



Xpace Cultural Centre
2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
www.xpace.info

Marina Fathalla and Sandy Saad

Festival Days are Mythical; All other Days are Historical

February 23 – March 24, 2018

Festival Days are Mythical; All other Days are Historical, is a multi-layered installation project that looks at the ways in which land, landscapes and natural resources are positioned in the context of Egypt's post-colonial independence. Created by Egyptian-Canadian artist, Marina Fathalla, the project explores the links between nuanced notions of wealth, class and the value of land through various lenses of tourism, elitism, and national pride. At the centre of the installation is a series of stamps from the St. Mark's Coptic Museum collection, displaying Egypt's presentation of itself to its population and to the world. Reflecting the country's changing identity within a particular historical framework, the stamps commemorate Egypt's ancient history, its industrial advances and its natural resources. The carefully composed stamps are contrasted with a rococo furniture set referencing the traditional motif of a *salon*¹ commonly found in upper class Egyptian homes. The highly decorative furniture is embroidered with images of Europeans enjoying leisurely activities in lush gardens. These gardens starkly contrast Egypt's arid landscape in the dessert images taken by Fathalla's father during his domestic travels in the 1970s, where he camped in public beaches, and on the pyramids, places that are now increasingly privatized for tourism. As a diasporic artist, Fathalla straddles a dual relationship to the Egyptian landscape with

¹ French for living room

her identity closely reliant on the land, while she experiences it as a foreigner. Her museological research, along with her travel experiences, have inspired her engagement in a project that explores the processes of appropriating and commemorating land, with a particular sensitivity to landscape and architecture at the intersection of its poetics and its politics.

In 1957, Egypt issued a stamp in honour of the completion of the Shepherd's Hotel in Garden City, Cairo. Its image comprised of a large modern structure overlooking a sailboat and double-decker yacht cruising along the Nile River in the foreground. The stamp was to commemorate the completion of the modern Shepherd's Hotel, half a mile from the site of its original version, which was established in 1841. The Egyptian General Company for Tourism & Hotels owned the state of the art structure and the land that it occupied. This establishment represented Egyptian modernity, a once colonial site for the leisure and pleasure of the upper class, more specifically for British occupants, was now owned and operated by Egyptians. The original Shepherd's Hotel was named after Samuel Shepherd, an Englishman who co-owned it with Mr. Hill, Mohammed Ali Pasha's head coachman. They proved to be successful entrepreneurs as the mid-nineteenth century "Hotel des Anglais" (English Hotel) would become a popular destination in Cairo, and one of the most celebrated in the world. Shepherd's was famed for its grandeur and opulence; stained glass windows, Persian carpets, gardens, terraces, and great granite pillars resembling those of the Ancient Egyptian temples. Its American Bar was frequented by French and British officers along with the world's elite. In the evenings, the hotel would host dances at which men appeared in military uniform and women in evening gowns.² The original Shepherd's was a potent symbol of Western influence, British colonial occupation, and the problematic and complicated relationship between the Orient and Occident, as well as the colonized and colonizer.³ This would

² Wharton, Annabel Jane, *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture*, University of Chicago Press, 2001.

³ Ibrahim, Tarek, "Johann Adam Rennebaum and the Architecture of Shepherd's Hotel in Cairo", *The Myth of the Orient: Architecture and Ornament in the Age of Orientalism*, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Oxford, Wien, 2016

eventually lead the hotel to be burned down in the Cairo Fire, a series of riots that took place in retaliation to the killing of 50 Egyptian policemen by British occupation troops on January 25, 1952. The event that is often thought to have led to the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, saw the burning and looting of the most opulent places that drew the world's aristocrats; retail shops, cafes, cinemas, hotels, restaurants, theatres, and nightclubs, most notably, the Shepherd's Hotel. The new Shepherd's Hotel was a response to its colonial predecessor and signaled Egypt's independent engagement with modernism. Its strategic location on the Nile would have the river serve as the foreground to a leisurely life in the lush richness of Egypt's land.

A series of post-revolution stamps celebrating the new Shepherd's Hotel, the Aswan Dam and a range of Egypt's modern productions were commissioned alongside images of pharaohs, historical monuments and flowers commemorating historical feasts. Floral stamps would trace back to the traditions of Ancient Egypt, one of the first countries to recognize 'national' plants. The Nasser government issued stamps of roses, lotuses, and poinsettias amongst others to represent and celebrate feasts related to pharaonic history and commemorate successes of contemporary times. The lush and fertile ground surrounding the Nile offered a bouquet ready to be utilized for the commemoration of Egypt's ancient history and modernity. Post-revolution Egypt would not only bring with it changes in government-produced propaganda when it came to landscape, it would also bring a new approach to land governance. Gamal Abdel Nasser's post-revolution land reform launched an effort to change land ownership practices in Egypt. Prior to the reformation, less than six percent of Egypt's population owned more than 65% of the land, and less than 0.5% of Egyptians owned more than one-third of all fertile land.⁴ These major owners had almost autocratic control over their fields, charging high rents, which led to large amounts of debt carried by farmers and peasants. The 1952 law saw the redistribution of 700,000 *feddans*⁵ and the reduction of the maximum size of land

