

MOATAZ NASR

The Other Side of the Mirror

Opening: Saturday 12 February, 2011, via del Castello 11, 5pm-12 midnight

Until First of May 2011, Tuesday-Saturday, 2-7pm

*I follow the religion of Love:
whatever way Love's camels take,
that is my religion and my faith.*
Ibn Arabi

Galleria Continua is pleased to present *The Other Side of the Mirror*, a new solo show by the Egyptian artist Moataz Nasr.

Regarded as one of the leading exponents of contemporary pan-Arab art, Moataz Nasr has conceived this exhibition as a philosophical and spiritual journey, inviting us to meditate on the meaning of things and on co-existence. A choral song, a paean to compassion, as the key to knowledge, as the light which illuminates the way, and to love, as the abolition of frontiers and prejudices – elements which the artist renders in formal terms by re-elaborating common icons of the Islamic world to the point of transforming them into new global aesthetic signifiers, symbolic abstractions open to a multiplicity of readings.

The exhibition is spread over the stalls area, the circles and the stage of the former cinema and theatre, metaphorically tracing a path directed towards spiritual elevation.

The Other Side of the Mirror is a video installation whose name has also been used as the exhibition title. *The Other Side of the Mirror* is the world the artist invites us to explore. A space we believe to be inaccessible only because we have not gone to the trouble of understanding its mechanism. It is the matrix of the human being, it is the desire to recognize oneself, it is that possibility which utopias and dreams keep alive; but it is also a dimension of the mind which, if once innate in the child, is, for the adult, something that can be retrieved only after a journey of discovery in one's consciousness.

The thought of the mystic Sufi philosopher and poet Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), a point of contact between Arab and Catholic culture - Doctor Maximus for Europeans, the Great Sheikh for Muslims - inspires many of the works in the show. In *EL Thaherwa El baten (The Manifest and the Un-manifest)*, the artist uses the Arab form of the word *Elhob* ('love') twelve times to create two circles, the first visible, the second in shadow on the other one, between the white of the mind and the black of the body. Counterposing the circles are the animals, the five lions of Islamic propaganda realized with over 35,000 wooden matches (*Oxymoron*, 2011), symbols of strength, ferocity, force and power, but also a representation of the Arab nations in the history of the world and of the energy of every single individual.

Love, as a universal symbol, also appears and acquires form in other works making up the exhibition. We find it in the tapestries produced by the artist as symbols of compassion and beauty; it stands out on the top of the two towers evoking the architecture of the five great religions; it is traced out in the Arabic calligraphy of the alabaster and crystal sculptures suspended over the stage.

Commenting on the show, the critic Simon Njami writes: *The base of the installation is inspired by a memory through which we rediscover the calligraphy, the myths, the magic signs and the aesthetic representations produced in the Arab world by the various problematic issues facing human beings. In the heart of this mechanism, two elements form the cornerstone of the proposition. A duplicated octagonal construction (the number eight is magical) that can represent a profane temple in which, as in a throbbing heart, we are invited to adapt the rhythm of our pulsations to the rhythm of the environment, a transformation which, alone, will enable us to accede to knowledge and ecumenism. And on the scene, as a wall of words, is the sentence of Ibn Arabi.*

In the large green neon dominating the stalls area, the artist forcefully proclaims the identification of his heart, now capable of assuming any form, with Ibn Arabi's thought. His inner being can be: *a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks, and a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Kaa'ba, and the tables of the Torah and the book of the Quran. I follow the religion of Love... that is my religion and my faith.*

The space in which we are progressively transported, continues Simon Njami in his analysis, is cabalistic... As in a treasure hunt, we walk around in this codified universe, and what does it matter if we are unable to completely unveil the constellation of signs and emblems comprising the exhibition path... the key to this journey is not reason but feeling. The consciousness of a space that goes beyond us and is concerned to measure us up, until all the old ideas that have thus far represented our raison d'être have been cast into doubt and transformed.

Moataz Nasr was born in Alexandria (Egypt) in 1961. He lives and works in Cairo. Bearing witness to the complex cultural process currently under way in the Islamic world, his work sets out to overcome particularism and geographical boundaries, and to give voice to the concerns and problems of the whole African continent. The need to belong to a specific geopolitical and cultural context, and to maintain a link with his own place of origin, is a key element in Nasr's life and work. The artist uses a range of media, including painting, sculpture, photography, video and installations. His work focuses on Egypt – its traditions, people and colours. But his output is not exotic and far-off, but extremely close to our own concerns. In fact, Egypt is just a background, a landscape inhabited by human beings rendered international by a common fragility. Indifference, impotence and solitude are the human characteristics laid bare by Nasr: weaknesses that do not pertain to any one country but which are a profound and all-embracing aspect of human nature. The artist's language is based on the repetition of a small number of simple elements, so as to make the work at once comprehensible and poetic. His installations are environments in which the viewer can walk around, explore and interpret. The artist has participated in many important international art events, including the Venice Biennale (2003), the Seoul Biennale (2004), the Sao Paulo Biennale (2004), the Yokohama Triennale (2005) and group events such as *Arte all'Arte* (San Gimignano, 2004), *Africa Remix* (Kunst Palast, Dusseldorf, 2004; Hayward Gallery, London, 2005; Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2005; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2006; Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2007), *Ghosts of Self and State* (Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2006) and, last but not least, a solo exhibition at The Khalid Shoman Foundation, Darat al Funun, Amman, Jordan, 2006. The most recent group shows to which he has contributed include: *Machine-RAUM*, Vejle Art Museum and Spinning Factory, Vejle, Denmark, 2007; *11 artists from Africa Remix*, Maseru, Lesotho; Durban, South Africa; Cape Town, South Africa, 2007; *Traversées (Crossings)*, Grand Palais, Paris, France, 2008; *Les Recontres Internationales de la Poto*, Centre Cervantes, Fes, Morocco, 2008; *MidEast Cut*, The Danish Film Institute & Backyard Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark (2009); *Coexistencias / Coexistences*, Il Bienalle delle Canarie, Centro de Arte La Regenta, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Canary Islands, 2008; *Festival International d'Art Video de Casablanca*, Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Ben M'Sik, Casablanca, Morocco, 2008; *African contemporary art*, Exhibition center, Algiers, Algeria, 2008; *Made in Afrika*, National Museum, Nairobi, Kenya, 2008; *Taswir, Islamische Bildwelten und moderne*, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, Germany, 2008. Last year Moataz Nasr also participated in *African Marketplace*, International Film Festival, Rotterdam, Holland; *MOATAZ NASR-DARB1718, GEO-graphics. A map of ART practices in AFRICA, past and present*, Bozar, Brussels, Belgium; *Rencontres PICHA*, Biennale de Lubumbashi, Lubumbashi; *Time After Time: Actions and Interactions*, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, USA ; *21st Century: Art in the first Decade*, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia. In 2008 Moataz Nasr founded Darb 1718, a non-profit cultural and exhibition centre in the middle of Cairo, the mission of which is to promote Egyptian contemporary art and a knowledge of international art, to create an archive of works and to set up and maintain an up-to-date, on-line archive of Egyptian art. Darb 1718 also organizes seminars, screenings and projects in order to inform and heighten the awareness of the local community.

For further information about the exhibition and for photographs:

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