

REPORT FROM EGYPT

The Cairo Effect

During the 9th Cairo Biennale a striking contrast prevailed between the staid official event and several livelier satellite exhibitions.

BY LILLY WEI



Rashid Rana: *This Image Is Not at Rest*, 2003, digital print, 30 by 130 inches. Works this page at the Cairo Biennale.

The 9th Cairo International Biennale opened on the night of Dec. 13, 2003, with a convocation of Egypt's official art world and other artists, academics, press and government types. Among those on hand were the U.S. ambassador to Egypt, David Welch, and Farouk Hosni, the Egyptian minister of culture, who, trailed by a small crew of cameramen, inaugurated the evening's ceremonies. The opening had the desultory drone of a required diplomatic function that has seen better days, instead of the hectic, heady atmosphere of a contemporary art event. Reinforcing the mood of yesterday were the majority of works on display at the Biennale, which remained up through Feb. 13, 2004. In contrast, "PhotoCairo" and a number of satellite exhibitions held at venues in the city's downtown offered a more provocative view of contemporary Egyptian art, an alternative to the retro esthetics and ideologies on view at the official event.

Wasted Opportunities

Like Istanbul, Cairo is a city where Europe and America have long dallied with the Middle East in an uneasy relationship, one that is particularly volatile now. In December, the city twinkled with miles of Christmas lights and decorations that seemed somehow tied to Egypt's colonial past. While the site had, at least, weather and location going for it, it also bristled with armed soldiers and police whose presence forcefully reminded visitors of the political present, a sober indication that Camp David is now ancient history.

The Biennale was housed in three main venues on Zamalek, a verdant, upscale island in the Nile in central Cairo. The Palace of Arts in the Opera House complex is an awkwardly partitioned exhibition space, where too many works were hung too closely together, but it was nonetheless the best of the three. The others were the Centre of Arts-Zamalek and the Gezira Art Center, formerly elegant villas that are now rather shabby but would have had a certain raffish charm had they not, too,

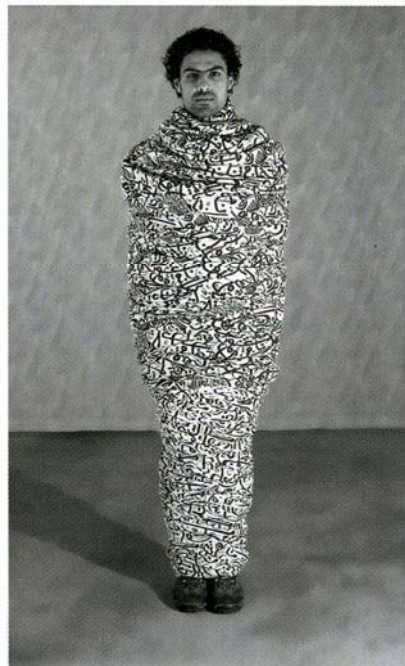
been so overcrowded with work so indifferently installed. (There was a purported fourth site, the Fine Arts Gallery in the Opera House, but—as was true in the last Biennale—it seemed always to be closed.) The exhibition presented 220 artists from 56 countries, breaking the previous record of 51 countries set by the 8th Biennale [see *A.i.A.*, Jan. '02]. Calling itself the largest international exhibition in the Arab world, the 2003 event included a sizable proportion of nations, both of Arab and other ethnicities, from the Middle East and North Africa, among them Algeria, Bahrain,

Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Tunisia, Turkey and Yemen. The only sub-Saharan countries represented were Mauritius and Sudan. Although Ghana was listed on the invitation, I could not find any Ghanaian work, nor did any appear in the catalogue. There was also a fair representation from Western Europe and the former Soviet Union, as well as a scattering of artists from the Americas and East Asia.

The Biennale offered a rare opportunity to see contemporary global art from a different perspective, yet it wasted that opportunity, for the most part, on dated, uninspired, provincial work with almost nothing that stood out. On view were many artists who are unknown in the West, and probably in the Middle East as well. But what are critics and curators supposed to make, for example, of three Mongolian artists, Gungaa Dashtseren, Bayanduuren Bayanjargal and Batbayer Doudon, whose modestly sized, inoffensive works on paper (abstractions, landscapes and calligraphy) were tucked away in a small room upstairs in the Gezira Art Center? By most current standards, including those of other biennials, they would be dismissed, but given some sort of context—which we were not—we might have better assessed them. Is it enough to know, merely, that they are from Mongolia? How, without being better equipped, can we correct our "orientalist" gaze—a term in frequent, accusatory use here—which can be both too forgiving, i.e., too condescending, and too harsh, too "globalized"? How do we get beyond cultural tourism and cast off the First World's esthetic burden?

