

TECHNOLOGY, TIME, AND THE STATE:
THE AESTHETICS OF HYDROPOWER
IN POSTCOLONIAL EGYPT

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Kristina L. Centore
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Thesis Approvals:

Dr. Emily Neumeier, Thesis Advisor, Department of Art History
Dr. James Merle Thomas, Department of Art History

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the work of Hamed Owais, Tahia Halim, and Inji Efflatoun, three artists who were active in Egypt during its era of decolonization following the 1952 Revolution. Using the large-scale public works project of the Aswan High Dam as a lens, this study focuses on the ways in which the construction of the dam and the social, political, and technological changes that it caused were linked to the ways in which Egyptian artists envisioned and employed concepts of time in new ways in their work. Additionally, artists in Egypt, existing outside of the binary of American abstract expressionism and Soviet socialist realism, employed and synthesized new aesthetic ideas in order to achieve their social and political goals. Fundamentally, this thesis argues that the blurred lines of these aesthetics, like the Aswan High Dam itself, reflect the geopolitical tensions that pressurized Egypt in the global Cold War era as it sought independence from imperial influence, and that they capture the ways in which artists in Egypt incorporated particular understandings of temporality into their work during a time of modernization. A close consideration of the work of these artists provides a window into a nuanced understanding of the intersections between aesthetics, politics, and technology in postcolonial Egypt.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Catalyzed by the 23 July Revolution of 1952 that led to Egypt's independence from colonial powers, and Gamal Abdel Nasser's subsequent political ascent, the construction of the Aswan High Dam (*al-Saad al-Aali*) defined a transformative era for a newly sovereign Egypt. Plans for the High Dam began to move forward in earnest shortly after Nasser's 1956 victory in nationalizing the Suez Canal—a further step in securing Egypt's self-sufficiency. Initiated, therefore, at a time of great optimism, the High Dam held symbolic meaning beyond its practical role as a project of national infrastructure that would impound and convert the flowing water of the Nile into hydroelectric power. As an emblem of Egypt's self-determination, the High Dam was widely depicted in a range of media throughout the period of its construction that lasted roughly from 1960 to 1970. In this way, the High Dam encapsulated a cultural moment in which postcolonial liberation struggles and technologies of modernization were linked, both to each other, and to the myriad aesthetics present in the work of Egyptian artists active at the time. It was also fundamentally connected to themes evoking Egypt's heritage and landscape in an effort to propel the nation into a new, modernized, and independent future. Nasser himself summed up these aims succinctly, bridging millennia with words that connected the pharaonic to the present day: "In antiquity we built pyramids for the dead. Now we will build new pyramids for the living."¹

¹ This quote is reproduced in Nancy Y. Reynolds, "Building the Past: Rockscapes and the Aswan High Dam in Egypt," in *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed.

In this thesis, I examine the relationship between the construction of the High Dam and particular aesthetic choices made by artists in postwar Egypt.² My analysis focuses on the linkages between technology, time, and the state in the work of Hamed Owais, Tahia Halim, and Inji Efflatoun, and considers how the technopolitics of the High Dam factored into their work.³ New conceptions of past, present, and future were connected to the intervention of the High Dam, which led to widespread changes in revolutionary Egypt by spreading electricity throughout the nation, remapping the ecology of the landscape surrounding the Nile, and altering the conditions of labor for Egypt's peasant populations.⁴ These temporal considerations were also integrated into the

Alan Mikhail (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 181. Curiously, the primary source for this statement has proved difficult to locate, lending it a somewhat mythical aura.

² Though I utilize the term “postwar” in this study to frame the general time period upon which I focus, the concept of “postwar” requires evaluation when applied to a global framework, as it does not fit neatly in regards to nations experiencing decolonization and related violence during this period. Hannah Feldman rightly points this out, and takes the issue as a point of departure, in *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). See also Okwui Enwezor's articulation of the “postwar” as a specifically global condition in his introductory essay, “The Judgment of Art: Postwar and Artistic Worldliness,” in *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–65*, eds. Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes (London and New York: Prestel Publishing Ltd., 2016), 21–38.

³ As Timothy Mitchell writes, “large dams offered a way to build not just irrigation and power systems, but nation-states themselves” (Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Technopolitics, Modernity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), 44). Much as Mitchell's concept of technopolitics connects hydropower to the nation, an incorporation of this schema into aesthetics signals the ways in which the politics of non-alignment manifested in art production. Additionally, for more on technopolitics beyond the Cold War binary, see Gabrielle Hecht, ed., *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

⁴ See Elizabeth Bishop, “Control Room: Visible and Concealed Spaces of the Aswan High Dam,” in *Landscapes of Development: The Impact of Modernization Discourses on the Physical Environment of the Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. Panayiota Pyla (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 72-87. For more on the conditions of labor surrounding the construction of the High Dam and their connections to aesthetics, see Patrick Kane, *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt: Aesthetics, Ideology, and Nation-Building* (London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd., 2013), especially Kane's discussion of “representations of the Aswan Dam in Egyptian arts as a discourse on the dialectical relation of the state, region, and labor” (Kane, 139) in Chapter 6: “Conflicts in the Arts Over Upper Egypt: ‘Abd al-Hadi al-Gazzar and His Contemporaries,” 139-171.

formation and employment of various aesthetics in postwar Egypt. Connected both to histories of Western modernisms as well as to networks between what may still conventionally be considered peripheries in Western art history, painters working in Egypt during this period employed a variety of styles that existed in a unique way beyond the generally accepted Cold War binary of Western abstract expressionism and Soviet socialist realism.⁵

My analysis takes the form of three thematic case studies. First, I examine the ambiguities present in a seemingly propagandistic representation of the High Dam by Hamed Owais that references Mexican Muralism and is executed in a style akin to a Constructivist aesthetic. Next, I consider a series of representations, painted as a result of grants given out by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, of the High Dam construction and of the Nubian villages that the dam replaced.⁶ In particular I focus on Tahia Halim's employment of a mixture of social realism and expressionism to document and represent a sense of truth in the present moment that manifests in her depictions of the Nubian people who were evicted from their villages at the site of the High Dam construction. Last, I posit a relationship between Inji Efflatoun's "white light" paintings, which explore

⁵ For more on the role of the United States and MoMA, in particular, in the global dissemination of abstract expressionist painting for Cold War political aims, see Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12, 10 (June 1974): 39-41.

⁶ The work of Abdel Hadi al-Gazzar and its relationship to his time spent at the High Dam site after receiving a grant from the Ministry of Culture has been examined in several studies which have been formative in my treatment of the topic. See Avinoam Shalem, "Man's Conquest of Nature: Al-Gazzar, Sartre, and Nasser's Great Aswan Dam," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 32 (Spring 2013), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/526468>; Kane, Chapter 6: "Conflicts in the Arts Over Upper Egypt: 'Abd al-Hadi al-Gazzar and His Contemporaries,'" in *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt*, 139-171; and Alex Dika Seggerman, Chapter 4: "The Beauty of Uncertainty: Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar and the 'Return' of Religion in Art," in *Modernism on the Nile: Art in Egypt Between the Islamic & the Contemporary* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 141-178.

the concept of Egyptian identity through a reclaiming of Orientalist abstraction that evokes a timeless past, and the modernization enacted by the High Dam.

