Hala Elkoussy
Myths and Legends Room: The Mount of Forgetfulness
2010
Stage set and HD video projection (25 min.), bronze and photograph

The mount referred to in Hala Elkoussy's *Myths & Legends Room – The Mount of Forgetfulness* is Mokattam Hill, a familiar site in Cairo next to the old centre, also known for some recent earthquakes that killed hundreds of people living at its foot. It figures in an obscure Caireen myth of the 11th century in which it is said to be granted the root of paradise by the Lord himself. In Elkoussy's film it is visited by the main protagonist, Rawi (Arabic for storyteller), who looks down from it upon contemporary, smoggy Cairo and sees that old stories are dying out. His aim – and Elkoussy's – is to save these stories, some of which are actually told and staged in the film through a number of reoccurring actors.
They are tales based on historical facts, rumors, religious beliefs, traditions and other myths and legends, conjuring up narratives which are responses from within the highly complex entity that is Cairo —to the modernization of this metropolis as it tries to catch up with western consumerist standards, to the grip of religious fundamentalism that directs it away from the cosmopolitanism during much of the 20th century, but also to the fact the state propaganda doesn't leave much room for a more objective and factual view on its modern, post-1952 history.
For example, in just one of the stories accompanied by specially made music on instruments that were traditionally used by Cairene storytellers, a mother grieves over her dead husband while she refers to the dictatorial reign of Gamer Nasser. The specific colors of that scene are defined by those of the Egyptian flag. Another story focuses on bread, of which a price increase in the 70s caused major riots in one of the few instances the voice of the people, usually ignored by the state, exerted some power. Here the typical Balladi loaf of bread is immortalized in bronze as another part of the installation.

In the end, *Mount of Forgetfulness*, screened in the errant theatre that was also used a set in the film, gives room to the communal memory of the common crowd of Cairo, through a versatile Arabic language which can make even the oldest tale sound very contemporary. Parts of the film will particularly make sense to Arabs, for whom Cairo since long functions as the cultural centre. But one doesn't need to understand it all to grasp its level of sophistication, which makes it an indigenous product of that very centre.

Hala Elkoussy (Cairo, 1974) studied at Goldsmiths College, London (2001-2002) and at the Rijksakademie of Fine Arts in Amsterdam in 2005-2006. She had solo exhibitions at Townhouse Gallery for Contemporary Art, Cairo (2005); Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (2006) and Goteborg Konsthall, Sweden (2009). Her work also featured among others in the travelling exhibition 'Snap Judgments' (2006-2008), at the Istanbul Biennial (2005) and the Sharjah Biennial (2009). In 2010 she was co-recipient of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize in Dubai.

Jelle Bouwhuis