

# Arab Art, Architecture and Cities

Tag Archives: *Tea with nefertiti*

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29/01/2013 · 8:22 PM

## Coca-Cola with Nefertiti: An Art Exhibition at Mathaf in Doha, Qatar

by Osama Abusitta

In the past few years Doha, the capital of Qatar, has transformed its art scape not only through an ambitious museum building program that was kick-started with the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA), but also with a series of art exhibitions that have outpaced the building program. At Mathaf, a temporary space for contemporary Arab art, an exhibition entitled “Tea with Nefertiti” runs through the end of March 2013.

The full title of the exhibition is *Tea with Nefertiti: the Making of the Artwork by the Artist, the Museum and the Public*. It examines artworks’ trajectory from the artists’ intentions, to the museum context and finally to public perceptions and the various meanings it acquires in the process. Tea with Nefertiti is an exhibition largely about exhibiting art. It conjures up an Escher-like drawing of someone in a museum looking at a drawing where a viewer in a museum is examining a drawing of someone looking at a drawing, and so on. The fact that the curators, Sam Bardouil and Till Fellrath, have chosen the museum context, which is the very subject of their thesis, rather than, say, a book, to explore their thesis deserves an attentive review in line with the attention they have afforded the making of Tea with Nefertiti.

Nefertiti, or rather her bust, currently residing at the Neues Gallery in Berlin, has had a long and winding route in the hundred years since its discovery that made her bust a metaphor of the artwork as intended by the artist, how it was transformed by the various contexts it had been exhibited in, and how the public imagination perceived the work over the decades.



Al Burak I, Mohamed-Said Baalbaki (from ds.udk-berlin.de)

Al Burak I 2007/2009, a work by Mohamed-Said Baalbaki, sums up the concept of how a museum, with its display cases, wall text and other tools can impart a sense of unquestionable truth to the contents of the display. The piece consists of several display cases along with explanatory material which are arranged museum-like. The contents on display are skeletons of imaginary animals and other objects fabricated by the artist. While the piece cleverly conveys the sense of the unquestionable truth acquired by a myth, it is not a work that falls within the notion of an altered meaning as the piece moves from the artist's studio to the exhibition space and the public perception. The artist has intended the work to be a critique of the museum; it is displayed as such and perceived as such. There is, however, another interesting aspect to this work that is obscured by the curators thereby shaping the public's perception of it. The title of the piece, Al Burak, refers to the mythical winged stallion that carried the prophet of Islam to Jerusalem. In Baalbaki's statement on his entry on the website of the University for Art, Berlin, he states that "the story of the prophet's winged horse and the phantasies that go with it are closely linked to my own upbringing. [...] They define a space in which reality and fiction are closely intertwined, in which authenticity and credibility become ever more questionable. They create a world in which reality is dependent on power." This is a direct statement about religion's role in instilling reality in a mythical concept. Many Muslims believe in the story literally and therefore this aspect of the work may be viewed as insensitive by some. The curators, therefore, were silent about it.

