

Wael Shawky. *Al Araba Al Madfuna*
3 November 2016 - 5 February 2017
Private View: 2 November, 12 pm
Curated by Abdellah Karroum

Fondazione Merz is pleased to present *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, an exhibition of newly commissioned work by Wael Shawky, winner of the first edition of the **Mario Merz Prize**.

The site-specific installation centres around the artist's film trilogy *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, presented together for the first time. Here, the viewer is led through a series of immersive environments that physically compile the films' contents - architectural set designs and sculptures. The installations, specially created for the exhibition, create an original atmosphere drawn from the historical, literary and cinematographic references from which the artist has built his stories.

Al Araba Al Madfuna continues Shawky's interest, explored in several projects over the last decade, in using existing stories and histories from our culture, as a point of departure for cinematic exploration. Shawky's work is based on historical narratives, sociological interpretations, and fictional writing, from which he constructs his way of looking at past myths alongside the realities of the present.

The films are inspired by Shawky's visit to the village of Al Araba Al Madfuna, near Abydos, the archaeological site of the ancient city and a former capital of northern Egypt. There, Shawky lived with its inhabitants for several weeks where he witnessed first-hand the community's activities of digging underground to search for treasures, using metaphysics, alchemy and spiritual powers to find their ancestors secrets. This truth-seeking journey took the artist-as-explorer to a location currently known as Al Araba Al Madfuna, built next to the archaeological site of a pharaonic kingdom.

Shawky produces the trilogy in a modern theatrical and cinematographic style. Children dressed in turbans, gallabiyas, and moustaches performing the roles of adults, speak the parables from Egyptian writer Mohamed Mustagab's *Dayrout al-Shareif* (1983). This is combined with enacted scenes inspired by Shawky's encounters with the villagers digging tunnels beneath their houses, hoping to find buried treasures from their ancestors. Written in ancient Arabic language, these tales also speak of contemporary concerns; a duality present in the composition of the films.

The first film, *Al Araba Al Madfuna I* (2012), is based on the short story, *The J-B-R's* by Egyptian author Mohamed Mostagab (1938–2005), about a tribe named Al Jabarina. *Al Araba Al Madfuna II* (2013) draws on two short stories, *The Offering* and *Horseman Adore Perfumes*. The first tells of a village mysteriously struck dumb, forcing a reconsideration of methods for trading in a place that previously relied on the power of language and the spoken word. In the second story, a beautiful royal enchantress, feared by her subjects, entraps and marries a series of unsuspecting horsemen who each meet a fateful ending.

The third film *Al Araba Al Madfuna III* (2015-16), commissioned by Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, inspired by Mustagab's short story, *The Sunflower*, uses the Ozorion and the temple of the Pharaoh Seti in Abydos as a "natural" set of granite, water, and architectural elements in a place surrounded by myths still unknown today. In this last film, children act as if they were exploring the temple, walking towards it, looking at the walls of hieroglyphs, making gestures and suggesting a scene. We see them act out one story while they are speaking another, citing the words of Mostagab's novel *The Sunflower*. In the story the sunflower is a metaphor for inventing change and adopting a new idea. The village transforms the meaning of a plant that had no value into the only worthy treasure.

For this last film, the artist has made a conceptual decision to invert the colours – the greenish water of Abydos turns purple and the white stars in the dark universe become black dots in a milky sky. The first two in the trilogy were filmed in black and white, following in the tradition of classic Egyptian movies. Like the metaphysical activities in the village of Al Araba Al Madfuna, the production of the artwork leaves a substantial part of its components undiscovered.

A catalogue will be published by Fondazione Merz, edited by Abdellah Karroum, presenting the entire series *Al Araba Al Madfuna* and their storyboards.

Wael Shawky is the winner of the first edition of the biannual **Mario Merz Prize**, the first and only international award for contemporary art and music. He was chosen by a jury composed of Manuel Borja-Villel, Massimiliano Gioni, Beatrice Merz and Lawrence Weiner.

A special thanks to Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar Museums, Doha, for having generously permitted us to screen the world premiere of *Al Araba Al Madfuna III*.

Coinciding with Shawky's exhibition at the Merz Foundation is a retrospective of the artist's work, curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Marcella Beccaria, at the Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea.

Supported by



Thank to Birra Menabrea, Biella

Notes to Editors

Fondazione Merz

Named after Mario Merz, the Fondazione Merz was established in Turin in 2005 as a centre for contemporary art with the intent to host exhibitions, events and education-related activities. The Fondazione alternates shows dedicated to Mario and Marisa Merz, with other major site-specific projects by national and international artists, who are invited to interact with the space of the Fondazione and its collections. The Fondazione also organises The Mario Merz Prize, a biennial prize that aims to recognize talents in the fields of contemporary art and music composition. The project creates a new network of exhibitions and music initiatives connecting Italy and Switzerland. The Fondazione is presided over by Beatrice Merz, and has an executive committee comprising Vicente Todolí (artistic advisor at Hangar Bicocca, Milano), Frances Morris (Director, Tate Modern, London), Mariano Boggia and Richard Flood (Director of Special Projects & Curator-at-Large of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York).

Wael Shawky

Wael Shawky was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1971. His practice spanning video, drawing, and performance are in-depth productions about the way history and mythology are written, offering crucial perspectives on contemporary narratives of uncertainty and change. Shawky is a major artist of his generation, developing an original art vocabulary dealing with global aesthetic and political issues. His work is exhibited internationally, most recently in solo exhibitions at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; MoMA PS1, New York (2015); K20, Düsseldorf (2014); Serpentine Gallery, London (2013); KW Berlin (2012); and large scale group exhibitions including Istanbul Biennial (2015); Sharjah Biennial (2013); and dOCUMENTA (13) (2012). His work is collected by public institutions including Tate Modern, London; MoMA, New York; MACBA, Barcelona; Qatar Museums, Doha.

Abdellah Karroum

Abdellah Karroum (born 1970, Morocco), researcher and curator, is the Director of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar since 2013. Karroum is the founder and artistic director of several art projects: *L'appartement 22*, an experimental space for exhibitions and artists' residencies founded in 2002 in Rabat, Morocco, and the *Le Bout Du Monde* art expeditions founded in 2000. He was Assistant Curator at the CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux (1993-1996), and has curated several major Biennale projects including: DAK'ART Biennial for African Contemporary Art (2006); the *Position Papers* program at the Gwangju Biennale (2008); the 3rd AiM International Biennale's exhibition in Marrakech (2009); *Intense Proximity* for La Triennale Paris (2012). Karroum was Artistic Director of the Biennale Benin in 2012.



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