

MOATAZ NASR Mind the gap

« Mind the gap... between the train and the platform » is this little sentence heard a thousand times in the subway, and in different languages, which comes to my mind when I read the exhibition's title of Moataz Nasr, as a grin, an unconscious sentence, permanent, referring to the way we consider the world: "be careful not to fall, be careful where you put your feet".

Obviously there is a literal meaning, including in the exhibition, where the viewer has to mind the gap but also a challenge launched here by the artist, a way to observe how we react to the barriers in front of us, and how we react to the pieces.

Mind the gap is the first solo exhibition by Moataz Nasr in Morocco; it is an idea that was growing slowly, a personal and professional path after participating to several collective exhibitions in the country. Fascinated by handycraft, he was patiently waiting for the occasion to start his researches, his investigations around those savoir-faires. It is also a way for the artist to anchor himself and to connect to the Moroccan territory, to the craftsmen and their incredible mastership of the traditional techniques; when often in Egypt, the most talented craftsmen move to the Gulf to earn more money. We already understand the artist's will to speak about the critical economic situation in Egypt. Moataz chooses to use zelij to highlight this endless source of inspiration, fascinating and sophisticated, allowing him to represent the Arab World at large, a way to cross the borders that define identities.

The Mac Gates refers to different things, first the shape in itself: M by Mac Donald's –well known by everyone (including the craftsmen who worked on the pieces) – symbol of an Americanisation and a global standardisation of the world, including Egypt, and that we find in Morocco too, changing the way of living and loosing traditions. The Americanisation translates itself through a language issue. Speaking English becomes a trend, a way of dividing power statuses strongly within society: even traditional Egyptian shops have started to write their names in English. Moatas states his love for the Arabic language and for its capacity of diffusion in the Arab world. Once again, he presents here the piece *The Echos*, video produced in 2003 in which he films his actress friend Chirine El Ansary, who, in different cafés in Egypt recites a speech initially written by Abdel Rahman El Sharkawi in 1930 and used in the film *El Ard (The Earth, 1969)* by Youssef Chahine in a monolog by Abu Swelam about the general standardisation, passivity, and negativity of the population. Showing this part of the film next to the video he made, he expresses his will to highlight again universalism and its "disastrous" timelessness: using in 2019 a piece from 2003, coming from a 1969 movie which itself speaks about the speech of the great depression from the 1930s - the artist, is inspired by, and questions a complex identity constructed by a global collective memory.

The Mac Gates should also be linked to the octagonal shape created with the bicycles (*Vacanze Marrakchi*, following the piece *Vacanze Romane*), which cannot ride without being together – symbol of a permanent connection allowing, thanks to the seven colours, to form the full prism and see the light. Continual and constant renewal, it is the same loop that we find infinite. The eight bicycles set the octagon, symbol of purity and water that we find in the Arab and Mediterranean worlds.

Moataz Nasr's investigation is primarily a research on History and the world itself, using art as a language but mostly as a magnifier to point to viewers what is happening around them without realising it. He sometimes draws inspiration from the material until the right idea emerges, but he sometimes begins with the idea until it leads to the right material to express itself.

Still playing with the associations of ideas, the artist chooses other symbols as the one of the traffic cone to create an abstract link with zelij referring to the Islamic world and the one of prohibition. He ties comparisons about restrictions – very prominent in the Middle East – in religion (interfering at all levels and in all aspects of life).

It is also a way to play with his audience, implicating simultaneously an impression of déjà-vu and a new one: the artist reverses the position and creates a 'mise en abyme', he is himself the spectator of the viewers and their conscious or unconscious reactions in front of the pieces. He encourages the viewer to cross the cones in the exhibition, and to cross the restrictions in their own life.

Moataz tries to always push further the limits, first regarding himself. He mixes here political, social, economical pieces with more personal ones. He also decided to show the video *Father and Son* realised in 2004. This piece presents a dialog between his father and him, during which he takes the place of his deceased mother, expressing feelings she never expressed to her husband (and the artist neither). Once again, Moataz wants to use the power of sharing experiences using Arabic language - as a therapy allowing him to clarify his own history, to open up, and to grow – wishing a sensitive identification with the spectator who might understand him.

When I asked Moataz if he would live in Egypt all his life, he answered, "Until it kicks me out". It's a kind of tough love, a complicated, sinuous and ambiguous relationship. It is also a way to construct – in opposition – always integrating the particular context of Egypt. The artist constantly tries to push back the limits to see how far he can go with his subversions. It is a way of creating his pieces in continuous link to the context, a critical claim.