

# The RAMI 14.0

## MOULTAQAYAT ALEXANDRIA

### MASTER CLASS Nabil Boutros, photographer and scenographer

**Master class issue:** *Nabil Boutros will present his relationship to Egypt; distance at a time, back and reunion, empathy, questions and answers in images, till his latest works.*

**Guests:** Young artists fine arts faculty students, "Walkscape" workshop's participants.

**Nabil Boutros :** Born in Cairo, lives between Paris and Cairo. Painter and set designer, he uses photographic medium since '86. His artwork has a main concern: Egypt and Middle East. Since several years, his works are more involved and have a critique view. His set design experience leads him now to installation works. [www.nabil-boutros.com](http://www.nabil-boutros.com)

#### Reflections (1) Multaqayat RAMI Day 1 : 5 June 2014

The Multaqayat sessions opened with a presentation by artist Nabil Boutros who gave a brief overview of his artistic process and tried to shed some light on his artistic preoccupations and concerns. His career can be roughly divided into three periods each with different artistic engagements and different uses of different mediums. He started as a trained artist in oil painting, primarily concerned with composition and in composing an image that invites the audience to create a certain meaningful and durational relationship to it. Like all artists he was confronted with the dilemma of reconciling his classical training and classical medium with with the ever evolving medium of the photograph. Inspired to make a shift to this new medium, black and white photography, he took along his interest in the contrast of light and shadow, 'chiaroscuro', and the depth that this contrasts creates, inviting a continuous contemplation from the audience in discovering those "obscure" parts of the image, and allowing this state of meditation to take place.

Boutros explains that his artistic motivation remained largely to discover. He was moved by his curiosity to interact with the people, to witness their stories and to document it in ways that give them a certain presence. This can be seen within the realm of human interest photography, a medium that Boutros emphasizes was made possible by the very technological setup of pre-digital cameras. The fact that pre-digital cameras required a certain temporality to operate and to process, made it possible for him to have a true "encounter" with his subjects. He goes on to explain that because of the "slowness" of the process he was able to have lengthy and deep conversations with his photographic subjects, in a process of mutual influence. However, Boutros is not nostalgic about the pre-digital age. He stresses that photography is a medium that is constantly redefined by technology and not vice-versa.

The black and white photographs were the main medium for a series of projects that he started in the 1990s, and that range from popular forms of music (Of Cairo, of the Night 1990-1993), to landmarks of Alexandria (Cairo-Alexandria 2004) , to religious and ritual practices of the Coptic community (Coptes du Nil 1997-2004). In all these projects a strong documentary and human interest concept, guides the artistic process and does show a painterly quality about the work, and a profound preoccupation with the notion of composition. This became more evident when he started using composite images to create "one frame". As a way to further complexify the relationship of the audience to the subject and the work he is dealing with, the multiple perspectives, parallel images, seem to problematise an easy or fast reaction to the work presented.

<http://www.nabil-boutros.com/index.php/travaux/nabil-boutros-coptes-du-nil.html>

A clear rupture appears in the work, after 2005, when social, political and cultural conditions transformed in a way that altered the way he relates to Egypt and its people, on one hand, And on the other hand the way his work was being received by colleagues, by which they were critical of his "grim" excavations of Egypt and its society. Those colleagues kept stressing the need to focus on the other side of Egypt, the rise of the neoliberal city, Egypt as a modern city. The malls, the new compounds, the rising consumerism,...etc. We begin to see "colour" and with it a sarcastic take on this "modern reality".

<http://www.nabil-boutros.com/index.php/travaux/nabil-boutros-egypt-is-a-modern-country.html>

The many paradoxes of this "modern Egypt" seem to be approached with a certain kind of humor that unravels the obvious and discordant reality. A series of projects, all colour photography range from personal portraits with Boutros dressed as the many stereotypes of Egyptian society, (Egyptians, 2011) to recycled photographs from the 1980s that had calligraphic patterns of two contrasting words (paradise – hell for example) superimposed on top of each other (Beyond , 2013). The cynical turn ushered in different preoccupations and different interests. His artistic motivation was no longer to record, or document, or to fashion a certain kind of encounter, but rather a clear critique, a statement against an order and a reality that is disheartening as it is puzzling.

<http://www.nabil-boutros.com/index.php/travaux/nabil-boutros-beyond-36.html>

The second session was presentations by participants from the Fine Arts school in Alexandria, in a workshop organised in collaboration with the school of Fine Arts in Aix-en-Provence in the Frame of RAMI network. The workshop, titled, Walkscape, was an attempt to experiment with different ways of mapping one's city and the many connections one has to it. It aims at allowing students, young artists, to go out themselves and experience the city, as citizens and people, in ways they would not have done, whether in their pedagogical context or everyday reality. Of primary interest to the workshop and its participants is mapping an "affective" relationship to space. In the true sense of "affect", to be moved, to be affected in a certain way, and hence moved to action.

The participants come from different disciplines: architecture, video art, photography, painting,...etc. Each bringing their own medium and its concerns to the ways in which they chose to map their relationship to their city and the space they inhabit. The final product, "a map", is a collection of nodes, demarcated by different districts of the city, and each node is orbited by a constellation of videos each representing a different experience for the different participants. The project can be seen as an exercise, rather than a finished or developed piece, but what it brings forth is an interesting potential for interdisciplinarity and the many possibilities that each medium can bring to articulate different experiences and contributes to a much needed openness for these participants, whose institutional context might not be make such excursions and experimentations possible.

*Walkscape* : [www.ramimed.com/Walkscape.html](http://www.ramimed.com/Walkscape.html)

A question was raised, after the presentation, by one of the audience members regarding the outcome of the workshop. The audience member asked the workshop participants if after finishing the workshop they were inspired to write their scores, or scripts and has the ideas discussed during the workshop inspired them to consider developing a "narrative score" of some kind. A discussion then ensued on the difference between the idea of a filmic script, or score and the idea of a non-linear narrative that might be a salient feature of video art and other multimedia practices. The audience member seemed to be unfamiliar with

the many ways of constructing narrative with multiple media that do not necessarily adhere to the same structures of mainstream filmmaking and production.

To present an example of a project that illustrates the use of several media in non-linear format, Nabil Boutros briefly discussed the project *Voyageur- Alexandria-Marseille*, that was a collaboration between Claudine Dussollier, Nabil Boutros, Jean-François Rivière, Alaa Khaled and Salwa Rashad. It was an investigation of the many relationships between Alexandria and Marseilles through the continuous movement and travelling between the two cities. The concept is expressed through interrelated building blocks of the dominoes, each block combines three practices or more: text, music, photography, film,..etc, it serves as a point of intersection between these mediums. The dominoes then serve as an “organisational principle” to the work, that creates a certain sequence that leads to another. Through many conversations with people in both cities, certain keywords emerged to encapsulate that experience and guide how the practices are involved or connected through these building blocks.

Both Dussollier and Boutros stressed the importance of communicating over the mere fact of linguistic intelligibility, as something they both learned about during that project and that goes beyond the conventional formats of creating narratives, whether for films or video art. Boutros ended the presentation by saying, “the intention of understanding must be there if communication is to happen”. That seemed to sum up, more or less the questions and thoughts of the first day.

*Le Voyageur* : <http://reas.zinclafrique.org/alex-mrs/>

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<http://ramimed.com/Moultaqayat-RAMI-14-0-Alexandrie.html>