While Owais, Halim, and Efflatoun represent three important case studies within a broader history of Egyptian modernism, their artworks addressing the construction of the High Dam and its myriad adjacent effects represent only a fraction of the many depictions of the modern transformation of the Nile. In particular, photography also played a significant role on the international stage in documenting and disseminating images of the construction of the High Dam. Yet an examination of the practices and stylistic evolutions of these three artists as viewed through the lens of the High Dam construction provides a unique window into the cultural landscape of postcolonial Egypt. My study of Egyptian art with a focus on the Nasser years not only contributes to a greater understanding of the fabric of interwoven political and social urgencies in Egypt during the global Cold War era, but it is also a catalyst for brushing standard narratives of Western art history against the grain.⁷ Like other efforts in the emerging field of the Global Modern—and specifically engaged with a growing body of art historical scholarship that critically re-evaluates the politics and aesthetics of non-alignment—my investigation contributes to broadening the scope of what constitutes the story of modernism outside of Western centers. By a consideration of the role that hydropower played in postwar Egyptian aesthetics—including its relationship to the conversion of Egypt’s natural resources into electricity, and the way in which this was connected to

⁷ Here I reference Walter Benjamin’s concept that the task of the historical materialist is to “brush history against the grain.” See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1968), 257.

themes of modernization, temporality, and political non-alignment—my project solidifies Egyptian modern art within a place of both local and global importance that adds to broader projects of expanding and revising the history of modern and contemporary art.

A Sociopolitical Historiography of Egyptian Modernism in Brief

As Elizabeth Miller writes, “Egypt’s history and historiography of the fine arts are deeply imbricated with the country’s particular experience of colonialism, nationalism, and decolonization.”⁸ Prior to the time period of my study, modern art in Egypt had manifested for nearly the past century at the intersections between a plurality of aesthetic paradigms. These particularities included various stylistic iterations within the realms of Western academicism, neo-Pharaonic imagery, surrealism, social realism, and abstraction, among others. Still-evolving after WWII, such aesthetic intersections were in part traces left by Egypt’s history as a contested space both territorially and culturally. Following the 1952 Revolution, Egyptian nationalism—which would soon also incorporate a broader pan-Arabism—led to a conception of an independent nation that was free of a long history of control by imperial powers. For Nasser, one critical way to secure Egypt’s independence and to shift Egypt into the role of a non-aligned center was through the establishment of new networks of artistic exchange, like the pan-

⁸ Elizabeth Miller, “Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in Egyptian Modern Art,” *ARTMargins* 5, no. 1 (February 2016): 62.

Mediterranean Alexandria Biennale, and through the construction of large-scale projects of national infrastructure, such as the Aswan High Dam.⁹

Since the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798, Egypt's modern history has not been one story, but a confluence of multiple narratives depending on whose vantage point it is viewed from. This refracted and unstable idea of Egypt's history, marked by imperialism, revolution, and the geopolitical tensions implicit in the cartographic power of the demarcation of national borders is in many ways mirrored throughout the Southwest Asia / North Africa region (the "Middle East"). Beginning in the sixteenth century, Egypt became part of the Ottoman Empire; yet, various forms of imperial influence coexisted there and were especially intertwined with the formation of Egypt as a distinct nation-state.¹⁰ Following the Napoleonic excursions of 1798 and the production of the *Description de l'Égypte*, French influence took on a major role culturally in Egypt.

This invasion by the French marked the beginning of a complex entanglement between colonial powers and the gradual development of the idea of Egyptian self-determination through nationalist movements. In 1882, British economic investment in the Suez Canal led to the British occupation of Egypt in an attempt to "restore order" against the 'Urabist uprising in which Egyptian nationalists sought to overthrow imperial

⁹ For more on the Alexandria Biennale, see Dina A. Ramadan, "The Alexandria Biennale and Egypt's Shifting Mediterranean," In *Mediterranean Modernisms: Intercultural Exchange and Aesthetic Development*, eds. Adam J. Goldwyn and Renée M. Silverman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Also see Anthony Gardner & Charles Green, "Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global," *Third Text* 27:4 (2013), 442-455.

¹⁰ For a history of how Egypt's borders were distinguished, over the course of many years and among negotiations between many actors, see Matthew H. Ellis, *Desert Borderland: The Making of Modern Egypt and Libya* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

power.¹¹ Though the country was still nominally under both the rule of an Egyptian khedive and under the jurisdiction of the Ottomans at the time, the British established control over the nation. At the beginning of World War I, the British officially removed the Ottoman powers and established Egypt as their protectorate.

These parallel and competing forms of rule modulated art production in Egypt throughout the first half of the 20th century. In standard narratives, modern art in Egypt began with the founding of the School of Fine Arts by Prince Youssef Kamal in 1908, which emphasized Eurocentric academic training based on Orientalist painting and Italian Impressionism.¹² The School of Fine Arts also utilized French as its main language of instruction.¹³ The establishment of the School of Fine Arts was soon followed by Mahmoud Mokhtar's invoking of Egypt's pharaonic heritage in his iconic statue *Nahdat Misr (Egypt Awakening)* of 1928, dovetailing with modernism's broader projects of looking towards the past in order to create the new.¹⁴ Here, with Mokhtar, this project took place on the stage of the nation, claiming pharaonic timelessness as Egypt's own.

¹¹ For background on the construction of the Suez Canal, which was orchestrated by the Frenchman Ferdinand De Lesseps in the 1860s, see Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Colossal: Engineering the Suez Canal, Statue of Liberty, Eiffel Tower, and Panama Canal* (Pittsburgh and New York City: Periscope Publishing, Ltd., 2012).

¹² Mostafa El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia: A Life's Journey* (Cairo: Gallery Picasso, 2014), 12. For a concise description of the School of Fine Arts, also see Claire Davies, "The Egyptian School of Fine Arts," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, accessed December 16, 2019, <https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/the-egyptian-school-of-fine-arts>.

¹³ Miller, "Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism," 63. Miller also points out that the idea of the founding of the School of Fine Arts as an origin story only gained traction in the 1950s as a way to bolster the national narrative (Miller, "Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism," 67).

¹⁴ For more on the early years of modern art in Egypt, Mokhtar and Mahmoud Said in particular, see Seggerman, *Modernism on the Nile*.

However, Egypt was still a site of cosmopolitanism in the interwar years. Beginning in earnest in 1938 with the launch of the *Long Live Degenerate Art* manifesto, the formation of the surrealist *Art et Liberté* (*jama'at al-famm wal hurriyyah*, or “Art and Liberty”) group would have a wide influence on aesthetics in many subsequent art movements in Egypt.¹⁵ Led by protagonists like Kamel Telmisany, Ramsès Younan, and Georges Henein, *Art et Liberté* rebelled against bourgeois rationalism and academicism in favor of individual liberation, and promoted the idea of connecting art to social engagement.¹⁶ *Art et Liberté*'s concerns were also international: the group loudly decried the fascism that was spreading throughout Europe at the time, and, in what may be considered a proxy war of avant gardes, *Art et Liberté* even clashed with Italian Futurist factions that were aligned with Mussolini's endeavors and were stationed in Cairo.¹⁷

Egypt's sociopolitical landscape changed in earnest with the 1952 Revolution. The charismatic Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had been a protagonist in the revolution, became the new president of Egypt in 1954. With the 1955 Bandung Conference, Nasser solidified his role as a leading figure in global decolonization movements as well as in the Non-Aligned Movement that stood in opposition to both Western and Soviet powers during the Cold War.¹⁸ Egypt's victory in the Suez Crisis of 1956 paved the way for

¹⁵ Sam Bardaouil, *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2017), 3.

¹⁶ Bardaouil, 1-3.

¹⁷ For a discussion of Futurism in Egypt, see Bardaouil, 60-84.

¹⁸ For a history of non-alignment and its origins in the Bandung Conference, see Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010).

Nasser's policies of Arab Nationalism, which, however, were to become all the more oppressive locally in their efforts to resist foreign influence in Egypt.

