

# DAILY NEWS

EGYPT

## Colonialism and technical difficulties at Darb1718's 'Saturated Souls'



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Ramadan. For the hungry, frustrated masses, the heat of Cairo in mid-August can fatigue a gentle soul more than the daily impediments in this magical, fetid city. For those desiring a diversion, Darb 1718 is currently holding an exhibition that will satiate the weary visitor. The show, "Saturated Souls," is the culmination of a two-week workshop between Artists' Residency Egypt and Artup, from Pittsburgh, USA. The child of this union is the Firefly Tunnel Project, brainchild of American artist Tavia La Follette. Under the many and sundry themes of "border crossing, interrupted relationships, the perception between reality and illusion, the beauty and absurdity of culture," the works understandably seem to share very little in common.

This is not to say that collaboration did not occur between participants in realizing the projects. Yet, the autonomy of the artists means the pieces stand without the buttress of the group's body of work, resulting in independent successes and failures.

One of the show's most successful pieces was the politically prescient and subtle

installation by artist Amado Alfadni, "Passport Agency." Set in a register office, the installation is a performance piece questioning ideas of identity, nationality, power and change in the run-up to the referendum for independence between Southern and Northern Sudan.

Alfadni, an artist originally hailing from the northern Sudanese city of Dongola, stands inside the cramped office issuing United States of Sudan passports to those who wish to bear them. The passports require no more information than a name, and a large crowd gathers outside the barred window. In the artist's statement, dated Jan. 9, 2011, after the results of the referendum, he calls the "civil split ... a division of the country by race and religion."

Alfadni wanted to provide an overlay of sound with aggressive stamping and paper rustling, creating a sensually overwhelming experience for the applicant. Unfortunately, it didn't quite work.

When observing the integrative motivations for Alfadni's piece, and the fact that the 'applicants' are Egyptians, the situation becomes incredibly ironic.

Outside the office are five passports hung on the wall. The first four — in different colors with different names and even different languages — chart the trajectory of history in Sudan through colonial occupation and political change. In English and Arabic, we see the Republic of the Sudan and The Democratic Republic of the Sudan set on different colors. Nothing appears fixed, save for the motif of the eagle emblem overlooking the entire shebang, one that greatly resembles Egypt's own flag.

There are, indeed, many kinds of colonization. Considering that Alfadni's piece is part of an American workshop aiming at exploring frictions between the Middle East and the US — the results of which will debut in a group show in Pittsburgh on Sept. 11 — it sounds worryingly similar to "frictions between the East and West," or the infamous clash of civilizations.

This, in itself, is colonization through representation. Framing the art of the Egyptian artists as somehow addressing the US' own preoccupations with difference, and the Arab world, seems unjust since the reception of the Egyptian art will be skewed by nature of their passports, in effect.

Another technical difficulty culminating in an unintentional success was Corey Sattler's conversation piece. On a ledge outside the second floor of the gallery, Sattler had set up a surreal, living room-scape, complete with life-size machine-featured stuffed family members surrounding a television.

Participants would sit in the spaces not taken up by the prickly make-believe people watching the television, which would project a live-feed of the real people performing the same activity, listening to a description of what they were doing there, and what the point of the whole thing was.

The show ended up being inadvertently hilarious and superbly uncomfortable, as participants would join a very frustrated American artist sitting in the ruins of his failed

installation, moaning about how it was “supposed to be” and reproving a few bewildered Egyptian attendants for asking the artist where he was from.

A sign on the door leading to the space invited participants to ask questions about anything piquing their curiosity. This piece was brilliant for revealing the real skeleton of an installation, and also the ego of the artist within it. Furthermore, in an alternative way to Alfadni's piece, the viewer saw the way cultural framing affects the reception of the work. Complaining to Egyptians about Egyptians in Egypt seemed to fit with the stereotype repeated frequently here, yet witnessing this within a work of art provided a gravitas to the kind of tedious conversations all of us encounter regularly.

Having the opportunity to talk to an unhappy artist is familiar experience frequently offered to dwellers of Cairo's downtown bohemian circus. But the circumstances of this installation, in addition to the cross-cultural misunderstandings, made it unbearable and at the same time, totally fabulous to revel in.

To add further irony to the opening, Alfadni lost his own passport in an Egyptian taxi earlier in the day, in many ways, figuratively flipping the finger further to the (national) identity that the passport presupposes, and the relations it entails to the one we reside in. Shows like this one here at Darb remind the viewer, and artists alike, that in many ways, life is one giant technical glitch, and things rarely work out the way they are supposed to.