

# In Chronological Disorder

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*Revisiting Histories of Invasion*



(Front Cover) Mohammed Kazem *Tongue* (1994) Silver gelatin print.

## ***No to the Invasion: Breakdowns & Side Effects*** ***(2017)***

Published on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York (June 24–October 29, 2017), curated by Fawz Kabra with the curatorial advisory of Mandy Merzaban.

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As the Barjeel Art Foundation's first major exhibition of contemporary art in the United States, "No to the Invasion: Breakdowns and Side Effects" marks our entry into new territory, both geographical and thematic. The show's ambition, with its almost preemptive sounding title, is to investigate and question the concept of invasion, including its many meanings, histories, contexts, and repercussions.

While the destructiveness inherent to invasion comes through in the exhibition in visible and tangible ways related to the aftermath of war, other references are concealed in the psychology of inherited traumas and on the shelves of dormant archives. The interdisciplinary scope of the exhibited works highlights this spectrum by tracing the impact of invasion on cities and bodies alike, across generations. The exhibition's focus in many ways reflects key characteristics of the Barjeel Art Foundation's collection as well as its strategy to explore the development of art history in the context of the Arabic-speaking world and its diaspora. Barjeel opened in the United Arab Emirates in 2010, born from

the desire of its founder Sultan Sooud Al- Qassemi to collect, investigate, research, and share modern and contemporary art by Arab artists, regionally and internationally. The foundation seeks to emphasize that art of the Arab world is interconnected with the global art historical narrative, even as it is underrepresented by it.

Featuring a selection of Barjeel's most inquisitive and critical contemporary works, "No to the Invasion" highlights key historical moments that take the viewer across a region stretching from West Asia to North Africa. It focuses on pieces produced between 1990 and the present, a timeframe that spans almost three decades of major socio-political events, including the First Gulf War, which started in 1990, and the Lebanese Civil War, which ended the same year, as well as the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the 2010 Arab Uprisings, with all of their aftershocks manifesting in civil and proxy wars.

The broader collection includes works by some three hundred artists. Some date much further back than these recent periods of instability, referencing the conflicts, socio-political climates, and cultural realities that would form the basis for subsequent events. Among the earliest works in the collection are portraits and landscapes produced in the early 1900s by artists such as Youssef Kamel and Moahmmed Naghi whose representational paintings offer scenes of Egypt and European cities prior to the military coup of 1952. Barjeel's collection of 1,300 works thus offers insight into a century of creative output inspired by political turbulence. This century saw Arab countries that were colonies of the British and French become independent states; it saw Palestinians forced into exodus in the Nakba of 1948. Monarchies in Egypt and Iraq crumbled in 1952 and 1958, respectively, and several wars stoked tensions in the second half of the century: the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), and the onset in 1980 of the Iran-Iraq War, just two years after Saddam Hussein became Iraq's president. Indeed, on the

surface, the Barjeel collection is a terrific resource through which to chronologically trace the history of artistic production in the Arab world over the last century. Yet there's another way of looking at it that's perhaps a bit more inventive. Many individual works in the collection traverse multiple points in time and space to reflect what it means to encounter the past as a subject of the present. At the foundation, we approach the collection as a series of objects with historical and subjective significance, whereby new readings can emerge based on how they are arranged. This way of conceptualizing the potential of the collection is all the more relevant in this moment, steeped as it is in clicks and scrolls, live streams and archival videos that are readily and simultaneously available at our fingertips. In an era that demands we constantly crisscross between media platforms, interdisciplinarity, in scholarship and methodology, is a critical tool for conceptualizing and analyzing our social and political landscapes. Through the considered presentation of artworks, we are able to meander between different moments in history and explore them achronologically. We create a framework wherein the viewer might encounter the past in a way that encourages them to reframe, reformulate, and question their understanding of the world.

This intermingling of past and present also occurs in many works in the collection. We see this tendency, for example, in a few pieces that explore political propaganda. Together these works trace the different ways in which art production has been used as an instrument both for and against government policies. Maha Maamoun's video *Domestic Tourism II*, 2009, is an apt example. The work features over sixty minutes of scenes appropriated from major Egyptian films produced since the 1950s, the common thread among them is an encounter with the grand pyramids of Giza. The compilation enables viewers to grasp the dramatic cultural, stylistic, and cinematic shifts that have taken place over the last half-century, playing like an encyclopedic montage of the

ways in which various narratives shape the ubiquitous image of the ancient monuments. The pyramids are as much an image of Egypt's ancient past as they are an unshakable aspect of its contemporary identity.

The piece is structured along a timeline that, according to the artist, also takes the shape of a pyramid; it begins with clips from the early 2000s and ascends, in reverse chronology, to a peak in 1959, a crucial period during President Gamal Abdel Nasser's populist regime. The timeline then returns down the triangular slope to the present. In a sense, Maamoun's video performs the act of looking outside of linear temporality to explore what happens when time is spliced and re-sequenced. In what ways could this kind of chronological apparatus influence our perception of historical and contemporary socio-political landscapes?

Scrolling through the Barjeel collection's database, or perhaps any inventory of art objects, can help to approach this question. One can slide between historical moments to triangulate specific themes and interpretations of political, social, and cultural histories. The way the Barjeel collection makes visible the resonances between ancient and modern monuments and concepts is mirrored in *Aswan*, a 1964 painting by Egyptian artist Ragheb Ayad, who was part of an avant-garde generation of artists in Egypt that called themselves *Al-Ruwwad* (The Pioneers). Though the state had commissioned him, along with other artists, to document the building of the Aswan High Dam—a cornerstone of Nasser's political campaign—Ayad subtly criticized the large-scale project in his painting. His depiction features thousands of thinly rendered manual laborers carving canyons out of the landscape and populating cliffs on the faces of two sharp peaks. Ayad presents the construction in a way that echoes the building of the pyramids, emphasizing the status of both projects as symbolic edifices

representing political power and the legacies of national leaders at the expense of the laborers who erect them. Effat Naghi, who was also selected by the Ministry of Culture to document the project, strikes a similar tone in her 1966 painting *The High Dam*. She rendered the inhumanity of such power imbalances as rows of scaffolding that lean precariously, on the brink of collapse.

Returning to Maamoun's video, we can identify the ways in which Nasser's rhetoric was transmitted through popular entertainment. The invasion represented here isn't as overtly recognizable as armed conflict; rather, it appears as the repeated image of the timeless pyramids. These images carry with them national propaganda that, as Maamoun illustrates, has subliminally permeated cinema through time. A prominent example is a scene she cut from the Egyptian film *Bride of the Nile*. Directed by Fatin Abdel Wahab in 1964, the same year the Aswan High Dam's first stage of construction was completed, the film nods to Nasser's political campaign to legitimize the project in the face of criticism regarding the resettlement of inhabitants in the area and the disassembly and relocation of such ancient monuments as Abu Simbel, a temple complex built during the reign of Ramses II. The story of Nasser's dam, designed to manage the Nile's flow in order to prevent seasonal flooding, is echoed in the film's storyline, in which a man seeks to manage another core natural resource: crude oil.

*Bride of the Nile's* protagonist, Samy Fouad, is a young petroleum engineer searching for oil beneath ancient burial grounds in Upper Egypt. He encounters Hamis, a phantom Egyptian princess who claims to be the last female sacrifice to the Nile. The film evolves into a love story, wherein a four thousand year-old princess sent to protect her family's afterlife from disruption and a young man seeking to secure his financial future contemplate the significance of the pyramids. In the scene showcased in Maamoun's video, Samy argues that the pyramids are a symbol of

injustice and slavery, while Hamis insists that they were built in an effort to fight massive unemployment. Her take on Samy's perspective echoes the political rhetoric at the time, that employing Egyptians to build a dam would enable the country to exert its influence and assert its independence from monarchs and colonizers.

The film thus presents a thinly veiled legitimization of the massive projects undertaken by Nasser's government. It does this by conflating ancient and modern Egypt; the imagined prestige and glory of the former justifies the actions of the latter. Nasser himself often referenced the connection: "In antiquity we built pyramids for the dead. Now we build new pyramids for the living."<sup>[1]</sup> Hamis is portrayed as she comes back to life, forgetting her ancient past and family commitments to pursue new love. In this way, she personifies the idea of replacing old regimes with new ones, encapsulating Nasser's vision of the dam as a historic effort of transformation and revival.

Many works featured in "No to the Invasion" take the viewer on a journey through the various repercussions of war and conflict on Arab societies. Mona Hatoum's *Witness*, 2009, references the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War in a fragile, miniature porcelain replica of Beirut's Martyrs' Square, a structure that has been deformed by bullets and bombs. Meanwhile, Sophia Al-Maria's video *Class A*, based on the artist's yet-unrealized rape-revenge thriller *Beretta* (2011-), reveals the darkest effects of patriarchal societies that condone the abuse of women. But other works, like Maamoun's video, tackle the theme of invasion through subtlety and nuance. In so doing, they persuade the viewer to come to terms with the forces of violation and infringement that are ever-present in our daily lives, impacting us in ways of which we are both conscious and unconscious. By encouraging us to consider history outside the bounds of linear time, the works in this show allow us to analyze the Arab world in innovative ways. At its best, the Barjeel collection can act as an

interface, where works created over a long period of time can be assessed side by side. Parallels and divergences can be identified and juxtaposed to reveal the elusive ways in which history repeats itself.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hussein M. Fahim, *Dams, People and Development: The Aswan High Dam Case* (New York: Pergamon, 1981), 62.