⁴ Dr. Assem Al-Desoky's *Major Landowners in Egypt: 1914-1952* (in Arabic, Dar Al-Shorouk, Cairo, 2007. quoted in *Egypt on the Brink* by Tarek Osman, Yale University Press, 2010, p.45

⁵ *Feddan* - A unit of area for land used in some Arab countries, approximately equal to an acre (0.42 hectare).

ownership. This new division of land along with the formation of Cooperatives provided farmers with pesticides, seeds, fertilizers, and marketed their agricultural products. By the 1980s the effects of land reform in Egypt drew to a halt as the country moved its attention away from agriculture and began to use its natural resources to grow other industries. Egypt would see a surge in the production of cotton and the building of waterside tourist destinations. However, the new distribution of land would be commemorated in a series of flora stamps produced by the Egyptian government, and can be found in Fathalla's installation.

Stamps are evidence that the government actively utilized Egypt's rivers, deserts and flowers to position itself as an attractive modern country with a rich pharaonic history. The post-revolution government would commission stamps commemorating the Cairo Industrial Fair, the International Fair for Egyptian Cotton, the Lion and Nile Hilton Hotel, while an assortment of floral stamps were produced to celebrate feasts and festivals; the rose in arch, the morning glory and the sunflower. Many of them can be found at St. Mark's Coptic Museum in Scarborough, Ontario, where Fathalla, researched and catalogued the collection. Each one carefully designed, acting as exhibitions of reception and representation, presenting ideals of where the country is at as a whole, as a display of national construct. The stamps are installed in ways that mimic the Egyptian landscape; floral stamps are placed on floor displays, while hotel stamps are displayed on tall towers. The wooden structures on which the stamps are arranged are contrasted two highly ornate rococo chairs, embroidered with images of European lovers affectionately embracing in a lush rose filled garden. The furniture style gained popularity during the year 1800, the same period where travel began to be called 'tourism,' and when the original Shepheard's Hotel was at its peak in popularity. The traditional home in Egypt would include this furniture *salon*, an area in which couches and armchairs were decorated in proper rococo fashion and adorned with gold-leafed frames and images of European landscapes. These designs would serve as the backdrops to the most special occasions that take place in an Egyptian household alluding to the colonial influence infiltrating domestic spaces to the present day. The furniture presents

a land that is very different from the barren landscape found in Egypt and the scenery produced in post-colonial stamps.

The combination of images of European lovers in lush gardens, large hotels straddling the desert and the Nile, flora stampage to commemorate feasts, and the nostalgic photos taken by Fathalla's father, offer a comparative analysis of the complex ways landscapes are experienced and portrayed from a post-colonial lens. In one, the land is perfectly manicured to offer the ideal setting for leisure and pleasure; in the other, it is used to present a destination for tourism, with the motive of commercial gain; it is also photographed and remembered in an experience, and in another, elements of landscape, such as plants and flowers, showcase an important aspect of daily life. To the ancient Egyptians, plants like lotus and papyrus symbolized the primeval waters of Nun, from which the Egyptians believed life began. Papyrus grew in thickets with considerable fauna along the Nile, becoming a symbol of fertility and life itself. Here there are vastly different approaches to thinking of natural resources - one cyclical and ritual, while the others are idealistic and commercial. Focusing on the commodification and privatization of land due to large hotel chains taking over the Nile coast, Fathalla also produced a repository listing the hotels along the Nile as well as, historical hotels, that were/are located alongside the river, a kind of textual cartography. The list takes the form of a website, which is then mobile for viewers to read it as an accessible set of indexical information that explores the contentions between tourism as leisure vs. tourism as livelihood/ and water as livelihood. The installation brings together a collimation of images of landscapes portrayed in various ways and motives. In her explorations, Fathalla excavates her own identity as an Egyptian, living away from her place of origin. She examines the complex ways she experiences a place that she is intrinsically connected to and inevitably detached from. She considers her position as an emigrant, a tourist, an artist, and a researcher. Her installation highlights the ways in which Egypt has treated and marketed its land in the wake of post-colonialism, and poses questions about the complex ways we consume our homeland and our negotiated relationship to landscape.

She compels viewers to think about the ways in colonialism, tourism, and history mediate our relationship to land.

- Sandy Saad

This exhibition was generously supported by the Ontario Arts Council.



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario