, creaks, rattles, rumbles, silences and sections of singing heavy with reverb echoed precisely the building's laid back mystique. Sound samples from recent events complimented its exposed workings: tiny white lights illuminated wet bricks, a PC on the ground, wires, an ancient well.

There was energy in the adolescent fantasies in the works of both Ahmed Sabri and Nermine El Ansary. Sabri laid black painterly computer strokes onto a 3 minute clip of *The Choice* by Youssef Chahine. In a psychologically charged scene between a man and a woman in an ornate interior, Sabri gave him a beard and her a niqab, slippery and rough additions: prurient vandalism, a split-second of nudity as the woman sits at her mirror. El Ansary's work was unashamedly obvious. Video-game music in a dark room, a life-sized clumsy plaster woman in fighting pose, wearing only boxing gloves and shoes. Behind her in UV paint big wings on the walls, and around the room more crudely painted visions, no doubt representing a nightmarish society: cityscapes, people, toothy monsters attacking (possibly) a large disintegrating brain.

In contrast Amr el Kafrawy's eight ink portraits, fragments of paper glued onto panels, hung outside. Modest, but outside they looked resilient, even provocative.

Other works tended to lack exuberance, humour or complexity: coy but accompanied to their disadvantage by artists' statements making grand claims. There was little attempt to engage the viewer's own body; works kept to themselves like a series of solo shows. The exhibition presented the body as under attack, unsurprising since in Cairo bodies are perpetually assaulted, judged: besieged by pollution, noise and traffic, covered, over-medicated, malnourished, signifiers of social position. Egyptian contemporary art is particularly figurative; this exhibition could have celebrated and explored that with more gusto.



Mohamed Nabil
Image courtesy of The Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo



Magdi Mostafa
Image courtesy of The Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo

Jenifer Evans is a British artist living and working in Cairo who has been involved in making installation, painting, sculpture, video, books and various collaborative projects, both fictional and non-fictional, as well as having a writing practice. She completed her masters in Painting at the Royal College of Art in London in 2007 and has shown in the UK, North America, Portugal and New Zealand.

Amr Elkafrawy
Image courtesy of The Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo

