

A close-up photograph of a brick wall. The wall is composed of numerous bricks in various shades of red, brown, and white. The bricks are arranged in a somewhat irregular pattern, with some white bricks interspersed among the red ones. The mortar between the bricks is a light grey color. The overall texture is rough and aged.

Images Towering Hope: Conceptions of Home and Time in Lara Baladi's Borg El Amal

by Nat Muller

“Skimming” would be the wrong word to use when attempting to grapple with the body of work by Lebanese-Egyptian artist Lara Baladi. Born in Beirut, raised in Paris, educated in London, and for over a decade a passionate resident of Cairo, Baladi’s diasporic and nomadic experience is reflected in her work. It is not necessarily the case that her work is about travel or movement, but it is the sense of discovery, and the unlocking of multiple layers of meaning that lie at the core of her practice.

The audience is invited into an immersion with the pieces Baladi has created. Yet it is always up to the spectator how much it would take to yield to a work, or how many levels of interpretation to excavate. In that sense, Baladi is an artist who places responsibility in the eye of the beholder, perhaps an exceptional and democratic gesture in a contemporary art world where so much is directed towards distanced criticality.

In a recent interview with Gerald Matts she explains, “Most of my work questions and challenges the history of image-making, both still and moving, and most of all the consuming of these images”. Living in Cairo, a city whose photographic and cinematic representations are grafted in our visual memory—be they taken through a colonialist, touristic or other lens—is definitely a challenge for every visual artist. In addition, the absence, in Cairo, of professional photographic labs has pushed Baladi, who initially started out as a photographer, to reconsider how to take and represent her images. This makes her work situated and relational. Situated because she adapts to the mediated and technological environment she finds herself in and relational because her images only make sense in relation to other images. This is particularly the case for two well-known earlier collages *Oum el Dounia* (2000) and *Sandouk el Dounia* (2001). Completing each other’s negatives, *Oum el Dounia* (“Mother of the World” in Arabic, and a common sobriquet for Egypt) and *Sandouk el Dounia* (“The World in a Box” in Arabic), both designate parallel universes. The former is about the openness of space: where earth and sky and water meet in the desert, and where

there is an almost careless lightness, the latter is the claustrophobia of technology and the urbanized-dark and dense. Similarly, this awareness is present in the collapsed desert landscape of Oum el Dounia. Populated by fairy tale characters lounging on the desert sands, such as Alice in Wonderland's caterpillars smoking sheesha, mermaids and fairy magicians, it is no coincidence that the first image encountered is a photograph by Lehnert and Landrock. Well known for their early 20th Century photography of "The Orient", and their depiction of the desert as an empty terrain incognita, Baladi has re-appropriated this Orientalist imaginary by offering her own mythologies and iconography, cross-referencing and deconstructing European fairy tales with desert rock formations, the biblical, the sphinx and the Bedouins.

This is Baladi's Egypt, Oum el Dounia, an iconographic *métissage*, where in she combines hieroglyphic writing in the sand with the Arabic word for God [Allah], and at the centre, places the phrase, "I remember". The use of the latter phrase is an important comment on history and how memory is (mis)construed. Sandoukel Dounia, on the other hand, is a dark and cluttered game world with manga-like pop characters wielding a playful, yet artificial, sextoy eroticism. At the centre of the work we find Baladi's "téta" (grandmother in Arabic) as the primal feminine power Kali, the Hindu mother goddess associated with death and destruction, but also with time and change. Both this work and Oum el Dounia function as mosaics wherein every image makes up a grain of sand in the desert, or a pixel in the data sphere. The choice of collage as an artistic form reiterates a vested concern with image-making and how visual regimes work. There is a tension between the patched aesthetic of collages, which function as broken images shards, indicating a temporal cut and volatility, and the monumentality of constructing a timeless iconography and mythology. Seamlessly Baladi leads us from "through the looking glass," to, "a glass darkly," wherein the perception of realities is scenographed into an extreme "performativity".

Over the past decade Baladi's work has followed an interesting trajectory from photocollage to image reproduction, and from big installations to participatory pieces. In the catalogue essay to her solo show Kai'ro (Sweden 2005), French curator and critic Simon Njami calls her practice one of "contemporary nostalgia". While there is a strong engagement with the temporal, and the positioning of memory, relegating Baladi's work to the realm of nostalgic desire-no matter how exuberant-would be inaccurate. The Greek ori-

gin of the word nostalgia suggests nostos "returning home", and algos "pain". Sorrow might be present in very personal works, such as *Diary of the Future*, which maps the last half-year of her father's illness through the coffee grains caked in the cups of friends and family during house visits. However, it is far more interesting to view Baladi's methodology as one of an "image archivist". In that respect, the "return home" is the journey of the images she carefully gives a place in her work. Whether these are the discarded items found at Cairo's Friday market in Karakib (2003), or whether she re-appropriates her own "digital trash" (such as the unused material of a residency in Japan) with her impressive walk-in kaleidoscopic installation *Roba Vecchia* (2006), if anything, Baladi's work is accumulative and tries to create an alternate logic in a world of visual overload. In the end nothing goes to waste, unconsumed images are recombined and re-appropriated accordingly and those who pay attention will find figures as Maria Magdalene, the aroussadoll, little Eve, and other characters and icons reappear in different guises.

According to Baladi, her latest work, *Borg el Amal*, 2008 ("Tower of Hope" in Arabic) which earned the Grand Nile Prize at the 11th Cairo Biennale earlier this year, is linked with all of her other works. In this case she has literally moved beyond the image and has stripped the representational to its bare essence, a skeleton of brick and cement. Her "ephemeral construction" embodies all the ambiguities and layers engrained in her previous work. This time, the work is markedly site-specific and addresses the socio-political condition of living in Cairo in a far more direct fashion. Erected on the grounds of the Opera House, The Tower of Hope is built on the main location of the Cairo Biennial. It is important to remember that the Opera House grounds are run by the Ministry of Culture and that the site thus stands as a symbol for an official, state-controlled, sanitised, and institutionalised narrative. Here you will not find a nod towards the many problems Cairo, the sprawling mega-city, faces daily.

The Opera House grounds are in, and by themselves, gated, manicured and lush, a stark contrast with the dire living conditions of the majority of city's population. Nevertheless, Baladi has managed to physically insert that which the hegemony considers an eyesore and bad publicity, and hence is a "no-go" zone. Inspired by the informal red brick architecture one finds around Cairo, the artist built her own structure, outside of the white cube confines of the Palace of the Arts, but still within the Opera Grounds. If real estate developers have us believe that the delights of the new Oum



Borg El Amal, bricks and cement. Photo by Lara Baladi, 2008

elDounia are to be found in the elitist gated communities, then the dark side of suburbia – the Sandouk el Dounia, if you will – is Cairo’s “red city”, represented by the urban sprawl of cheap and hastily built informal housing, devoid of infrastructure, proper sanitation and other services. Baladi has once again flipped the Möbius strip in a gesture that is quite radical for a first commission from a government-run venture – the Cairo Biennial. Yet, she has taken the Biennial’s theme of “The Other” to heart by giving that which is rendered invisible in the official visual landscape. A home within the lion’s den, stretching boundaries of the territorial and politically permissible, Baladi’s piece is not only informal, but also parasitical. Borg el Amal feeds off its host, the context of the Biennial and the Biennial grounds, to work within the context where accepted systems of representation collapse. The construction is a piece of informal architecture, a work of art, a political and artistic manifesto, a parasite, a tower of Babel, a tower of hope, a shelter, a music box, a prison, a place of refuge, all in the form of brick and cement.

The Tower of Babel in its biblical reference is an important one. Dedicated to the glory of man instead of to the glory of God, a united humanity that spoke one language under the kingdom of King Nimrod, the tower of Babel would have its top in the heavens. In its modern-day, urban, globalised resurrection, the Tower of Hope is indeed an homage to humanity reflecting the inventiveness of mankind in order to survive. The roofless building with its discontinued ‘don’t lead to the sky’ staircase, suggest that hope is always a possibility, fate is not set in stone and that even in the bleakest of circumstances, beauty is to be found, and amidst that beauty we find a donkey symphony.