The Suez Crisis had been a response by President Nasser to the United States's pulling support for the Aswan High Dam.¹⁹ Subsequently, after Egypt had defeated Britain, France, and Israel in the Tripartite Aggression, the Soviet government offered their financial support and expertise for the dam construction.²⁰ The dam, built between 1960 and 1970, harnessed Soviet-engineered modern technology (designed by the Hydroproject Research Institute in Moscow, or "Gidroproekt") to generate hydroelectric power and, in the process, control the flooding of the Nile that had occurred annually for millennia.²¹ At the same time as it was a symbol of Egyptian independence, the dam was an intervention that changed labor relations in Egypt, reshaped the landscape, and was a radical blow to the lived experience of the Nubian people, who were forced to evacuate their ancestral villages on the banks of the Nile to make way for the dam's construction.

These legacies of rupture and changing hands of power have been reflected in the way that art history writing has attempted to construct a chronology or timeline of "art from the Arab world."²² For the contemporary artist Walid Raad, for example, this has

¹⁹ Bishop, *Control Room*, 74.

²⁰ Bishop, 74.

²¹ Shalem gives the dates for the construction of the dam as 1960-1970 in "Man's Conquest of Nature," 25. Timothy Mitchell alternately provides the dates as 1964-71 in *Rule of Experts*, 45. It is possible that this discrepancy in dating is due to the fact that there were multiple stages of construction of the project, which I will outline further in this thesis. For more on the role of the Soviet government in the construction of the dam, see Bishop, "Control Room," 74.

²² As I will discuss further, debates regarding how to delineate and categorize modern and contemporary art production in the Southwest Asia / North Africa region are currently ongoing.

manifested in the form of a fictional archive that reflects the trauma and illogic of an existence splintered by the violence of the Lebanese Civil Wars. While the Lebanon of factionalist violence considered in the work of Raad is a far cry from the politics of revolutionary Egypt, the way in which Raad probes the concept of the archive and the impossibility of reconstructing history resonates throughout approaches curators and art historians have taken in the writing of an art history of modernisms from the region. As Omar Kholeif writes, “national cultural institutions in states such as Morocco, Egypt, and Lebanon often emerge and disappear in response to the extenuating social and political circumstances, without a transparent roadmap for their reconstitution.”²³ Using the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt and its accompanying Egyptian Museum in Cairo as an example, Kholeif writes that despite the collection holding the largest trove of art from the area, including over 12,000 works of modern and contemporary art, there is no archival index or record of the collection, and most of the collection is in storage, inaccessible to the public.²⁴ However, as Dina Ramadan suggests, such narratives of a “lack” in terms of a recorded art history in Egypt may have acquired more legitimacy than they actually hold. Ramadan writes that this way of conceptualizing Egyptian art history, including an ever-present anxiety that a “decline” in the quality of Egyptian art was looming just around the corner, has been in place since the founding of the Egyptian art publication *Sawt el-Fannan* in the 1950s and “continues to permeate and limit the

²³ Omar Kholeif, “Tracing Routes: Debating Modernism, Mapping the Contemporary,” in *Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary: Works from the Barjeel Art Foundation*, ed. Omar Kholeif with Candy Stobbs (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Munich, London, and New York: Prestel Verlag, 2015), 17.

²⁴ Kholeif, 17.

field of Egyptian art history and criticism.”²⁵ These points of discourse that relate to “broken” chronologies are a useful way of framing a discussion of the relationships between aesthetics, nationalist politics, and the invoking of temporal concepts that are present in Egyptian art during the Nasser years.

Egypt and the “Global Modern”

My endeavor to investigate the postwar era in Egyptian art fits within larger efforts in the newly emerging field of the “Global Modern.” This turn has been initiated in part by exhibitions including the 2016-2017 exhibition *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and Atlantic, 1945-1965* at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, among others, and echoes an expansion backwards in historical time from the “global contemporary” to the “global modern,” based on the influential writings of art historians and curators like Kobena Mercer and Okwui Enwezor.

In the introduction to the anthology *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, Mercer writes of the importance of in-depth examinations of the work of artists on their own terms and within their own frameworks of nation and culture, rather than as add-ons to a Eurocentric art historical canon.²⁶ For Mercer, especially of import is also a consideration

²⁵ Dina A. Ramadan, “Cultivating Taste, Creating the Modern Subject: Sawt el-Fannan and Art Criticism in 1950s Egypt,” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 42, no. 1/2 (Summer/Winter 2008): 30, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23063539>.

²⁶ Kobena Mercer, introduction to *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London: Institute of International Visual Arts and Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 7. Also see Prita Meier, “Authenticity and its Modernist Discontents: The Colonial Encounter and African and Middle Eastern Art History,” *The Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (“Visual Arts and Art Practices in the Middle East,” Spring 2010): 12-45. Meier writes that “new work must continue to contextualize cultural practice in more precise

of the cross-cultural and colonial history of modern art. Sifting through such nebulous terms as “the global” and “the international,” Mercer proposes “the cosmopolitan” as a way of describing the interplay of modern art and cross-cultural intersections. Such an investigation asks, in a broader sense, for a tracing of a plurality of aesthetics that existed beyond the Cold War binary.²⁷

As Alex Dika Seggerman has noted, Egyptian modern art finds itself historiographically in a particular iteration of the Global Modern that comes at the intersection between the fields of the Islamic and the Contemporary in art history.²⁸ However, Nada Shabout has discounted the idea that modern Egyptian art should be considered in continuity with Islamic art, and argues that it is rather connected to the formation of an Arab aesthetic that is a reclaiming of “Eastern” visual motifs as a response to modernity, writing in *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* that “to claim that modern Arab art is a continuation of Islamic art is absurd despite obvious commonalities perceived by some as a sign of continuity.”²⁹

In *Modernism on the Nile*, Seggerman instead argues for the importance of considering the lived experience of Islam as an element within modern Egyptian

localities, but also seek to capture how artistic practices are claim-making strategies within a shifting web of new and old forms of territoriality” (Meier, 36).

²⁷ Examining post-WWII aesthetics through the lens of multiplicity was the central concept of the exhibition *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and Atlantic, 1945-1965*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes. See the exhibition catalogue for an in-depth exploration of this methodology: Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes, eds., *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965* (London and New York: Prestel Publishing Ltd., 2016).

²⁸ Seggerman, *Modernism on the Nile*, 8.

²⁹ Nada M. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 14-15.

painting.³⁰ At the same time, Seggerman establishes a framework she terms “constellational” to describe the way in which artists in Egypt bore finite connections to specific artistic networks across national borders.³¹ Comparable to Mercer’s notion of the “cosmopolitan,” Seggerman distills cross-cultural interactions to points of specificity. In this thesis I emphasize these connections to show that Egyptian modernism is not separate from that of Europe or the U.S., but rather is an integral part of a comprehensive history that depended upon specific interactions between individuals, governmental projects of diplomacy and soft power, and international networks between affinity groups like women’s rights activists that made exchanges across borders possible.

Relevant to an incorporation of politics into the “constellational” nature of global modernisms, notions of artistic interconnections across continents are elucidated in Okwui Enwezor’s essay “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition.” Here, Enwezor defines “the postcolonial constellation” as the framework marking the production of modern and contemporary art in global terms, extending the concept of art-making beyond what has previously been conceptualized as a linear narrative of Euro-American art history. As Enwezor writes, the “postcolonial constellation” is a way of understanding contemporary art as “refracted, not just from the specific site of culture and history but also—and in a more critical sense—from the

³⁰ Seggerman, *Modernism on the Nile*, 10, 3-8.

³¹ Seggerman, 10, 3-8.

standpoint of a complex geopolitical configuration that defines all systems of production and relations of exchange as a consequence of globalization after imperialism.”³²

In this sense, Egyptian modernism is located both locally and internationally: not simply because of its physical site in Egypt or because of its physical reach through international exhibitions, but because of the always already extant interaction of the local and the global that define the modern world (and indeed, stretch back even further still, as scholarship in fields such as the “global early modern” show us). In this instance, a fuller understanding of Egypt’s unique place in art, politics and history serves to decentralize Euro-American narratives of modern art and create something entirely different, generating a greater understanding of the stakes of Egyptian art production during a time of reckoning with the ongoing entanglements of imperialism and colonialism that define modernity.³³

³² Okwui Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 207-234.

³³ The concept of “ongoing entanglements” here references the projects of artist, poet, activist, and musician Camae Ayewa, especially her collaborative music project “Irreversible Entanglements.”

CHAPTER 2
HOLDING ON TO THE FUTURE:
HAMED OWAIS AND THE HIGH DAM

As a centerpiece of Egypt's struggle for liberation from imperial control by Western powers, the Aswan High Dam contributed to a new definition of Egyptian national identity at the same time as its ripple effects affected the politics and culture of the greater Arab world.³⁴ In the words of Avinoam Shalem, the '60s in Egypt were "born, so to speak, under the sign of the Aswan Dam."³⁵ But by 1965, Egypt was on the brink of a recession following a significant overhaul of its system of land ownership that had, at first, successfully funneled peasant farmers into the massive public works project of constructing the High Dam.³⁶ These workers, Sa'idi (Upper Egyptian) as well as other Delta *tarahil* laborers, were forced into migrancy by policies of land reform and redistribution that had been enacted by the Egyptian government.³⁷ Organized into groups that were deployed in phases to the dam's site beginning in 1960, the laborers were quickly put to work.³⁸ By the middle of the decade, however, the majority of the dam's construction had been completed, and Egypt was sent into a massive economic downturn as migrant workers found themselves out of a job, and with their previous way

³⁴ Shalem, "Man's Conquest of Nature," 21.

³⁵ Shalem, 25.

³⁶ Kane, *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt*, 141.

³⁷ Kane, 141-142.

³⁸ Kane, 141-142.

of life profoundly restructured.³⁹ It is noteworthy, then, that 1965 marked the year in which the Egyptian social realist painter Hamed Owais (1919-2011) painted the work *At the Aswan Dam*—a work that, on its surface, bespeaks a propagandistic belief in the government project of the High Dam construction.⁴⁰

Owais's painting depicts the building of the High Dam in a style that shows the influence of Mexican Muralism and edges towards the geometric compositional structure of a Constructivist photomontage.⁴¹ In the work, laborers are engaged in the construction of a towering electrical power infrastructure high above the reservoir Lake Nasser.⁴² As confirmation of the stage of construction that Owais intended to portray, the installation of the electrical towers was one of the final touches of the dam construction that would have been put into gear after the work of building up the dam's bulk had been completed by the laboring masses in the earlier part of the 1960s.⁴³

³⁹ Kane, 141, 154.

⁴⁰ Alternate spellings of the artist's name include "Hamed Ewais," which is, for example, used by the Barjeel Art Foundation as well as on listings for sales of the artist's work by the auction house Christie's, and "Hamed Oweis," which is used in Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art 1910-2003 (New Revised Edition)* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005).

⁴¹ See, for instance, Aleksandr Rodchenko's propagandistic photo series in the Soviet periodical *USSR in Construction (SSSR na stroike)*, which was mainly active in the 1930s. I thank Dr. James Merle Thomas for pointing me in this direction. More on *USSR in Construction*, in comparison to contemporaneous American New Deal photography, can be found in Timothy A. Nunan, "Soviet Nationalities Policy, 'USSR in Construction,' and Soviet Documentary Photography in Comparative Context, 1931-1937," *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (April 2010): 47-92.

⁴² For a description of *At the Aswan Dam* which defines the depicted body of water as Lake Nasser, see Anneka Lenssen, "Exchangeable Realism," in *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965*, eds. Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes (London and New York: Prestel Publishing Ltd., 2016), 430-435.

⁴³ Kane, *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt*, 164.

The fact that the work is currently held by the State Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow raises the intertwined questions of whether the painting was completed under Soviet patronage and, if so, how this may have affected Owais's choice of subject matter and style. At the same time, I wish to make the case that *At the Aswan Dam*, though in some ways a departure in both form and content from Owais's previous works, marks a shift in his approach and views rather than an anomalous instance in his oeuvre. In turn, I argue that the continuation of this shift is intricately connected to the history of Egypt's endeavors to assert its independence on the world stage in the midst of Cold War politics, as well as to the disappointment felt in Egypt after its defeat in the 1967 war that was known throughout the Arab world as the *Naksa*. Fundamentally, Owais's works in the decade extending roughly from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s exhibit characteristics of Owais's near-desperate fight, mediated by technology, to hold on to the dissipating dream of the 1952 Revolution.

Hamed Owais and the Group of Modern Art

Owais was, at the time he painted *At the Aswan Dam*, a fixture of Egyptian social realism. His work was well regarded internationally during his time, exemplified not least by his being awarded the Guggenheim International Prize in its inaugural year of 1956.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Barjeel Art Foundation, "Hamed Ewais," accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/artist/egypt/hamed-ewais/>. Additionally, documentation from the Guggenheim's archives on the establishment of the Guggenheim International Award is viewable online at "Establishment of the Guggenheim International Award," Archives Collection, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, accessed December 17, 2019, <https://www.guggenheim.org/finding-aids/file/establishment-of-the-guggenheim-international-award>.

Having left a job as a metalworker, Owais attended Cairo's School of Fine Arts and went on to study at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando in Madrid.⁴⁵ He subsequently returned to Egypt to teach at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Alexandria and co-founded the Egyptian Group of Modern Art in 1947, which included other well-known Egyptian artists such as Gamal el-Sigini, Gazbia Sirry, Zeinab Abdel Hamid, Salah Yousri and Youssef Sida.⁴⁶ Upon settling in Alexandria, Owais took the famed Egyptian painter Mahmoud Said, who was also championed by the Egyptian Surrealists, as his mentor.⁴⁷ He additionally took inspiration from the work of Mexican Muralists Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, and exhibited work in the 1952 Venice Biennale, where he was influenced by Italian social realism (Owais returned to Venice in 1954 and 1956).⁴⁸

Owais also exhibited in the Alexandria Biennale established by President Nasser in 1955 and 1958, and traveled widely throughout Eastern, Central, and Western Europe throughout his life.⁴⁹ In 1959, he visited Poland and participated in two exhibitions, and in 1972, he was invited by the Ministry of Culture to travel to the Soviet Union, where he

⁴⁵ "Hamed Owais," Haus Der Kunst, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://postwar.hausderkunst.de/en/artworks-artists/artists/hamed-owais>. Also see Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 77-80.

⁴⁶ Nadia Radwan, "Hamed Owais," *Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World*, accessed April 2, 2020, <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/bios/Pages/Hamed-Owais.aspx>.

⁴⁷ Barjeel Art Foundation, "Hamed Ewais."

⁴⁸ Barjeel Art Foundation, "Hamed Ewais."