An international event of this scope presumably wants an international audience, but remarkably little outreach or information was forthcoming from the organizers, at least to the non-Arabic speaking press. Lest this sound sour, I suspect that the disregard was more or less general, due to disorganization rather than to bias. Ultimately, the

Photo from Mansoor Hassan's photo-and-video compendium *Bound/Unbound: The Bound Project*, 2003-ongoing, printed on banner, 6' by 4 feet.



Dubbed the largest international exhibition in the Arab world, the Biennale welcomed 220 artists from 56 countries, with a very sizable proportion from the Middle East.

only source of information was the catalogue, which is bilingual, in Arabic and English, but is otherwise maddeningly opaque as a reference. It is sloppily assembled, full of contradictions and misspellings, and with little that is substantive. Worst of all, the order of its entries is incomprehensible—if indeed any exists. Not even the announcement card listed countries alphabetically. The wall labels were equally unhelpful (in English, that is; the Arabic portion was usually longer). All that was given was the name of artist and country, if that, and no data about the work—not even a title. Wisely, some artists provided their own handouts and images, but many did not. In any case, they might have been better introduced by their hosts.

The Triumph of Officialdom

The undistinguished quality of most of the projects on view raised many questions about the selection process, which evidently followed the formula of previous years. A number of participating artists were invited in the category of honored guests or received “special invitations” from Biennale organizers such as Ahmed Fouad Selim, the Commissaire-General of this and the previous Cairo Biennale. Himself an artist and critic, Selim is a former winner of the exhibition’s top prize, the Grand Nile, which comes

with an award of 50,000 Egyptian pounds (over \$8,000), a substantial sum by Egyptian standards. Conflict of interest does not seem to be an issue here: Selim is apparently not the only artist who has sat on the Biennale jury and been awarded a prize by that same jury. (Two of this year’s invited artists, Cécile Massart from Belgium and Nazir Nabaa of Syria, were jurors but, correctly, did not receive awards.) Other participating artists were chosen by judges from their own countries—by panel review, a single curator or a curatorial team.

Many of the selectors were from ministerial agencies and academies not involved with new art, a fact that was evident in the abundance of outmoded works, dominated by abstract paintings and sculptures with Cubist, Surrealist, School of Paris, Expressionist and Abstract Expressionist associations. For instance, the venerable Pietro Cascella from Italy was given pride of place at the entrance to the Palace of Fine Arts with an army of carved, Cubistic marble sculptures. Nearby was Mona Saudi from Jordan with more abstract marble sculptures that were, similarly, variations on an early modernist vocabulary.

The exhibition was accompanied by a three-day international symposium (Dec. 15-17) that included local and visiting academics, artists, curators, critics and writers. It was headed by another Cairo insider, Fatma Ismail, an art critic, artist and chief of the Central Department of the Centres of Art. The symposium’s subject was the same as that of the Biennale’s manifesto, conceived by the Commissaire-General: “Mythology, a Bet on Imagination and a Bet on Art.” Selim rather alarmingly proclaims in the catalogue, “We hope that works in the 9th Cairo International Biennale will defeat globalisation in its defined sense as the authority to destroy humanity and force the nations to kneel down. . . . Perhaps this will be our last stand before we are swept out by the Flood.”

At one of the sessions of the symposium, a mem-



Medhat Shafik: Reawakening of the Phoenix, 2003, mixed-medium installation. Works this page at the Cairo Biennale.