A reviled animal in Egypt, the working animal of the poor, and if called one, an Arab insult, donkeys provide an important presence in Lara Baladi’s work. The sad sound of donkeys braying in the Cairene streets first instilled the idea of composing a beautiful symphony with integrated donkey sounds. Henryck Gorecki’s Symphony #3 (Opus 36), known as the Symphony of Sorrowful Songs, and the donkeys of Burrolandia, a refuge for donkeys outside of Madrid, form the base of the composition by Nathaniel Robin Mann and Angel Lopez de la Llave. Gorecki’s original piece, in three movements, draws on lamentation and loss. In subtle combination with the donkeys braying, Borg el Amal comes to life and the haunting sound piece fills the space with pain and

beauty. It is serene and comforting, yet heart wrenching experience. However, it never creates an anticlimax due to the fact that Borg el Amal is ultimately an inhabited space. With its makeshift concrete benches, visitors can actually “hang-out” there, enjoy some seclusion, have a smoke or little picnic (as I did with some friends). Perhaps it is the combination of “lived space” and the structure’s limited lifespan – 2 months – that prevents the piece from becoming a monument. Moreover, Baladi’s work is not about monumentality and master narratives, but about the brick and mortar of life, how fantasy and reality intertwine, and the pleasure and pain that fuels our existence. Within the material externalisation of the most basic human experiences, she has ridiculed class divisions – a very touchy subject – by inviting in “The Other.” The card to the show however, is an open invitation. No R.S.V.P needed, everyone is invited to pass by at any time and become a resident:

Come in. Sit down. Listen
 Yes it was noisy outside, but you’re in the heart of it now. Listen
 Look up. Look down. Look around.
 Look inside and listen.
 Listen.

The request to the visitor to pause and listen to the sound piece is also a request for introspection. The space allows this as it is protective and comforting and safe. The bricks are cut with the words “hope” and “amal” imprinted on them, and the letters make out a donkey and a man. These elements combine to reproduce hope with every brick and ultimately keep the structure standing. Apart from the Biblical references, the piece is significant as Baladi has chosen to build a tower as opposed to a house or another architectural form. Towers stand out due to their singularity, their condescending grandeur, and because of authoritarian or ideological scripts – religious, nationalist, political or other – to which they are tied. But not Lara Baladi’s tower, ultimately, hers is a people’s tower, made according to the most instant and improvised methods of construction – a Borg Baladi. In addition, the artist offers the tower’s visitors red bricks for take-away, as if she were saying, “Make your own”. Once again, the essence of the brick becomes scrambled – building block and art object all in one – produced cheaply and me-

NOTES

1- Interviews 2, Gerald Matt, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Verlag Walther König, Köln. p.37.

2- Simon Njami. “The Minute Music of Lara Baladi”. *kai’ro*, Bildmuseet, Umea. Sweden, 2004. p.14.

chanically, yet still an authentic and original “Lara Baladi”, once again leaving the choice to the viewer.

Baladi inhabits her work with a love and generosity that is rare in the contemporary art world. As an artist she has with Borg El Amal reified the essence of what art might mean - a temporary autonomous zone. Translated into a physical space, this site - The Borg el Amal - like all of Baladi's, transcends its locality and its space-time frame. As the travelling nomad, Baladi has made and found her home in her art.

When not roaming the Middle East, Nat Muller is an independent curator and critic based in Rotterdam. She has held positions as staff curator at V2_ Institute for Unstable Media (Rotterdam) and De Balie, Centre for Culture and Politics (Amsterdam). Her main interests include: the intersection of aesthetics, media and politics; (new) media and art in the Middle East. She has published articles in off- and online media and is a regular contributor for Springerin, Bidoun, and Metropolis M. Running independent projects in new media art and video around the world, Muller has taught in a number of institutions in Beirut and Rotterdam, including the Willem de Kooning, American University in Dubai and recently completed a curatorial residency at The Townhouse Gallery of contemporary art.



Worker on site. Photo by Lara Baladi, 2008



Detail of Borg El Amal. Photo by Lara Baladi, 2008