

Martina Corgnati  
*in conversation with*

# Nermine Hammam

*Nermine Hammam is one of the most unique and leading emerging female photographers from Egypt and the Middle East region. Her peculiar style uses digital images with intricate colored episodes that gear towards an effect brought about old water-colored prints. Their distinct style even at a distance, is achieved by following a complex technique: Using old or damaged films, printing on canvas, painting and then rescanning the image in order to print once again the final version. The use of expired, half-burned or damaged film, is quite distinct from other significant artists such as Joana Hadjthomas and Khalil Joreige, who use damaged and burned films to recreate the actual image with scenes of violence, scenes of war and of bombing. Hammam's atmosphere is most of the time soft, profound and old-fashioned. She reflects her memories or rather, an aura of nostalgia.*



Untitled #33 Metanoia series, 2009

Hammam is a graphic designer and an artist. She realized several projects, each devoted to the specific subjects of: Ashoura (2006), Palimpsest (2007), Eschaton (2008), and now Metanoia: The Forgotten Ones (2009). She handles subjects of great difficulty due to their hidden meanings, their taboos, and their impartial realities (one exception is the series devoted to Egyptian beaches: The Beaches Series, 2008) Due to such complex divergences brought about social requisitions, Hammam creates layers of the same happening, reflecting the damages brought about what she captured in that single shot, confirmed again and again and again. The narrative of each single project is assured by the sequence of images that follows one after the other and the artist recommends watching it as part of a whole. Multiple single shots have a visual empowerment that justifies the status of her work carrying a great aesthetic appeal. This in return cancels the simple and simplistic documentary approach that characterizes a lot of young artists photographic and video projects nowadays, especially the ones enriched with “strong” content.

*Martina Corgnati: Nermine Hammam from where should we start?*

**Nermine Hammam:** From where should we start? We can start briefly from my childhood, passing a particular this street with my grandfather here in the Middle-East.

*MC: Which Street?*

**NH:** A street In in Cairo, while heading in the direction to the airport, close to the book fair, you see it all the time but you do not realize it, non the less it cannot be missed: A huge garden, massive, wide... it used to be 16 acres, but I think the government at some point took half of it, and I think there are 8 acres remainAs a child I used to see this beautiful garden and I noticed ghost-like figures walking between the trees; literally looking like ghosts, figures endlessly lost.. In this garden there is this huge palace, and this institute, which I would rather not cite by name. I was intrigued.

Indeed the garden belonged to the Psychiatric Hospital, the “Yellow Palace” or as people call it: Saraja el Safra, which is where my last project took place from the beginning of this year (2009). The idea of the *Yellow Palace* became quite important in the Arabic language, or at least, perhaps it plays a very important role in Cairo’s slang alone. But paradoxically NOBODY ever went inside and saw it!

People say: *Are you coming from yellow palace?*

Meaning: *have you become mad?*

So we start from the end of my itinerary. I think it is the best and clearest way, to start from the end.

*MC: Did you ever get to go insidethe?*

**NH:** Of course! Now I have, almost everyday, briefly before or after working hours, but during weekends I would would spend the whole day.

*MC: How did you get the chance to do that?*

**NH:** Someone invited meI asked someone there, then and I got a permission, a “contract,” that allowed me to shoot there for a certain period.

*MC: What attracted you there?*

**NH:** The ... At the beginning this huge garden and its mysteriousness I have always seen. But then once inside I was shocked. In the old times, people of the villages used to keep the mentally sick disabled at home or, at least, keep them in their community. The mentally handicapped ill were said to had have been touched by God who had given them certain powers. When I was a child I used to spend most of my weekends in the Delta area, in a village, and there were always this type of “*disturbed*” people but they got along somehow, theythe mentally handicapped were accepted, even revered in some cases to allow them to be integrated. A myth was created around them so as not to get rejected. Now the big metropolis changed profounddeply, all these costumes, habits and traditions: But still in the *Yellow Palace* this palace I found

Untitled #74 Metanoia series, 2009



some patients reflecting the myths that used to be attributed to them., like “Mad!”

For instance, many of them would call out to me: *Come, come I can read see the future.*

I would ask: *You can read the future fortunes?*  
*Of course, they would say. We all can.*

They believe this for themselves. But they remained the only ones. Families Society does not keep them anymore because of there is a stigma of being genetically associated with them.. B Parents and relatives are often ashamed to have one in the family, and because society is becoming more individualised rather than communal. There is also the physical and economical impossibility of taking care of the needs of the mentally handicapped deal with such a problem. Before a new law was passed, Some families, when they could, they would often tend to send people away without proper medical assessment- these people, away to the hospital with false identification or none at all, for a one-way journey, to institutionalize them, to get rid of them forever. I know about cases sent back to their homes which are not welcomed and denied entry kept literally outside the door. who I know about someone who was kept out this way for two weeks. She slept outside the door and was fed by neighbours for two weeks, before being sent back to be institutionalised.

**MC:** *What did you do there during these months?*

**NH:** Well, the project was about shooting them but we went further. I discovered I could not “enter” their world without interacting with them, spending time, talking, laughing. Having touching them (physical contact is essential), and letting them know and enjoy the process of image-making was my way of breaking through the barrier of suspicion, and for them to be able to trust me.. A relationship had to be forged before being accepted. It took me many weeks before I was able to take a single shot.

**MC:** *Were things difficult there?*

**NH:** It was hard, extremely hard because of the lack of the most elementary hygienic structures and the smell and the dirt everywhere. But we went through it. The images speak for themselves: Speak about the terrible type of conditions these people live in, really at the border of humanity, cared only by nurses which, after a certain amount of time, became more or less like the “patients” they should assist were caring for.



Untitled #20 Metanoia series, 2009

Untitled #15 Metanoia series, 2009



So there is for sure a certain amount of “social commitment” about this idea of taking the photographic glimpse in a forbidden place, a place where no glimpse enters. But it is not only that.

*MC: And what is beyond that?*

**NH:** Most of my work tries to deal with altered states of consciousness, and the relationships between subjectivity and objectivity, in other words the lack of consistence of reality's lack of constancy in front of subjective alteration and manipulation. Most of my photographic images are manipulated, by different degrees, from minimal to total alteration. This gives a different meaning to what's inside the image, therefore one is giving it a new reality – and if you're able to alter it, it must be inherently unreal.

At the end, all the projects I have done have to do with me. I usually enter the project without knowing what I will find, and then I find myself totally involved. Each time I discover, there is no definite reality, just subjectivity. ... There is this machine that works inside us and then, at any point, just with a simple physical or emotional shock, even a physical shock and everything changes... and you are not the same person. All perceptions change.

*MC: What were your previous projects about?*

**NH:** In 2007 I worked on a project There is a series I called Palimpsest. I went to a churches where a priests had done exorcisms. and dealt with “magic.” A People go there when they want to be healed, many of them veiled Muslim woman women went to a priest because she wanted to be healedgo there when they want to be healed. Part of Egyptian folk belief is that pPriests are in touch with the Devil and can perform Black Magicmiraclecericals and get rid of the evil that resides in us. Many Muslims believe in this, and In this series the images are a little theatrical but the whole point is that Wwhen people want to get healed all boundries are transcendedthey want to be treated, so they go there. Veiled Moslems would go to church. Then the year before I shot the Ashoura Festival in Lebanon

for the first time. I went there three times after that, but before In 2000, I started shooting a Sufi moulid fFestival in the year 2000. , whicWhich are birth festivalvities of sufi saints. The people that take part in it try to change their state of consciousness through songloud drums, moving at a certain rhythm and breath (Arabic, nafas)ing. And they do it! So I started questioning somehow the nature of reality and the

nature of image. I went to Paris to meet a disciple of Stanislav Grof, a psychiatrist who started as a Freudian Orthodox, but then moved to different experiences and strategies of “taking carewho used breathing to alter one's state of consciousness.” and helping. GoingI went to the workshops and I found myself myself interested in experiencings related to different perceptions of reality, where the same image changed continuously, ridding itself of its meaning and perpetually redefining itself.very early stages of life. It is through this type of hyper-ventilation that plays with chemicals of the mind, and gives certain clarity to the whole.

*MC: This must be heavy.*

**NH:** Very heavy, extremely heavy. Indeed., The Beach series (Eschaton), done in 2008,es Series was a kind of a break for me. I looked for contrasts and similarities, for example between men and women's relationship to the freedom that water brings. The similarities of the men's postures to those of women in Hollywood movies of the 40s and 50s.the dark, veiled women and almost naked children, standing between light and darkness. Things like that...

*MC: And now what is your next step?*

**NH:** I think I want to go back to everything I have done and to do them again to see how my own perception has changed. My attitude now is far less romantic than it has ever been, and/or I will make some portraits.

*MC: When you take a picture, what is the most important thing in your process?*

**NH:** To get rid of the self and, of your-self, to let go of your ego, empty yourself to let the other enter and take its space. It is never an easy journey: It is not easy to remove judgement and to be completely open. I know, for me it has been really physically painful, so difficult – but this is the way, shooting with no opinion. But still I am not so sure of my success.

*Martina Corgnati is a Milan-based art historian, curator and critic. She holds the chair of History of Contemporary Art at Albertina Academy, Turin, Italy. Her curatorial practice included contemporary practices and artists from the Middle East in the past decade. She curated Gates of the Mediterranean, Rivoli, Turin, 2008, Arab and Italian Artists around the Mediterranean, Italian Cultural Institutes of Damascus, Beirut and Cairo, 2008, South-East: Mediterranean Encounters, Horcynus Orca Foundation, Messina, Italy, 2005. Martina Corgnati is author of over 20 books and 200 artists' catalogues essays.*



Untitled #24 Metanoia series, 2009