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MIDDLE EAST | IHT SPECIAL

A Cultural Icon Tells Her Own Story

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DOHA, QATAR — You can't take tea with Nefertiti: But if you could, the queen of ancient Egypt might seize on the opportunity to lament that she has come to represent a narrative of "cultural otherness," or so surmise the curators of "Tea With Nefertiti," at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art.

With the iconic limestone and stucco bust of Nefertiti created by Thutmose in 1345 B.C. as their starting point, Till Fellrath and Sam Bardaouil have put together an exhibition that examines artworks spanning thousands of years and various continents through three lenses: that of the artist, the museum, and the public.

While the bust of Nefertiti is not included in the show (it is in Berlin), it serves to inspire critical reflection on visual culture. "Tea With Nefertiti" is, in the words of Mr. Bardaouil, "an invitation to let Nefertiti tell her own story."

That story unfolds through a juxtaposition of works by 26 contemporary artists with pharaonic, Coptic and Islamic archival documents, and modernist paintings and sculptures by Egyptian and European masters, including Georges Sabbagh, Mahmoud Moukhtar, Alberto Giacometti and Amedeo Modigliani.

Contemporary highlights include Vik Muniz's life-size mummy made in Tupperware ("Tupperware Sarcophagus," 2010); a video by William Kentridge tracing the history of the Egyptian collection at the Louvre ("Carnets d'Egypte," 2010); and Ghada Amer's re-creation of a refined Egyptian living room ("Le Salon Courbé," 2007). In that living room, seemingly abstract embroidered patterns covering the elegant furniture spell out the word "terror" in blood-red Arabic letters, while the English definition of the same word is revealed through a close inspection of the wallpaper.

The pièce de résistance is perhaps "The Body of Nefertiti," a video by the collective Little Warsaw, which featured in the Hungarian Pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale. For that project Little Warsaw, comprising Andras Galik and

Balint Havas, did the unthinkable: They sculpted a bronze body and placed it under the original bust of Nefertiti, rendering the statue complete. Hailed by art critics as remarkable and decried by many Egyptians as offensive, this controversial piece ties the exhibition together.

Arranged as they are according to the perspective of the artist, the museum and the public, the seemingly disparate artworks begin to relate to one another.

Questions emerge. Why, for instance, does an unsigned 10th-century Fatimid bowl constitute a decorative object, while a Neolithic vase is elevated to the domain of contemporary art when Ai Weiwei adorns it with the Coca-Cola label? Why did the Parisian gallery Bernheim-Jeune always call Mahmoud Moukhtar an “Egyptian artist” in its publications, while Picasso, whom it also represented, was simply described as “artist”? What does it mean that Egyptian publications initially called Georges Sabbagh “monsieur” because they saw him as an outsider living in Europe, but later switched to “effendi,” claiming him as one of their own after his sculpture “Egypt Awakening” rendered him a national hero?

By delving into these often overlooked curiosities, the curators seek to deconstruct the mechanisms of visual display that shape how one perceives artwork. “No curation is neutral,” said Mr. Bardaouil as he led members of the press through the exhibition. By that he meant that any artwork derives ideological narratives from the context in which it is displayed. Placing an object on a pedestal in a museum creates a system of hierarchies. The object no longer represents its maker’s creative process, but the curator’s vision and the host institution’s mission. No artwork illustrates this as well as the bust of Nefertiti, which since 2005 resides alone in a palatial room at the Neues Museum in Berlin.

The exhibitions supporting archival documents suggest that many of the filters through which one interprets art are rooted in several 19th-century historical trends. The concurrence of European colonial power and the modernization of archaeological practice, for instance, benefited Western museums, which were amassing collections with objects found and expatriated by European archaeologists. As the museums developed, a canon of art history emerged that classified art from the colonies according to ethnicity and geography. This led to the notion of the Middle East as exotic, an association that continues to influence “Western” perceptions of art from the region.

Ultimately, the exhibition puts forth the idea that, when inserted into a carefully constructed display, art becomes a useful tool for appropriating the past and controlling the present, or even the future. Such an intellectually weighty premise raises the bar for exhibitions that focus on Arab art, which tend to revolve

around clichéd motifs that reinforce stereotypes even while intending to dispel them. “Tea With Nefertiti” potentially adds nuance to the discourse.

To the delight of many who lent pieces for the exhibition, it also constitutes an unprecedented opportunity for works originating in or inspired by Arab lands to return to the Middle East.

“I am happy that for the first time we are lending pieces from our collection back to the region,” said Regine Schulz, director of the Roemer and Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim, Germany, home to one of the largest collections of Egyptian art. “It is so important that this show opened here, rather than in Paris or New York. Doha is not Egypt, but it nonetheless presents an opportunity to view the art from another perspective.”

Debuting the exhibition in Qatar did present certain challenges, however. Initially, the curators feared the Qatar Museums Authority might shy away from possibly controversial aspects of the exhibition: Emily Jacir’s video depicting Egyptian Museum personnel carelessly cleaning treasured hieroglyphics (“A Sketch in the Egyptian Museum,” 2003), for instance, implies that cultural treasures might be better off where they are until museums in Egypt can properly care for their collections.

Yet this fear proved unfounded. Mathaf embraced the exhibition in accordance with its mission to promote Arab art while sending a message that it is engaging with the international art world.

More broadly, “Tea With Nefertiti” exemplifies the Qatar Museums Authority’s drive to not only hold world-class exhibitions but to present the country as a hub of cultural production and knowledge creation.

Other exhibitions on view in Doha include a selection of Arab modern art from Mathaf’s permanent collection; an exhibition celebrating Arab contributions to Renaissance-era Western discoveries at the Museum of Islamic Art, whose park features Richard Serra’s monumental steel sculpture “7”; Yan Pei-Ming at the Katara Art Center; and an exhibition at the Orientalist Museum documenting a 16th-century European’s travels through the Ottoman Empire.

Collectively, these shows can be seen as an attempt to position Qatar as a prominent cultural hub that values tradition while looking outward — an ambitious goal and one that has yet to be fully realized.

“Tea With Nefertiti,” constitutes a step in that direction. It is due to become the first museum exhibition conceived and curated in an Arab country and exported internationally, with an opening scheduled at the Paris Institut du Monde Arab in April, and plans to travel later to Brussels, New York and South

Korea.

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