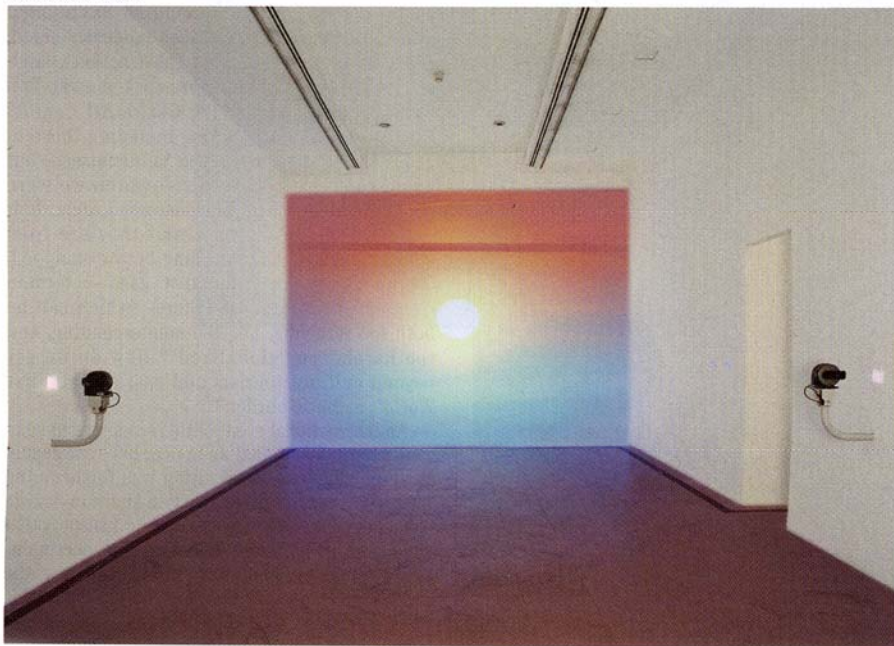
ber of the audience began his question to the panel (of which I was a member) with Plato’s Cave and ended it with the pronouncement that violence is an exclusively American product. Much was undoubtedly lost in translation, a slippage that might once have seemed droll if, as a metaphor for escalating Middle Eastern and Western misconceptions and misrepresentations, its consequences had not already proven so dire. Although everyone connected to the Biennale and the Cairo art world was courteous, hostility against the United States appeared high, and the tension of global politics was palpable. Even downtown, where there was generally greater openness, resentment against the West and against Western critics and curators was rife and combustible, and miscommunication reigned on all sides. One Egyptian artist, a young woman, angrily lectured a group of journalists, including myself. “You should do your homework,” she said.

Rally to the Causes

Among the exceptions to the run of bland abstract and semiabstract works at the Biennale were a number with political subject matter (though everything here eventually looked political). Some supported the Palestinian cause and implicitly or explicitly condemned the Israelis and their ally, the U.S.—the Arab version of the Axis of Evil. However, the works mainly functioned as rants, lacking nuance, and were usually pedestrian in execution.

NayelYassin Malla, an artist from Saudi Arabia, won a jury award for *The Massacre of Our New Generation*, in which he plastered a room at the Palace of Arts to resemble mud and projected on two screens a continuous barrage of photographic images of Palestinian children, many of them wounded or dead. The subject was deeply, terribly affecting—but not as art. The distinction is a vexa-

Paul Pfeiffer: Morning after the Deluge, 2003, DVD installation.



tious one. First World esthetics can appear aloof, even frivolous, in light of the bloody realities of the Third World.

Argentine artist Ricardo Longhini equated the current Palestinian situation with the Holocaust. Having branded a sheepskin with the motto, in English and Arabic, "The Downfall of Human Memory," Longhini framed within the skin, in two oval cutouts, a well-known and heartbreaking news photo of a Palestinian father attempting to shield his small son from a burst of gunfire (the son was killed immediately afterward) and an equally distressing shot of a small Jewish boy on his way to a Nazi concentration camp.

Another politically motivated piece was by the young U.K.-educated artist, Yara el-Sherbini. Wearing a black burka and describing herself as a "guerrilla artist," el-Sherbini gave a tentative, unpersuasive performance at the opening, drowned out by the chatter of the crowds. Singing along with a Britney Spears recording, she fingered a toy automatic assault weapon like a ukulele; when the chorus played "Hit me baby, one more time," she doubled over as if shot. *Upside Down World*, a collaboration by two Kuwaiti artists, Ali Hassan Al-Awadh and Jaber Ahmed, was just that: a boxy construction with one wall open, simulating a room or prison in which many of the objects—table, vase, shoes and a photo of a young boy crying—were attached to the ceiling rather than placed on the floor. In defying and derailing gravity, the artists create an inversion of everyday life, a metaphor of a political situation in which reality has been rearranged.