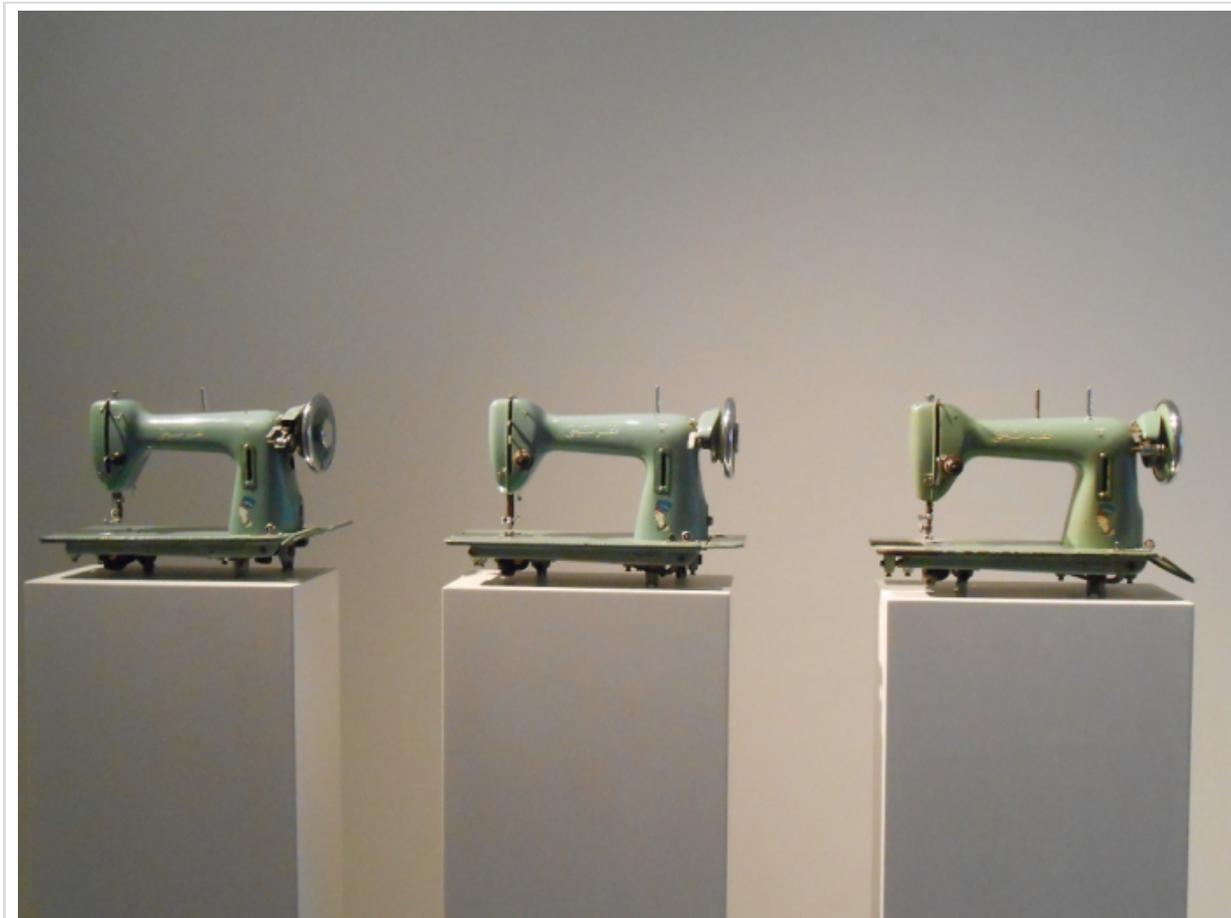
Ai Weiwei's Coca-Cola Vase, 2007, is a Chinese Neolithic vase from 5000-3000 BC where the artist had painted the Coca Cola logo. "It was seen as a mundane object among many others like it." writes the curator, "By leaving his mark on it Ai reversed the equation. The pot suddenly became a valuable artwork in the contemporary art market." One wonders what is mundane about a 5-7 millennia old vase. It is true that the vase became an object of desire to collectors of contemporary art but Ai's actions have also deprived the

Chinese of a part of their cultural heritage. Ai was commenting on the loss of Chinese cultural heritage during the Cultural Revolution and by de-facing the vase with the logo he has committed the same sin but this time with material reward to him. What would have been a more interesting angle to view Ai's work (and career) within the context of this exhibition is how the West focuses on dissident artists from the non-West and promotes them according to political rather than artistic agendas. In her review of the current Ai Weiwei exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum, New York Times art critic Roberta Smith writes: 'Tellingly, the opening label of the Hirshhorn show identifies Mr. Ai as "one of China's most prolific and provocative contemporary artists" rather than one of its greatest or most original.'



Ai Weiwei, Coca Cola Vase

The exhibition refers to several Orientalist works and explains how they are fragments of the artists' imagination rather than true artistic representation. Describing a work entitled *In the Harem* by Rudolf Ernst that portrays a reclining Arab woman smoking shisha in sumptuous surroundings, the curators write that Ernst "would not have been able to enter into these premises" and that he used "artifacts, pottery, kaftans and textiles" to depict a "setting that is similar to his specific genre." The curators confirm the widely held notion that Orientalist works are, at best, peripheral to Western art. In this instance too, the more pressing question to explore; the question that would be central to the thesis of this exhibition, would have been why Orientalist works that were aimed at Western audiences and produced by Western artists, who often have not been to the Arab World, are now being appropriated and coveted by the subjects themselves: Arabs. The answer maybe that the colonialist impact on us, and them, has been such that not only is our art considered peripheral by them but that *their* peripheral art is considered high art by us. This work is from the collection of Orientalist Museum in Doha.

