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## Egypt's Moataz Nasr captivates wonder of international art scene

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BEIRUT: A wall of ears sculpted from dough and clay, a room full of wheelchairs bolted in place, an artificial ceiling constructed of misshapen wooden logs, a scene from an old film re-enacted and projected back as a mirror image of itself. The world of Moataz Nasr's imagination is vast and all-consuming.

The Egyptian painter, video maker and installation artist uses a seemingly endless array of materials. Sometimes they are tangible and concrete - squares of mud, a contained field of green grass or a puddle of water acting as a reflecting pool for a video screen. Other times they are more conceptual and abstract - an idiomatic expression in Arabic, an alphabet built from burnt clay blocks, an allegorical chessboard or ruminations on such notions as progress, stasis, masculinity and change. Whatever Nasr culls together in a given piece, and however he chooses to express himself, his work has escalated dramatically in volume and recognition over the past few years.

Now 43, Nasr has been creating artwork in various guises for 15 years, mounting exhibitions throughout Egypt and occasionally abroad. But the 8th International Cairo Biennial in 2001 marked the tipping point in his career. At that outing, one of the few of its kind in this part of the world, Nasr installed a piece called "An Ear of Mud, Another of Dough" and walked away with the grand prize. The work incorporated elements of sculpture, video and sound collage, with some 7,000 ears molded from clay bisque and bread dough affixed to a wall opposite a silent video looping footage of people shrugging their shoulders, all held together by an audio track droning in the background. Based on an Arabic expression roughly equivalent to "in one ear and out the other," it offered a damning if general critique on societal indifference.

After the Cairo Biennial, Nasr won the Culture Ministry prize at Dak'Art 2002, Senegal's committee-driven biennial for African art, for an installation called "The Water." He participated in the 2003 Venice Biennale with an installation of 4,000 tabla drums, part of Egyptian curator Gilane Tawadros "Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes."

This September, Nasr became one of just two artists from the Arab world exhibiting at the Sao Paulo Biennial, the most heavily attended of such international exhibitions in the world. At the Busan Biennial in South Korea this fall (where the Middle East fared better in terms of representation), Nasr installed one of his most trenchant works to date, a video piece called "The Echo."

"Biennials and group shows [are] a door," says Nasr, speaking from Cairo. "Art now has changed and after postmodernism, you can say that art has opened a new chapter." Nasr pegs this as the age of curating, and he believes international exhibitions have become popular because they have the budgets to promote video art and installation, both of which are less secure in the traditional art market.

Two of Nasr's installations were included in "DisORIENTation," something of a landmark survey of Middle Eastern cultural production held at the House of World Cultures in Berlin. Highlighting Egypt's fortuitous regional overlap, Nasr is also included in "Africa Remix," a sprawling exhibition of 88 artists that hits the Hayward Gallery in London in

February, then tours to the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. And, along the way, Nasr has staged gallery shows at Townhouse in Cairo, Arte Visiva in Napoli and Arte Continua in San Gimignano. Coming down the pike, he has a site-specific installation in the works for London's Covent Garden, appearances at Brazil's Museum of Contemporary Art in El Salvador and the Sharjah Biennial and a new work called "Father and Son," which he will unveil at the American University in Cairo's Falaki Gallery in December. All this, and the list goes on.

"Everything happened suddenly, since 2001," says Nasr. "It was surprising for me. The question I'm always being asked everywhere I go is: 'Are you living in Egypt? And why?' So I feel I'm responsible, as I'm representing Egypt and the Arabs wherever I go; a kind of ambassador, showing the world that there are people who speak the same language as they do, who are open-minded and still choose to live in the Middle East."

To play the role of cultural ambassador is a dicey endeavor, as an artist's particular vision of the world will always be called upon to speak in terms far more expansive than his or her own imagination. Like many Arab artists who have achieved success in the West, Nasr has been criticized for creating works, particularly the tabla piece, that are seen as reductive, exotic or too easily digestible.