One artist of interest was Rashid Rana from Pakistan, whose unassuming color digital prints show superimposed, miniaturized soldiers overrunning an idyllic landscape, which might be historically neutral Switzerland—deep green hills and mountainsides, nestled with white, red-roofed houses. The soldiers, lifted from television news broadcasts, move, for the most part, from



Susan Hefuna: Nile Delta, 2002, digital print on canvas, 23 1/2 by 15 1/2 inches.

left to right, or from West to East. Although this may be a pointedly critical commentary about Western military aggression, it is also lighter and more ironic, something in short supply here.

On another note (or perhaps not), the young Jordanian artist Mohammed Farouk Said installed on a platform life-size, mustard-yellow, pistol-packing male and female demi-mannequins (cut off from the waist up), dressed in miniskirts, slacks or shorts, and high boots or sneakers: Pop with a message? Also interested in apparel was the Italian Elisabetta Catamo, whose sculptures consist of large, flat metal plates cut and assembled into simplified, nail-studded, geometric garments hung on the wall. They resemble paper cutouts a child might make, or particularly stiff vestments. Religious allusion, feminist critique or fashion send-up, their downside was their slickness and corporate look. Ketta Ioannidou represented Cyprus with paintings that included one of a cheeky, cartoonlike, tousle-haired, wasp-waisted, long-legged, bikini-clad blonde, with lots of pink skin showing, shod in cowboy boots. She aims an arrow at an unseen target, bending a bow that lacks a string.

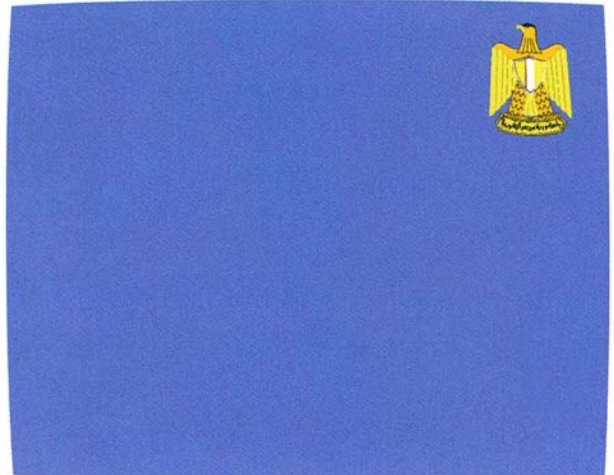
Inadvertently amusing was the Egyptian Nathan Dos's *Cosmic Vagina*, a not-quite-over-the-top installation of hanging ceramic pods, seeds, stems, vulvalike objects and rosy vines in dark fleshy tones, culminating in a radiating mandala shape on the wall—the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* crossed with *Aliens* in a low-tech edition, say. It was perhaps as close to sexual provocation as we got in this Biennale. On a different note, Mansoor Hassan, from Pakistan, showed some striking large-scale photos of a dark-haired man wrapped in a white, shroudlike cloth, save for his head and stubble-shadowed face. There was also a video of the same person tightly swaddling himself in the cloth, which is decorated with beautifully patterned black markings that resemble cursive Arabic but are really invented configurations that mean nothing. The work might be read as referring to a culture that willfully conceals itself behind the formality of language, which could, but does not, communicate—or perhaps it alludes to communication itself at an impasse.

Doris Bloom, born in South Africa and now living in Denmark, overlaid disparate histories and geographies in her installation of gridded, expressionistically rendered paintings called "Cape Town to Cairo," referring to Cecil John Rhodes's call for a "Cape-to-Cairo" railroad that would link the continent under British dominion. In another kind of geographical narrative, Romanian-born, Paris-based Leonard Rachita showed a series of heads made of salt and Seine water that were cast from



Hala Elkoussy: re(construction) #1, El-Guezira, 2003, color photograph, 27 1/2 by 39 1/2 inches. Works this page in "PhotoCairo."

Still from Hamdi Attia's video *Endless images*, 2003.



the death mask of a young woman who had drowned in Paris sometime in the early 1900s. The heads were placed in a long row of containers filled with water that the artist had collected from the Nile. As the heads dissolve over time, the piece metaphorically joins the two rivers and their histories. It provided one of the few intimate moments here, with a certain dark, compelling poetry; but because of its position to one side of a crowded space, viewing was not optimal.