⁴⁹ For a detailed list of Owais's travels and exhibitions, see Zamalek Art Gallery, "Hamed Owais," accessed December 19, 2019, http://www.zamalekartgallery.com/en_artistcv.php?artistID=8.

exhibited in Moscow, Leningrad, and the city of Bako in Azerbaijan.⁵⁰ Owais additionally curated as well as participated in the Contemporary Egyptian Art Exhibition in Beijing in 1980.⁵¹

According to Liliane Karnouk, Owais and the Group of Modern Art saw new modes of expression as existing necessarily in tandem with new technologies, much like how factory workers adapted to the realities of modernization.⁵² In a 1984 interview, Owais described the Group of Modern Art to Karnouk as follows: “We believed that revolutionary ideology should be reflected in art. We, the Group of Modern Art, rejected ‘surrealism,’ because it was essentially rebellion, or an art which did not aim at the consciousness of the people at large.”⁵³ Here, Owais emphasizes his stance that art should be focused on social collectivity, with the goal of evoking the inner spirit of the Egyptian people—a concern that would extend throughout his oeuvre and connect to his long standing project of depicting the interplay between the worker and new conditions of modernity in Egypt. As Karnouk writes, “Unlike the situation in western Europe,

⁵⁰ Owais’s trip to Poland is mentioned in Lenssen, “Exchangeable Realism,” 432, and his visits to Moscow, Leningrad, and Bako are mentioned in Radwan, “Hamed Owais.” Connections between the Soviet Union and the Arab world are demonstrated by the fact that the Soviet Union provided scholarships to many young artists from Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Sudan to study in Moscow. Though, as far as can be surmised, Owais was not among these students, these connections are important to consider when placing Owais within the international milieu of his time. See Olga Nefedova, *Arab Artists of the Mediterranean World: The Early History of Art Education for Artists from Syria, Lebanon and Algeria in the USSR in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s*, in *Mediterranean Mosaic: History and Art*, eds. Erminio Fonzo and Hilary A. Haakenson (Fisciano: ICSR Mediterranean Knowledge, 2019), 93.

⁵¹ Radwan, “Hamed Owais.”

⁵² Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 77-78.

⁵³ Karnouk, 80.

where modernism sprang out of rapid technological development, modernism in Egypt was embraced as a symbolic inducement to cultural and political change.”⁵⁴

This linkage of social realist aesthetics, Owais’s interest in the idea of the character at the core of the Egyptian people, and the conditions of modern life is apparent in Owais’s aptly titled *Factory Workers* of 1953, painted shortly after the 1952 Revolution. In *Factory Workers*, despite the realism that makes Owais’s figures appear tired and subdued, as if they are filing home from work en masse as they depart from the factory (we see its smokestacks in the distance), Owais fills the canvas with their presence. This scaling-up is a recurrent aspect of Owais’s work, and for Karnouk this reflects the power of the people as “revolutionary giants, boxed in miniatures.”⁵⁵ This sense is made even more apparent in Owais’s *Fellah*, from the early 1960s. In this work, the form of a crouching working-class man mimics the rectangular shape of the canvas. Nearly filling the image entirely, any movement from the man depicted would cause him to either exit or be restrained by its frame. In viewing this work, one is asked to consider the conditions of the man’s containment, and for how long it might last before his movement would break that which frames him.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Karnouk, 3.

⁵⁵ Karnouk, 81.

⁵⁶ Nadia Radwan makes a similar observation in Radwan, “Hamed Owais.”

At the Aswan Dam: Modernity Engineered

At the Aswan Dam marks the beginning of a change in Owais's oeuvre in the mid-1960s. The integration of the worker with both the physical and symbolic dimensions of infrastructure in *At the Aswan Dam* shifts from an emphasis on social projects to instead show a reliance of human beings on technological systems in subsequent works. As Anneka Lenssen observes in *At the Aswan Dam*:

Presumably, Owais intended to convey the awesome power of human and nonhuman collaboration in the painting, linking flesh to steel and water to electricity. Yet in using this schematic shorthand, he also left the immediacy of his realism behind, signaling submission to industrial power.⁵⁷

The two workers depicted in the painting (with their faces concealed by their helmets), who may well have been Nubian men from the now-absent village below (and a third worker, who peeks out in the lower part of the canvas with face obscured by orange goggles), are incorporated into their new, technology-infused environment as the old one disappears.⁵⁸ Yet, these workers do not “speak,” and like any other individuals, would have viewed the project in complex ways.⁵⁹ The promise of the dam and its aura of

⁵⁷ Lenssen, “Exchangeable Realism,” 434.

⁵⁸ Here I take the idea that the Nubian men from the villages that were being destroyed were also employed in the dam's construction from Reynolds, “Building the Past,” 194.

⁵⁹ Here I reference Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, eds. Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 66–111.

progress were surely pervasive and brought with them new possibilities of freedom from the past.

Owais's painting, in its mechanized forms and collapsing of space into nearly flat geometry, bears a resemblance to the systems that governed the electrical grid generated by the High Dam. The application of Soviet expertise to the project included the construction of a control room, located deep within the dam itself, which regulated the processes of the dam's electrical substations.⁶⁰ Similar to the internal workings of the dam, the lines and connections of Owais's electrical towers are interwoven in such a way as to resemble a circuit board large enough to encompass the human figure.

In another painting of the Aswan High Dam, *The High Dam* (1964) by Abdel Hadi al-Gazzar, this notion of circuitry and the fusion of both the human and the landscape with mechanical and electrical engineering is even more apparent. While Owais's depiction of the dam places the worker as a central component of its active construction, al-Gazzar's depiction instead takes on a symbolic resonance. Al-Gazzar's work, believed to have been held in the house of the National Democratic Party of Egypt, depicted the dam as a soaring tangle of wire and metal merging with a human body that, according to Shalem, becomes a personification of the Nile that also references the facial features of both a sphinx and of President Nasser.⁶¹ The area behind this figure has been blown out by a halo of white light that surrounds the figure's head, and an extended

⁶⁰ Bishop, "Control Room," 81.

⁶¹ Shalem, "Man's Conquest of Nature," 22, 24-25.

passage of metallic tangles extends throughout the landscape, seamlessly becoming part of the figure's embodiment.

Owais's landscape does not communicate a technological quality as overtly as al-Gazzar's; yet, it contains a more subtle but no less real invocation of the processes of an engineered modernity. The smooth ultramarine blue of Owais's rendering of the reservoir conceals any sign of the ancient Nubian villages that were in actuality submerged beneath it. In the landscape itself, we see new construction that completes the erasure of the villages. These structures, which may be temporary dwellings or day shelters for the workers, dot the riverbank along with construction vehicles and equipment. There also appears to be a tower for a telephone line with perhaps a bullhorn attached to it to announce the start and stop of work.⁶² The scene eschews the possibility of a singular perspectival reading, appearing untethered from a terrestrial logic; the scopic confusion of this fragmented, re-imagined modern landscape reconfigures space and is infused with impositions of timekeeping and labor.⁶³

The dam itself was comprised of granite from Aswan's geologically unique rock formations.⁶⁴ This granite, likely visible as the sandy-brown rocks in the foreground of *At the Aswan Dam*, was quarried and removed from its centuries-old location in the

⁶² I thank Dr. Emily Neumeier for pointing out the presence of the bullhorn, which signals the notion of timekeeping.

⁶³ Pertinent to the notion of reconfigured and systematized temporalities in Egypt are On Barak's analyses of the effects of the imposition of the Gregorian calendar over the Hijri with the establishment of the telegraph in Egypt. See On Barak, "Outdating: The Time of 'Culture' in Colonial Egypt," *Grey Room* no. 53 (Fall 2013): 6–31.

