Hala Elkoussy's 'Al Khawaga and Johnny Stories' takes us into the heart of colonial Cairo, the 'Paris on the Nile' as it was known, linking the history of Egypt with that of Britain, France and other powers from the late 19th to mid 20th centuries. The work presents this history as a way of thinking about the present-day metropolis. Its many archive photographs, diaries, periodicals, personal accounts, maps, books and film, together with period furniture, turn a humble shop on Sandgate Road into a walk-in Cairo chronicle of mixed fact and fiction. It offers a sideways glance at Egyptian identity as seen from the points of view of foreigners looking at Cairo and Cairenes looking at foreigners, and opens a discourse on the local and foreign.

In the Egyptian language the title hints at a conflation of different national stereotypes among foreigners and colonisers. Khawaga is an Arabic word referring to foreigners, especially Western tourists, mixing a sense of disdain with one of envy or curiosity. It can even be applied to Arabs who forsake their culture in an attempt to emulate the West. Johnny is the generic name used by Egyptians for British soldiers. Like Limey, Rosbif or Tommy, nicknames invented by different countries for British nationals, it denotes a particular relationship to the subject, which fluctuates between mockery and affection.

Elkoussy is not interested in presenting a slice of official history; rather, her approach is one of 'history from below', producing 'unauthoritative knowledge'1. Hers is a gathering of information that looks at history through the prism of personal recollection and ordinary people's narratives instead of history's traditional lodestars of individual great figures: "…my approach to this project carries within its folds a conviction that value lies in the incidentals, between the gaps and in what is omitted."2

Not unlike her installation 'On red nails, palm trees and other icons' for the Sharjah Biennial in 2009, the abundant material of her 'Khawaga and Johnny stories' becomes condensed into the intimate space of an archive and reading room, a project that demands the visitor's attention and involvement. Both works focus on Cairo, the huge, 17-million populated, and politically and physically fast-changing metropolitan heart of a renewing nation in a lately resurgent part of the world. Both necessarily involved extensive research and consultation.

In search of a city (in the papers of Sein) is the accompanying film. Made especially for the installation, an allegorical female character, Sein, materialises out of discarded archival papers, meanders through the streets of present-day Cairo. She muses on past and present in a kind of day-dream, roaming the city as if searching for her identity. The places she passes are important landmarks in Cairo's turbulent history, and are either evocations of foreign involvement, like Souq Bab El Louk, modelled on Paris's Les Halles, or testament to Egypt's struggle for independence, like Gawad Hosni Street or Talaat Harb Square, named after their eponymous heroes. The Flaneries are a melancholy and emblematic rumination on Cairo's turbulent past and as yet unclear future.

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