Andreas Helbling and Zeljka Marusic, an artist-couple from Switzerland, collaborated on a Thomas Hirschhorn-like cardboard-and-wood construction the size of a room, another way, perhaps, of looking at geography, habitat and colonialism. The structure, crammed into the main hallway of the Centre for Arts, suggested a tunneled cave surmounted by a white dome. Inside were fuzzy rugs spread about as if in a tent. With a projection of the sky in the dome and another of the sea at the rear, and accompanied by an audio of waves and birdsong, it was one of the few video installations on view. It would have benefited from more room and greater refinement in execution, though it was conceptually interesting.

Medhat Shafik, an Egyptian-born artist who lives



Still from Hassan Khan's video and sound performance *tabla dubb*, 2003; in conjunction with "PhotoCairo." Courtesy Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

and works in Italy, received this year's Grand Nile award. With the architect Akram El-Magdoub and the artist Hamdi Attia, Shafik represented Egypt at the 1995 Venice Biennale, where the Egypt pavilion received a Leone d'Oro. Primarily a painter, he here created an installation in an enclosed space of the Palace of Arts. Consisting of an open, metal-barred rectangle sheathed in white gauze, the work sat serenely in sand like a stylized tent, surrounded by objects resembling excavated artifacts. Shafik seemed to be referring, in this habitat, to the ancient nomadic life of the desert.

Khalil Abdulwahed Abdulrahman, from Dubai, exhibited a sequence of stills from a video showing a paintbrush in perpetual motion. The video was praised when Abdulrahman showed it earlier at the 2003 Sharjah Biennale (as was the work of Abdulrahman's compatriot Mohammed Kazem, shown close by in Cairo). But it was impossible to imagine the effect of the moving image from the stills.

No Good Deed Goes Uncritiqued

Among the few artists who were shown to advantage was Paul Pfeiffer, who represented the United States. His work was installed in a spacious, newly renovated gallery within the Palace of Arts that was on a par with any Chelsea white box. Three walls were each dedicated to a sleek, signature LCD micro-monitor broadcasting looped, digitally altered found footage. These were earlier works, dating from 1998 to 2000: *The Pure Products Go Crazy*, with actor Tom Cruise; *Fragment of a Crucifixion (After Francis Bacon)*, featuring the New York Knicks' Larry Johnson; and *John 3:16*, a close-up of a basketball that spins in place, never dropping into the basket at the bottom edge of the screen. Shown on the fourth wall, Pfeiffer's recent *Morning after the Deluge* (2003) is a stunning, large-scale projection of an incandescent beach horizon on which the sun neither rises nor sets. The sun is the still focal point, while the horizon line scrolls steadily from top to bottom of the picture plane, water moving transparently over the orb. In the adjacent, com-

parably pristine corridor, *The Long Count: Thrilla from Manilla* (2001), another micro-projection, this one showing an excerpt from the Muhammed Ali-Joe Frazier fight, held solitary court.

Beautifully curated by U.S. commissioners Holly Block, executive director of Art in General in New York, and Jane Farver, director of MIT's List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Pfeiffer's work looked its best. In this context, however, the installation was construed by some as another instance of American swagger—and money. As one Egyptian artist said, shrugging, "If this had been a Palestinian artist, we would have applauded." Although it was only a small fraction of the American expenditure at the recent Venice Biennale, the \$90,000 provided by the U.S. Department of State, the NEA, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trust was obviously more than any other artist could command.

"There is no level way of looking at this," Farver said in a telephone conversation. "I am very aware that we had more money than most of the other artists, some of whom were hanging over nail holes from previous installations. But we renovated a space which was unusable and left it for future exhibitions. We hired a local crew, and the only person imported was Paul's technical adviser, whom he requested, a normal practice. It was important for us to make a good presentation, and I was happy that Paul was able to be there."

Pfeiffer was awarded a jury prize, but, given the widespread anti-Americanism at the Biennale, one wonders what the Biennale officials and audience were thinking about as they viewed Pfeiffer's dark images of Tom Cruise in his underwear violating a couch or Larry Johnson's agony and ecstasy. This is American pop culture—its film stars and sports figures—inflected through Pfeiffer's subtle and not-so-subtle messages, in American terms, about racism, heroism, irony and loss. New media was scarce here; in fact, the last Biennale was the first to include video and film. Pfeiffer said that a number of local artists were appreciative and had thanked him for showing them how it could be done.