⁶⁴ Reynolds, "Building the Past," 194–197.

geological record. Nancy Y. Reynolds suggests that such geological interventions may be seen as a physical manifestation of time turned upside-down—much like the compositional fragmentation of Owais’s forward-looking vision.⁶⁵ Similarly, the attempt to harness the power of nature by way of the dam had unintended effects, as was made apparent by the massive flooding of the Temple of Ramses II (1260-1250 BCE) and other ancient monuments that was caused by the project. The deluge sparked a massive intervention by UNESCO to disassemble, relocate, and reassemble the pharaonic structures in new locations on the shores of Lake Nasser.⁶⁶

The building of the dam replaced these sites of heritage with a giant power station that extended the electrical power grid throughout Egypt. Because of the dam, it became a new normal for the average Egyptian home to have a television set and to be connected to new experiences of the simultaneity, to borrow from Benedict Anderson, of national broadcasts.⁶⁷ Elizabeth Bishop surmises that these broadcasts formed a “control room” in a different sense, spreading condoned values through the government’s choice of programming.⁶⁸ As the Egyptian government became more repressive during these years and was accosted by pressures on the international stage, the technologies that Owais

⁶⁵ Reynolds, 182. Here I build from Reynolds’s association of time with the overturning of the Aswan granite by suggesting that this granite is depicted within Owais’s painting, and that this inclusion signals a reference to temporality.

⁶⁶ Shalem, “Man’s Conquest of Nature,” 26.

⁶⁷ Bishop, “Control Room,” 81; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), 24.

⁶⁸ Bishop, “Control Room,” 81.

depicted in *At the Aswan Dam* had an afterlife in several other works that, in a similar mechanized style, represent technologies of war.

A Lost Futurity

The inclusion of weapons in Owais's *Le Gardien de la Vie (The Protector of Life)* of 1967-68, *America* of 1970, and *Al Aabour (The Crossing of the Suez Canal)* of 1974 replaces the schematics of the Aswan High Dam's electrical towers with something far more aggressive, converting Owais's technological renderings into elements of force. After Egypt's defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and the loss of the territory of the Sinai Peninsula to Israel, known in the Arab world as the *Naksa* or "setback," for many the optimism of Nasser's revolution too was lost.⁶⁹ While *Le Gardien de la Vie* represents a soldier protecting a group of Egyptians, including families at work and at play, *America* instead represents the anger and pain felt in Egypt after the *Naksa*. In this work, a towering mechanical warhorse displays the might of the Egyptian military, and is about to demolish the Statue of Liberty, which represents America, Israel's ally.⁷⁰ Painted

⁶⁹ According to Shalem, in Israel the conflict was referred to as the "Six Day War" rather than the *Naksa* (Shalem, "Man's Conquest of Nature," 21). For reference to this lost feeling of optimism in relation to *Le Gardien de la Vie*, see Barjeel Art Foundation, "Hamed Ewais." For more on the *Naksa* and its effect on Syrian abstraction in particular, see Anneka Lenssen, "The Plasticity of the Syrian Avant-Garde, 1964-1970," *ARTMargins* 2, no. 2 (June 2013): 43-70. Though separate nations at the time of the *Naksa*, Syria and Egypt had been briefly conjoined between 1958-61 under the moniker of the "United Arab Republic."

⁷⁰ This description is culled from a lot essay associated with the artwork on the Christie's Auctions website. See Christie's, "Hamed Ewais (Egyptian, 1919-2011), *America*," accessed November 17, 2019, <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/hamed-ewais-egyptian-1919-2011-al-aabour-the-5977072-details.aspx>.

several years later, *Al Aabour* represents the result of this anger: Egypt's invasion and subsequent reclamation of the Sinai in 1973, known as the October War, that ultimately resulted in the 1978 Camp David Accords and set the stage for the still-ongoing Palestinian liberation struggles.⁷¹ The towering central figure in this work wears a helmet that recalls those of the workers in *At the Aswan Dam*, while its looming stance recalls the soldier in *Le Gardien de la Vie*. Though it is outfitted in armor and has a torso composed of guns pointed at the Israeli sandbags pictured below, it holds a pitchfork and a scythe: the attributes of the Egyptian farmer.⁷²

Throughout Owais's oeuvre in the 1950s-1970s, the linkages between technology, modern life, and social collectivity evolves from one of hope and optimism to one of failure and anger at the loss of the dream of Egypt's self-determination. The hint of this lost promise may be detected as early as in Owais's *At the Aswan Dam*, although this work was completed at what was purportedly an optimistic time of building the infrastructure of Egypt's future. The merging of technologies with the idea of a collective Egyptian identity is present both in *At the Aswan Dam* and *Al Aabour* in a progression from mechanized energy production to mechanized destruction of Egypt's enemies. Despite the forward-marching promise of hydropower, and its association with Egypt's

⁷¹ The identification of this painting with the October War is taken from Christie's, "Hamed Ewais (Egyptian, 1919-2011), *Al Aabour (The Crossing of the Suez Canal)*," accessed November 17, 2019, <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/hamed-ewais-egyptian-1919-2011-al-aabour-the-5977072-details.aspx>. For background on modern conflicts and U.S. intervention in Egypt leading up to and including the Camp David Accords, see Ussama Makdisi, "The Making and Unmaking of the Arab World," in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, eds. Aneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 32-33 and Asaf Siniver, ed., *The Yom Kippur War: Politics, Diplomacy, Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷² The association of this work with an Egyptian farmer is taken from Christie's, "Hamed Ewais (Egyptian, 1919-2011), *Al Aabour (The Crossing of the Suez Canal)*."

ability to convert its own natural resources into a national source of energy, Egypt was unable to escape eruptions of pressure on the international stage that transformed it both inside and out.

CHAPTER 3
PALIMPSEST: TAHIA HALIM'S
DOCUMENTARY MODERNISM

In the early 1960s, Egypt's Ministry of Culture distributed grant funds to many artists in order for them to document the construction of the High Dam and to depict the villages of Nubia that were about to be leveled to make way for the project.⁷³ Artists in Egypt, including the landscape painter Margo Veillon, who had been one of Inji Efflatoun's teachers, had been interested in observing and depicting the people, culture, and architecture of Nubia even before the plans to construct the High Dam had begun in earnest.⁷⁴ Yet once construction was imminent, Nasser's Ministry of Culture purposefully sought such documentation under the aegis of the state.

According to Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, Nasser strongly supported and took pride in the diversity of art practices within Egypt. Although art production became subsumed

⁷³ Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, "The Politics of Egyptian Fine Art: Giving a Voice to the People," The Century Foundation, May 16, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/politics-egyptian-fine-art/?agreed=1>. Al Qassemi here makes the argument that politically motivated art production during the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings in Tahrir Square resonates with a history of political engagement among Egyptian artists that connects back to the Nasser years.

⁷⁴ The Nubian people are an Islamic African population that are considered by some to be directly descended from pharaonic Egypt. See Anne M. Jennings's 1995 anthropological study of a Nubian community north of Aswan (for whom, therefore, eviction was not obligatory during the High Dam construction) for more information on Nubian culture and architecture (Anne M. Jennings, *The Nubians of West Aswan: Village Women in the Midst of Change* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1995)). According to Jennings, 50,000 Nubians were resettled in Kom Ombo as a result of the High Dam construction (Jennings, 28). For background on Inji Efflatoun, whose work I will discuss further in Chapter 4, see Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 74-75 (the artist's name is spelled "Indji Aflatoun" in the Karnouk volume). For examples of Veillon's depictions of Nubia, see John Rodenbeck, ed., *Nubia: Sketches, Notes, and Photographs: Margo Veillon* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004). Veillon was of Swiss heritage, was born in Cairo, and spent time between Egypt and Europe.

under and controlled by the Ministry of Culture, policies were often lenient, even allowing subtle critiques to pass through the filter. As Julie F. Codell writes, “Often the category of art—presumed to be sanctified and free of worldly motives—can be used to transform and purify state intentions.”⁷⁵ As long as art was thought of as being a pastime of the upper classes, its political efficacy as critique was considered limited, and it instead filled the function of, perhaps, showing the benevolence of the regime. Additionally, Al Qassemi sees roots in this permissiveness on the part of the state in the decolonial struggle against the British, in which many artists were politicized in ways that aligned with the goals of the state—at least initially.⁷⁶ At the same time, however, the depictions of the High Dam construction and the surrounding landscape that were painted by many of the grant-receiving artists do not fit quietly into the mold of propaganda, communicating the realities of the project in powerfully expressive forms.