To be sure, there is something seductive and phenomenal about Nasr's installations, putting him in league with an artist like Olafur Eliasson, who wowed London's art public with a recreation of the sun in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall last year. (Eliasson has so fine-tuned the sudden and sublime effect of his installations that critics often speak of the "wow factor" in his work.)

In such works as "The Water" (featuring a video screen reflected in a pool of water, where images of different faces are intermittently and unceremoniously disturbed by the crush of a large foot in the puddle) and "The Earth, the Sky, and What's in Between" (installed across three rooms: one with a life-size chessboard in water and clay on the floor; one with a false ceiling and thin beams of penetrating light; and one with a series of large sticks braced awkwardly between floor and ceiling), Nasr plays on moments. He rigs his works to produce visceral flashes that carry an aftereffect of symbolic meaning. The puddle splash evokes human cruelty, the false ceiling suggests a view from the grave and the chessboard represents conflict, war and the machinations of power politics.

While these works tackle universal themes, "The Echo" pinpoints Egyptian society precisely. Nasr revisits a scene from Youssef Chahine's 1969 film "Al-Ard," based on Abdel Rahman al-Sharkawi's novel of the same name, in which the character Abou Swelam regales his male colleagues for their complacency in the face of British occupation and economic recession circa 1933. Using the talents of Egyptian storyteller Chirine al-Ansary, Nasr reshot the scene in a bustling, present-day coffee shop in downtown Cairo. The finished work juxtaposes the two scenes on separate screens facing each other as if in dialogue (the set-up is thus reminiscent of Douglas Gordon's masterful reworking of the "You talkin' to me" scene in "Taxi Driver").

In this work, explains Nasr, "Words are very important, since it's a movie where all the genius lies in the actor's performance and in what they say. The movie is in the memory of all Arabs, that's why the words and Chirine's performance were very important."

"The notion of masculinity is [a] big part of my work," he adds. "This is the reason I have chosen a woman in particular, not a man, to play this part, talk to the men, insult them ... It was a woman who had to tell the men things like: 'How come you're sitting here like women putting your hands on your cheeks, crying and doing nothing but saying words, words, words ...' In the original movie, while the actor Mahmoud al-Meligui is talking, there's a mashrabiya (an oriental window) behind him, behind which we can see two women standing and eavesdropping. They don't take part in the conversation, and this

image shows the place of the women in the society at that time. They couldn't take part in any opinion-taking or serious conversation. Egypt is a macho, masculine society. Yes, women are taking a big role now, but still, it's totally a man's society."

Nasr's treatment of masculinity takes a more intimate turn in "Father and Son," another video work to be projected on two screens.

"It's a work [about] the relationship between my father and I," he says. "My father is 85 years old, born in 1919, and I'm talking with him about how I was raised as a man in this society, about his relationship with my mother and how he was so controlling in the house, in a dictatorial way, no voice above his own."

For someone who started out as a painter, and a commercially successful painter at that, what are Nasr's thoughts on the potential of installation and video art?

"Painting for me is a hobby which I love," he explains. "It's a daily release. I can't do an installation everyday to express my feeling, because it needs money or funding and it will take time, but I can paint everyday. I [haven't] shown my paintings for two years now. Painting has become a more personal activity, even though I see my paintings ... as something similar to the texture of the walls of the city I live in ... Sometimes I think of other works like installations while I'm painting, and I can see deeply into the work. Painting is helping me a lot in my life, as a person first and as an artist second.

In terms of his approach to other media, he says, "It differs from one work to [another]. It depends mostly on what I want to do and say and what effect I want to have on people ... I think that contemporary art nowadays is open to everything. Cinema, theater, story telling, even ballet and music can be used as material ... I'm challenged, provoked and stimulated by everything that happens to me in my life. Don't you think we all are? But the thing," he adds, "is how to express yourself."

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