Brighter Lights

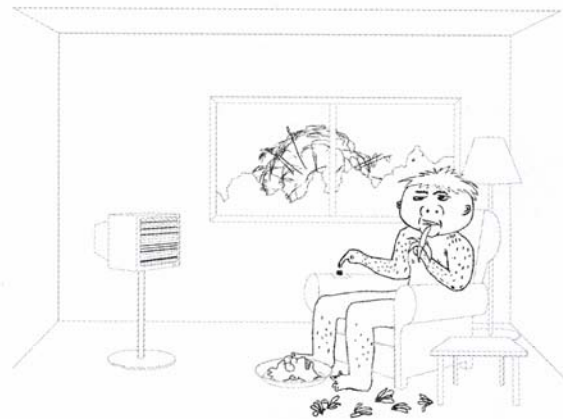
To find artistic experimentation, independence and provocation in Cairo, one had to travel downtown, to the unofficial shows that ran concurrently with the Biennale; these were more in tune with what progressive artists are doing throughout the world. The alternatives centered around "PhotoCairo," a group exhibition of photographers and video artists, seven from Egypt (Jihan Ammar, Hamdi Attia, Hala Elkoussy, Susan Hefuna, Rehab El Sadek, Amgad Naguib, Maha Maamoun) and an eighth from Beirut and Paris (Fouad

If nothing else, the Cairo experience revealed a new generation of Egyptian artists in their late 20s and 30s who are impatient to present themselves on their own terms.

Elkoury), shown at Townhouse Gallery, which has been a locus for younger artists since 1998. The gallery was founded and is directed by William Wells, born in Canada but a Cairo resident for the past 17 years. Townhouse Gallery has been responsible for channeling much of the energy at the fringe.

Attia's clever installation at "PhotoCairo" consisted of a completely disassembled television set. All of its parts, including yards of wiring, were unraveled and displayed, as if, in regarding its components, the viewer could "see" its insidious power to manipulate, control and corrupt. Elkoussy, a young photographer who graduated from London's Goldsmiths College and is coordinator of programs at Townhouse, makes carefully staged, sometimes dreamily ambiguous photo narratives that capture moments and places familiar to Cairenes; she then alters them, probing the boundaries of reality and fiction, a nod to the power of photography to communicate and misinform.

Downtown had been the site of the alternative arts festival, Al Nitaq, organized as a parallel event to the 2001 Biennale. With an abundance of installations and works in various mediums, including video and film, Al Nitaq had demonstrated that there is enormous local and regional interest in new art. "PhotoCairo," although a scaled-back effort, had a similar impetus. Its program included a series of related events that, like the exhibition, concentrated on photography and the moving image. Readings, performances, screenings, panels and presentations took place in several



Basim Magdy: *Two Days to Apocalypse*, 2003, black-and-white animation, 3 minutes, 40 seconds; at Falaki Gallery, American University in Cairo.

How can we correct our "orientalist" gaze—a term in frequent, accusatory use in Cairo—which can be both too forgiving, i.e., too condescending, and too harsh, too "globalized"?

alternative venues, from a garage to a factory to the back room of an Internet café.

Hassan Khan, a compelling videographer and filmmaker who shows internationally, presented his *tabla dubb* as a one-night performance in a hangarlike garage next to Townhouse. It was packed for the occasion, the audience predominantly a younger art crowd and neighborhood residents. A rear projection, *tabla dubb* flashed scenes of teeming Cairo streets and street life intercut by the ubiquitous face of Hosni Mubarak as well as the voice and image of the artist, although the latter was an understated, almost anonymous presence. The images were accompanied by an ear-splitting composition by Khan that combined electronica and music for traditional tabla drums. The performance was a live mix with music and video loops, a rapid-fire blend of sound and image. As the artist expressed it, the performance was meant to highlight the "politics of shared co-habitation in a city

where power is contested on a daily basis." Khan's is a vision of urban life in Cairo as complex, entangled and contradictory.

