

The Landscape of Our Memories: Recent Works by Youssef Nabil

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Heureux qui comme Ulysse a fait un beau voyage ou comme cestuy lá qui conquiert la toison et puis est retourné, plein d'usage et raison, vivre entre ses parents le reste de son âge. (<https://www.bacdefrancais.net>, accessed July 20, 2022)

This melancholy refrain by the celebrated French poet Joachim du Bellay (1522-66) finds a poignant echo centuries later in *The Beautiful Voyage*, the most recent work of a modern Ulysses, Youssef Nabil. Yet unlike du Bellay, Nabil does not offer a vision of a happy return to home and hearth, in this case Egypt, but rather an unending voyage across the artist's imaginary. Nabil's latest video installation is a poetic and ultimately shattering meditation on love, life, memory, death and exile.

FADE IN...

A woman lies asleep in an interior space, dreaming. Soft music plays in the background, accompanied by the soothing sound of waves. The scene shifts to an eternal twilight by the sea, where a ghostly figure sits waiting. Waiting to depart or to return we do not know. The elegiac mood of the eight-minute video is established by a feminine voice reciting in Arabic verses from *Ithaka*, perhaps the most celebrated poem by Constantine P. Cavafy, the Alexandrian Greek poet (1863-1933). The verses sing of the importance of life's journey rather than of its end and set a hopeful tone. The poem is especially poignant since it evokes Nabil's childhood – a joyful and nostalgic memory of a lost time. Later in the video, we learn it is the voice of the artist's Mother, who is said to have often recited these same verses to him as a boy growing up in Cairo.

In the following scene, the actress Charlotte Rampling delivers a monologue, telling Nabil's story. The two protagonists lie in a bathtub in a ghostly bathroom seated far apart, together yet separate. Both figures are archetypes: Rampling the eternal Mother and Nabil the spectral figure of Egyptian lore and son. In her dream, Rampling reassures the artist that he never truly left his loved ones or his country, that life is a journey, a dream, that his true home is movement and that the dead are never truly lost to us. The words are the artist's own, the first script he has written and published, and represent a moving summation of the wisdom he has acquired through the years as an outsider in an ever-changing and unsettled world, which resonates deeply with many viewers. The video ends with Rampling asleep in her bed and Nabil quietly standing by the door poised to depart. It is an exceptionally beautiful and moving conversation – a moment of intimacy and contemplation between two loving friends.

FADE TO BLACK...

Twenty-one hand coloured gelatin silver prints accompany the video, which is at the beating heart of the installation. The photographs present a curated selection of Nabil's works from 2016 to the present.

He is his own best subject: self-portraits of the artist are set in reimagined landscapes and seascapes from New York to Monterrey and Greece. The settings seem familiar yet are strangely undefined, united only by the presence of the artist and his memories of place. The figure of the artist evokes that of other celebrated outsiders, such as the Zelig-like Jewish author Lev Nussimbaum (1905-42), who adopted the persona of a Muslim writer known as Kurban Said, in order to pen one of the most popular pre-war romance novels, *Ali and Nino*. The artist's figure also recalls the Palestinian public intellectual Edward Said, whose transformative work reimagined the field of Orientalism: all three have navigated successfully between worlds and produced their greatest works as exiles.

الخط الثالث

the third line

Another theme is nostalgia for an Orientalist fantasy of ancient Egypt and the golden age of modern Egyptian cinema and culture, when a local form of Surrealism emerged, the celebrated artist Umm Kulthum sang and exotic belly dancers performed. The fantasy of Egypt as a verdant green landscape or a fertile oasis of palm trees amid an arid land is referenced by a number of the photographs in this series although none are set in Egypt, as the titles affirm.

A sense of loss is also a favored leitmotiv, symbolized by Nabil's frequent choice of twilight as the setting for his compositions. Yet we feel the artist's ultimate acceptance of his identity as a nomad wandering the earth.

The cinematic quality of Nabil's vision is referenced in this series by his use of words in a subtitle form and of transparency. His enduring interest in film is visualized by a self-portrait inserted into the end credits of a film – as if Nabil's life was also only a movie.

From an art historical perspective, Nabil's work is informed not only by the local art and culture of the Middle East, but by a profound admiration of Western art. In the video entitled *You Never Left* (2010), a veiled woman portrayed by Fanny Ardant cradles a young Christ-like figure, played by Tahar Rahim, in her arms. The image strikingly evokes the sculpture of Michelangelo's *Pieta*. In another instance, Nabil has pictured himself reclining in front of Botticelli's *Primavera*.

This new series includes the work *The Dream* (2021) a self-portrait of Nabil in a classical landscape under a moonlit sky. He is shown sleeping under a tree, while being visited in a dream by three angels. The composition is a slightly altered version of the French Symbolist painter Pierre Puvis de Chavannes' (1824-98) 1883 work of the same name (see image herein), wherein the title states that the angels offer the sleeping figure Love, Glory and Wealth. According to Nabil, he first saw the painting in 1992 at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the year he started his career as an artist, and was immediately drawn to it, a similar dreamlike quality is frequently encountered in the artist's oeuvre. Nabil clearly identifies with the sleeping figure of the lonely wanderer, now transformed into the contemporary artist and his dreams of glory (Nabil email correspondence with the author, July 15, 2022).

Nabil uses appropriation skillfully, sampling from a range of works from across the visual arts. The setting of the video evokes Stanley Kubrick's last scene in his masterwork *2001: A Space Odyssey* which is set in a modern impersonal hotel room furnished with antiques and uses a similar soft muted color palette. The image of the two figures in the bathtub is mysterious and puzzling, Nabil himself explains that he intended to add a dimension of Surrealism, intimacy and sensuality to the work (Nabil email to the author, July 3 2022). Both the meaning of the motif and the formal model of the composition remain open to different interpretations, yet its prototype may ultimately be traced to Renaissance painting, such as in Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*.

Nabil's artistic journey has been a long and ultimately fruitful one. Beginning in the early 1990s he developed his signature style. Consisting primarily of portraits and self-portraits referencing the work of his friend and mentor the Armenian-Egyptian photographer and film buff of the 1950s, Van Leo (1921-2002). Van Leo's black and white photographic subjects were the luminaries and celebrities of modern Egypt of the 1940s-50s, when Cairo was known as 'Hollywood on the Nile'. Nabil later worked with distinguished photographers in the 1990s in New York and Paris.

Yet Nabil's photographs developed an original visual language grounded in a reimagined Orientalism, as evidenced by his hand colored black and white prints evoking late 19th and early 20th century Colonial era photography. The hand tinting technique was still current in Cairo in the 1980s and 1990s, the formative period of Nabil's career.

الخط الثالث

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Nabil's use of appropriation and transformation was a strategy he shared with contemporary Middle Eastern as well as global artists of the 1990s. Artists ranging from Chant Avedissian to Ghasem Hajizadeh have explored Middle Eastern and Iranian pop culture as a source of inspiration, while Nabil's work is also in dialogue with that of Shirin Neshat and Cindy Sherman and artists of the picture generation.

Nabil's celebrity portraits were evocative and glamorous, yet a close reading of his early self-portraits and landscapes reveals a deeper side of his personality. By way of example, the 2010 video *You Never Left* explored similar themes of longing and separation to those in *The Beautiful Voyage* (2021). The video presages the present work, yet the imagery is rooted in the Arab soil, whereas *The Beautiful Voyage* (2021), by moving beyond the local to the global, presents a cosmopolitan vision.

The Beautiful Voyage (2021) is both personal and universal: the image of the wanderer, with an uncertain future, facing the Mediterranean, not only a space of dialogue between cultures, but also a space of shared memories of the massive immigration to Europe from the shores of Africa since the Arab Spring of 2011; of the covid crisis; and, in a larger sense, of the crisis of humanity torn by wars, revolutions, and diaspora. Yet the work goes beyond the usual facile statements of political and social outrage. It offers a moment of peace and serenity at the end of the long journey we have all undertaken. The covid era presented Nabil with the opportunity to reflect anew on major philosophical issues he had explored in the past, and his new work movingly shares the end of this voyage with us.

It is this transformation of the artist as well as of the human being, which sometimes leaves the viewer in tears, and which ultimately elevates these works beyond the realm of art to that of an almost religious experience. By presenting us with these landscapes of our shared memories, Nabil offers us all a vision of hope in a constantly changing world, in which he argues, home is within each of us.

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