

Hamdi Attia TOPONYMY OUTSIDE IN

Exhibition : 27 october – 30 november 2018

Vernissage : 26 october 2018 | h19

Conversation with the artist by Juan Asis Palao Gomez

JAP: *Hamdi, do you think that Geography as a studied discipline at school exercised a fascination on you; even before knowing you wanted to do art?*

HA: Yes. Let's imagine my classrooms in a small elementary school, in a poor village in southern Egypt, the 70s. We had 3 kinds of wall decorations, picture of the presidents (Nasser and Sadat), calligraphic posters (poems, nationalist and religious lines), and maps. And calligraphic posters and maps handmade by teachers with the help of students like myself. By the time I was in middle school, I was known as the one who can draw the map of the world blindly. I also was interested in drawing portraits of public figures and in learning about calligraphy.

JAP: *When you were younger in Egypt, you probably had to confront very strong nationalist speeches. Has your practice, as a critical manipulation of geographical and topographical representations, been influenced by this confronting of Egyptian society and, afterwards, the American one, where nationalism is present almost everywhere?*

HA: Definitely. Nationalism as embedded and embodied in the presidents' pictures alongside nationalist calligraphic posters informed the way I looked at maps on the same wall in my classrooms. The person of the president was buried under the iconic posture of the official pictures, the reading function of letters was overtaken by calligraphic aesthetics, and the notion of perfection and accuracy of maps was challenged by the hand drawing and paper poor quality. Map drawing for me became a host for issues of representation, aesthetics, accuracy, familiarity, and confusion to tell my version of the world's story. However, living and working between the United States and Egypt allows me to explore the geopolitical and sociocultural scenes as an outsider who is inside and an insider who is outside at the same time. I look at the discourse of exceptionalism in American politics and how it is based on the superpower status of the US, while the Egyptian discourse of exceptionalism is based on great images of the past—either its ancient history or its role in leading the Arab world during two decades of the postcolonial era.

JAP: *Contrary to the famous installations by Mona Hatoum where the conventional borders of the continents still exist, your geographical pieces transform territories even if we can still recognize them. Is your practice, having a stronger emphasis on shape diversion, motivated by a certain sarcastic humor, a dark humor?*

HA: I think that different waves of humorous thoughts, imagery, and cultural production that have roots in literature pioneered by such figures as Marquez (Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), Borges (*The Exactitude of Science*), and Italo Calvino (*Invisible Cities*), drives my attention to the arbitrary nature of maps,

borders, and the modern nation-state.

JAP: *Marquez's imaginary town in One Hundred Years of Solitude, Macondo, sounds like 'deep' ('hondo'), and actually the novel is a journey through the collective memory into the deep roots of a 'Colombian' identity. But in fact, it seems that erasing the borders of a site on time and space, as Marquez did with Macondo, paradoxically produces another counter effect: the site seems able to include more plural meanings and identities. How do you manage the relation between the extreme particular and the extreme universal dimension of your manipulated geographic representations, for instance the satellite photography the Nile valley into the profile of a man's head?*

HA: John Dewey once said that playfulness is full of serious thoughts that don't easily come to mind in non-playful circumstances. In other words, a playful process offers a safe framework for serious ideas to be explored, examined, and developed. I was entertained by the idea that the anatomy of human bodies and the topography of earth can be viewed similarly. Playfully, I cut an open window of my profile on white cardboard and placed it over a large canvas of satellite image of earth, as if I am holding a magnifying glass to look for a resemblance of the facial features. When I arrived to the terrain of Egypt, I was reminded of issues of identity, local geopolitics, and history of fear that the Nile valley could be wiped of the map if the high dam was ever bombed. I think that using a self-silhouette as a window that contains a cropped image of earth sets the tone to make the link between the telescopic universal view and the microscopic arial view.

JAP: *Continuing with the erased and recreated borders, to which extent is the Palestinian struggle for freedom a framework for an Arab artist of your generation? Do you think that it is still central to the contemporary Egyptian artistic scene? And if not, how do you explain this decay of political solidarity among Arab nations?*

HA: I think that the Israeli occupation of Palestine is on the mind of almost everyone with intellectual agency in the Arab world. In fact I would argue that it is a cross-generation concern. Although this issue is deep in people's conscience, it is rare to find it expressed in an artwork in Egypt for example. That being said, I want to make a distinction between framing the issue as "Arab-Israeli conflict" and as a "Palestinian struggle." The first discourse is produced by national, regional, and international officials, as well as news headlines, and it usually emphasizes a kind of binary equivalence when the conflict is not one between two equal sides. It is safe to say that the notion of official Arab "solidarity" is a part of this discourse that doesn't see "people" in the equation from the beginning. The second framework emphasizes the fact that this is an ongoing colonization, and an ongoing effort to decolonize. This framework calls attention to the very facts on the ground and to Palestinian voices. In my view, when artistic expressions address the question on the basis of the first discourse they become part of ongoing propaganda.

JAP: *Let's go closer to the problematics linked to the Palestinian territories. Do you think that the actual dystopian geography of Palestine is in fact more an illusion of our perception than a factual reality? In other words, are you fighting with a kind of pragmatic naivete for a Palestinian State, but by means of an ironic subterfuge?*

HA: I think that, for example, the two-state solution is a product of the so-called international community which views the struggle as a conflict between two equal sides in terms of both rights and forces. I see this solution as not genuinely serious on one hand, and on the other hand it is not practical. In my project, I am trying to bring forward ecological issues affecting daily life to call attention to how the occupation is part of the larger problem of the environment, including climate change. This is how I comment on how the struggle is narrowed down to a simple two-side conflict in the international public eye. I'm not sure if this is irony, but it is definitely subterfuge—especially when my work comments on the perception and reality of distance between locations in Palestine, given the system of checkpoints.