Meanwhile, a disarming, faux-innocent, black-and-white projection called *Two Days to Apocalypse* was shown at the Falaki Gallery of the American University in Cairo. Created by the young Egyptian artist Basim Magdy, it consists of a simple, line-drawn flash-animation video featuring an Everyman observer as hero; another character, a Superman-cum-stealth-bomber proves, in the end, not to be invincible. When asked if the work is anti-American, Magdy said that, to him, Superman is a universal image; what interests him is the interrogation of the constructs of power and their absurdity. In a statement, he writes that the West, in its zeal to overturn old stereotypes, has established new ones for Third World artists, a new "fixed set of expectations" of the issues they should address: "identity, political oppression, gender equity and religion, within the limitations of a local context, dismissing diverse aesthetic interests as ones that do not relate to any immediate local reality." Egyptian artists who have interests other than these find the current situation quite frustrating, "wedged" as they are "between institutional accusations of being influenced by Western trends and Western accusations of neglecting their local 'identity issues.'"

If nothing else, the Cairo experience revealed a generation of Egyptian artists in their late 20s and 30s who are impatient to present themselves on their own terms. Toward that end, they are creat-

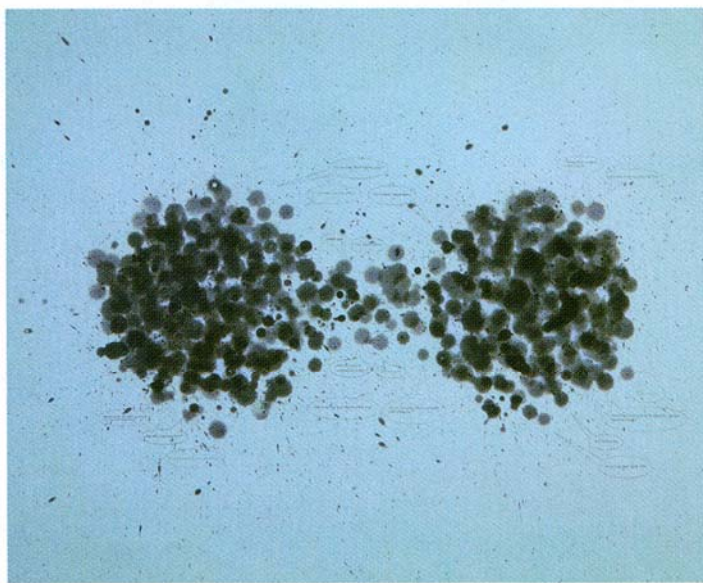
ing their own exhibition opportunities in Egypt and elsewhere. Many have studied and shown abroad and are nomads of sorts, like their counterparts all over the world. Ignored for the most part by officialdom, many of them dismiss, with both frustration and disdain, the government-sponsored Biennale as the self-serving preserve of Cairo's art mafia. As one artist exclaimed, "We know it's terrible, that's old news." However, Negar Azimi, curator of programs at Townhouse Gallery, regrets the division; in the end, he says, "We all have the same intent in mind, which is the promotion of the arts in the region."

International biennials elsewhere in the Middle East are becoming increasingly comprehensive and exciting. The Sharjah Biennale, in the United Arab Emirates, which expanded to become a global event in April and May 2003, was an unexpected critical success [see *A.i.A.*, Nov. '03], and the eighth incarnation of the Istanbul Biennale followed in the fall [see *A.i.A.*, Dec. '03]. While political, social and economic situations are different in all three countries, surely the Cairo Biennale could dust itself off and become as up-to-date as Istanbul, not to mention Sharjah. Then it would be an event to look forward to. □

The 9th Cairo International Biennale was on view Dec. 13, 2003-Feb. 13, 2004. There is a 370-page catalogue in Arabic and English. "PhotoCairo" could be seen at the Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art, Cairo, Dec. 14, 2003-Jan. 7, 2004, accompanied by a 36-page pamphlet.

Author: Lilly Wei is a New York-based writer and independent curator.

Crown Point Press



Fred Wilson, *Exchange*, 2004. Color spit bite aquatint, aquatint and direct gravure. 30-1/2 x 34". Edition 25. Printed by Case Hudson, assisted by Rachel Stevenson.

Fred Wilson

six new etchings
color brochure available

exhibition:
May 4 - June 26, 2004

20 Hawthorne Street
San Francisco, CA 94105
(415) 974-6273
www.crownpoint.com

also showing at:
Art Chicago 2004, May 7 - 10
Art|35|Basel, June 16 - 21