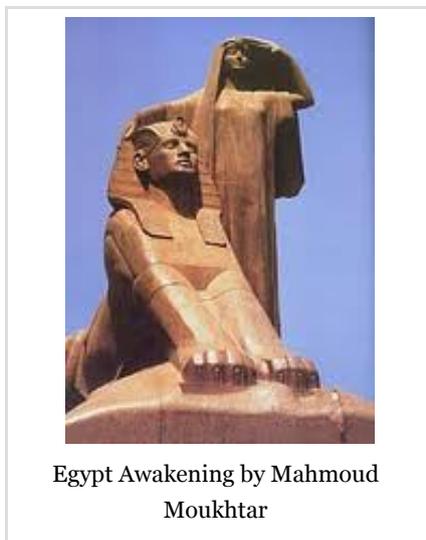


Ala' Younis, Nefertiti

Ala' Younis presented a work entitled *Nefertiti*, 2008, consisting of video and installation that feature actual Nefertiti brand sewing machines that were produced in the early 1950's at the dawn of Jamal Abdul Nasser's reign to empower women to be independent. In her publication, *Needles to Rockets*, 2009, (not included in this exhibition) the artist probes the Nefertiti brand as well as several other brands of the same vintage. The questions raised in that work according to text related to her show at Darat Al Funun in Amman are: "How do objects become iconic and acquire personas? What relationships do people have with consumer products and with the myths that surround them?" And while the title of the work comes from Jamal Abdul Nasser's modernization slogan about locally producing "needles to rockets", the intent of the artist in both works does not seem to be the wholesale slamming of Nasser's modernization project as the curators do when they write that "both the [modernization] project and [the] machine failed." This statement is straight out of the Western political rhetoric that Nasser's project was a failure and by extension pan-Arabism is a failure. But Nasser's reign still inspires many Arabs and Nefertiti sewing machines lasted through the late 1980's. They were only discontinued during Mubarak's time not Nasser's. In an ironic twist that demonstrates how museum exhibitions impart unquestionable truths, the statement above was taken as such and was repeated verbatim in *Nafas* art magazine published on the web by the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, in Germany.

In a curious section of the exhibition that revisits the works of early 20th century Egyptian artists Mahmoud Moukhtar and Georges Sabbagh, the curators delve deeply into ancient details of these artists and uncover interesting but tangential information. Moukhtar, the creator of Egypt's well known *Egypt Awakening* monument, was understood to have graduated from the Ecole Des Beaux Arts in Paris. It turns out, the curators tell us, that he may not have graduated after all. His records at the Ecole show otherwise. Further, they suggest that *Egypt Awakening* may have borrowed elements from Bartholdi's work including the Statue of

Liberty and Lion of Belfort which was Bartholdi's proposal for the monument for the inauguration of the Suez Canal. In the case of Georges Sabbagh the details are juicier. A well-known French art critic wrote the introduction to the catalog of Sabbagh's first art show in Paris and the curators wonder why such a famous critic would offer this favor to a relatively young and unknown Egyptian artist. We find that the critic was an investor in the Heliopolis real estate development in Cairo where Sabbagh's father was also an investor.



Since this is a show about how context can shape perceptions, one wonders why critics' role in shaping perceptions is not part of the endeavor. Many artists' careers have been propelled or buried by critics for reasons other than artistic merit. What about the collector or the patron? Their influence on art and artists and even museums is immeasurable. From Lorenzo De' Medici to Charles Saatchi, artists and public alike have been influenced by who the patrons favored or not.

The efforts that the curators have expended on this exhibition are admirable. Many of the pieces are on loan from other collections which must have taken endless wrangling. The catalog is of excellent quality with good reproductions and extensive bibliographies. The concept of the exhibition, while not fully explored, is an intriguing one. Qatar Museum Authority, above all, has elevated the experience of visiting a museum in the titi is a quantum leap towards more critical art exhibitions in the

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