Many well-known Egyptian artists, including Tahia Halim, Abdel Hadi al-Gazzar, Ragheb Ayad, and Effat Naghi took part in this project, and depicted the circumstances of the building of the High Dam in varied forms.⁷⁷ Just as the documentary characteristics of these works represent a specific moment in time in which the ecology of the Egyptian landscape was being reshaped by the High Dam, so too are their aesthetic qualities

⁷⁵ Julie F. Codell, “Introduction: Political Economy and the Nation of Culture,” in *The Political Economy of Art: Making the Nation of Culture*, ed. Julie F. Codell (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), 16.

⁷⁶ Al Qassemi, “The Politics of Egyptian Fine Art: Giving a Voice to the People.”

⁷⁷ At this time, I have been unable to definitively confirm whether or not Hamed Owais was one of the artists who received a grant from the Ministry of Culture; however, I would speculate that he was, given the prevalence of government support for the arts and the alignment of his work with the goals of the state.

connected precisely to their contemporaneous moment. These included abstraction, in the case of Halim, Ayad, and Naghi, and an aesthetic with roots in surrealism, as in the case of al-Gazzar.⁷⁸ It is telling of Egypt's particular sociopolitical and non-aligned position on the world stage that these artists depicted the project each in their own style rather than simply taking on a unified aesthetic, such as, for example, that of the Socialist Realism that had been compulsory in the Soviet Union in the postwar years.⁷⁹ For instance, in *Aswan* (1964), Ragheb Ayad's depiction, we are placed near ground level, slightly pulled away from the midst of the mass of workers who are employed in the construction of the dam. Through his use of line and color that blend the forms of the workers' bodies with their surrounding environment, Ayad's painting does not glorify the worker in the name of the state, but rather connects the worker with the long-forgotten laborers that built the ancient pharaonic monuments.⁸⁰ Unlike, for example, Alexander Rodchenko's photo series of the White Sea-Baltic Canal Project for the periodical *USSR in Construction*, which features a propagandistic view of a Soviet gulag at work, Ayad presents an image of a towering project in which the workers are diminished to hard laborers.⁸¹ Differing, too, from Owais's workers, Ayad's laborers do not integrate with

⁷⁸ For more on al-Gazzar and the High Dam, see Seggerman, *Modernism on the Nile*, 141-178.

⁷⁹ See, for instance, Clement Greenberg's well-known polemics in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5-22.

⁸⁰ "Aswan, Ragheb Ayad," Barjeel Art Foundation, accessed February 20, 2020, <https://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/collection/ragheb-ayad-aswan/>.

⁸¹ For more on Rodchenko and the White Sea-Baltic Canal project, see Erika Wolf, "The Visual Economy of Forced Labor: Alexander Rodchenko and the White Sea-Baltic Canal," in *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture*, eds. Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 168-174.

futuristic machinic parts, but rather toil in the shoveling of earth. In Ayad's depiction, the new social collectivity that the High Dam promised instead becomes one of compulsory participation in backbreaking work.

On the other hand, Halim depicted the villages of Nubia that the High Dam would come to replace. Halim, well-versed and well-trained stylistically in European modern art, purposefully sought to evoke the idea of Egyptian heritage in her work. The pictorial language she developed often relied on a modernist flattening of space that artists in Egypt associated with the reclamation of histories of "Eastern" painting that had been appropriated by European painters like Matisse, Klee, and Van Gogh.⁸² As Katy Siegel writes, many artists in the Global South employed abstraction as "a historical return, not a rupture."⁸³ While American Abstract expressionists such as Barnett Newman, to use Siegel's example, were contemporaneously appropriating non-Western visual forms in their abstraction, they did so while viewing such art forms as "naive," rather than as a way of connecting with one's own heritage as a source of power as artists in postcolonial nations did.⁸⁴

In this chapter, I wish to make the case that Halim developed and employed a particular painterly aesthetic in works like *In the Old Nubia Town* (c. 1960s) in order to

⁸² See, for example Hamed Abdalla's stance on the idea of reclaiming "Eastern" art in Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 96, which I will discuss further.

⁸³ Katy Siegel, "Art, World, History," In *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965*, eds. Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes (London and New York: Prestel Publishing Ltd., 2016), 50. Here Siegel refers to the artists Sadequain, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, and Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id.

⁸⁴ Siegel, 49.

give a sense of immediacy to the experiences of the Nubians evicted by the edict of the High Dam construction. Though Halim was of an aristocratic background and for her depicting Nubia entailed a search for an Egyptian heritage and subjectivity to “return” to, Halim’s blend of social realism, modernist geometry, and expressionism was employed in an agentive fashion: that is to say, she purposefully appropriated visual forms associated with Egyptian or Islamic heritage rather than “copying” a modernist aesthetic from European painters, and furthermore, this approach also communicated the agency and individuality of her Nubian subjects. In this light, Halim’s work serves an opposite purpose than that of an approach rooted in ethnography, for example. Instead of rendering Nubian communities with an emphasis on an empirical “truth” that would seem to situate them in the past or render them as in line with the “naive,” Halim’s depictions of the Nubian people, specifically women, establish a documentary form that advocates against erasure by depicting the displacement of Nubia as incontrovertibly part of the contemporary moment.

Tahia Halim’s Internationalism

Tahia Halim (1919-2003) was born into a well-to-do family in Donkola, Sudan, and her father, who had been a brigadier in the Egyptian army, had also at one time served as chamberlain to King Fouad of Egypt.⁸⁵ Halim’s initial training in art was

⁸⁵ El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia*, 70. Alternate spellings of the artist’s name include “Taheya Halim” (utilized in Karnouk’s *Modern Egyptian Art*).

provided by a Syrian nun employed by her family, followed by lessons in academic and Impressionist painting at the workshops of Youssef al-Tarabulsi and Alecco Jerome before she began her studies at the Cairo School of Fine Arts.⁸⁶ Subsequently, Halim headed to the studio of the avant-garde Egyptian artist Hamed Abdalla, whom she later married, to study with him.⁸⁷

Abdalla had opened his independent studio in 1942 after studying with various international artists who were living and working in Egypt, rather than acquiring his own training at a formal art school.⁸⁸ It was at Abdalla's studio that Halim met Efflatoun, also a student of his, and thus began a lifelong friendship.⁸⁹ Halim and Efflatoun's friendship extended to shared trips to the countryside and to Efflatoun's family farm to paint together.⁹⁰ Though it may be tempting to associate the work of Efflatoun and Halim with Abdalla's "influence," it would be more productive to consider that their politically-motivated concerns had likely driven them to seek a teacher such as Abdalla.

Abdalla's interests were bound by the dual and seemingly opposing attributes of a rootedness in rural Egyptian identity as well as a desire to claim the freedom of the

⁸⁶ El Razzaz, 70.

⁸⁷ Ezzeddine Naguib, "Hamed Abdalla, eternal traveller," in *Arabecedaire: Hamed Abdalla*, ed. Morad Montazami (Paris: Zamân Books, 2018), 13.

⁸⁸ Naguib, 13, 12.

⁸⁹ El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia*, 62, 93.

⁹⁰ El Razzaz, 62, 93. Though El Razzaz does not give exact dates for Halim's and Efflatoun's excursions, he indicates that the two met at Abdalla's studio, and that their trips to the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt occurred after Efflatoun's imprisonment (which I will discuss further in Chapter 4). However, he does not specify whether any occurred prior.

modern age that was associated with “the outside world”: Europe.⁹¹ As Ezzedine Naguib sums up, Abdalla was concerned with a “project of modern art that reaffirmed the Egyptian identity, while at the same time opening itself to the artistic and cultural movements of the West.”⁹² Abdalla’s concerns in this vein were encapsulated by a detailed archive, consisting of clippings, books, and other ephemera, of Western abstraction that hinged upon the appropriation of non-Western forms. Abdalla maintained this archive, which has been likened to the German art historian Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas, throughout his life.⁹³ In a 1987 interview Abdalla summed up his concept of cultural ownership of such aesthetics, stating that “my paintings are inserted in the Arab-Egyptian tradition, they fit within the process of evolution of that civilization. It is not my fault if you [Europeans] may have recognized in them certain elements, which originally you may have collected from us.”⁹⁴

Shortly after marrying in 1945, Halim and Abdalla were able to hold a joint exhibition in Alexandria that was met with a positive critical reception.⁹⁵ In 1949 the couple traveled to Paris, where Halim studied at the Julian Academy between 1949 and 1951. There she was instructed in the study of the nude figure and the ballet, but also pointed in the direction of employing ancient Egyptian, Coptic, and Islamic art in her

⁹¹ Naguib, “Hamed Abdalla,” 13.

⁹² Naguib, 15.

⁹³ The comparison to Warburg is made in Morad Montazami, ed., *Arabecedaire: Hamed Abdalla* (Paris: Zamân Books, 2018), insert between 76-77.

⁹⁴ Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 96.

⁹⁵ Naguib, “Hamed Abdalla,” 16.

practice.⁹⁶ Halim and Abdalla then went to London, where they held a second successful joint exhibition in 1951 that was sponsored by the Egyptian cultural center.⁹⁷ Their work went on to travel to Brazil, Venice, Peking, Moscow, and Brussels.⁹⁸ The couple then returned to Cairo, but divorced in 1956. Their marriage had been a tumultuous one, with Abdalla's dogmatic personality resulting in arguments and, at times, violence.⁹⁹ This investigation reminds us that the intersectionality of gender and power are at play just as much in "global modernisms" as in any other. Yet, despite these marked inequities, Halim, Abdalla, and Efflatoun remained in contact as artistic interlocutors throughout their careers, corresponding about art and attending each others' exhibitions over the subsequent decades.¹⁰⁰

In Abdalla's 1954 work *Hope*, his interest in exploring and reclaiming modernist abstraction is apparent. The distance between the central figures and the background are collapsed, and both the figures and background are broken up into geometric shapes. An emphasis on the use of color for formal effect replaces the realism of modeling and shading. Halim, however, took a different approach to the relationship of figure to ground. Halim's *Country House* (1954) depicts a woman in an interior setting, likely

⁹⁶ El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia*, 70.

⁹⁷ Naguib, "Hamed Abdalla," 16.

⁹⁸ Naguib, 16.

⁹⁹ Naguib, 16.

¹⁰⁰ For examples of such correspondances within a published volume of Abdalla's archives, see Montazami, ed., *Arabecedaire*, 22, 39, 57, 120, 135, 167.

employed in household duties. Her figure is formed of shapes similar to those Abdalla used in *Hope*. However, even in early works like these, Halim's backgrounds tend towards the undefined gestural abstraction of Art Informel, and it may be worth further examination as to whether Halim's abstraction influenced the later work of Abdalla. In Abdalla's later work, upon his settling in Europe in 1956, he began to explore notions of Egyptian identity through the abstract manipulation of Arabic letters such as in *Al-Thawra (Revolution)* (1968).¹⁰¹

Settling in Cairo in 1956 without Abdalla, Halim worked as a teacher until she was able to dedicate her time to her own art beginning in 1962 and for the subsequent fifteen years.¹⁰² In 1958, she had become the first woman to win the Guggenheim International prize for her work *Tenderness*.¹⁰³ As El Razzaz writes, Halim's work in general after 1953 shows affinities to that of Abdalla in her modernist flattening of space and play with scale and proportion.¹⁰⁴ Without access to an image of this work, we may presume that it went along with the rest of her oeuvre in this regard.

Like Efflatoun, Halim's role on the stage of international, multicultural, and third-world feminisms in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in attention paid to her work during her lifetime through the lens of international women's studies. This included a 1978 article

¹⁰¹ Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 75.

¹⁰² El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia*, 71.

¹⁰³ Barjeel Art Foundation, "In the Old Nubia Town, Tahia Halim," accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/collection/in-the-old-nubia-town-tahia-halim/>. Karnouk refers to this work as "*Affection*" in Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 76.

¹⁰⁴ El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia*, 73.

written by a friend of Halim, the African-American artist and filmmaker Camille Billops, suggesting the “global” reach of Halim’s art practice that has nonetheless generally flown beneath the radar of art historical canonicity.¹⁰⁵

Nubia: Heritage as Modern

As El Razzaz argues, Halim’s visits to Nubia, which she may have begun in the 1950s in order to capture Egyptian life and folklore, changed her aesthetic approach.¹⁰⁶ As she focused on Nubia, she began to move away from both academic rules and the modernism of Abdalla and to move towards a greater emphasis on expressionism in her work.¹⁰⁷ Without knowing the exact dates encompassing Halim’s sponsorship by the Egyptian government in order to depict Nubia, it is still noteworthy that the plans for the High Dam would have been a topic of national conversation soon after the 1952 Revolution.¹⁰⁸

As an actualized symbol of Egypt’s independence from imperial powers, the Aswan High Dam was the nexus between the promise of a liberatory future and the realities of questioning how such a future might be built. Owais’s *At the Aswan Dam*, leaving the colonial past behind, presents a smoothly rendered scene of Egypt’s claim to

¹⁰⁵ See Camille Billops, “Tahia Halim,” *Women’s Studies* 6, no. 1: 107-111.

¹⁰⁶ El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia*, 74.

¹⁰⁷ El Razzaz, 74.

¹⁰⁸ Kane, *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt*, 143.

a technologically infused modernity that negates both before and after. Yet, it is the epilogue not just to Egypt's freedom from colonization but also to the scene represented in Halim's *In the Old Nubia Town*. While the panoramic view from above in *At the Aswan Dam* sends the viewer high up above Lake Nasser, looking down upon its radiant blue waters from beyond the dam's adjacent electrical towers, Halim, like Ayad, situates the viewer at ground level—here, in one of the villages that Owais's view would replace.¹⁰⁹ Halim's documentation is the implicit, though invisible, palimpsest within *At the Aswan Dam*, and yet it poses an argument to *At the Aswan Dam*'s view of modernity: that the Nubian people were not of the past, and that they were not a source from which the modern was to arise, but rather that their experiences were profoundly of the here and now.

In the Old Nubia Town depicts a woman whose hair and blue dress, especially, are simplified into flattened shapes. She bends to pick up a basket, perhaps at a marketplace.¹¹⁰ In the lower left of the canvas is a donkey that is very small in scale, suggesting that it is behind her while also playing with the viewer's sense of distance. These elements are foregrounded on the canvas, while behind them the distinctive vernacular architecture of Nubia is rendered in white pigment against the sandy brown tones of the earth and the sky. Halim's application of paint in the areas surrounding the central compositional elements is done with a knife, and utilizes pigments that were

¹⁰⁹ For a description of *In the Old Nubia Town*, see Barjeel Art Foundation, "In the Old Nubia Town, Tahia Halim."

¹¹⁰ El Razzaz gives the title of the work as *Ella Al-Souq Fi Al-Nuba (To the Marketplace in Nubia)* in *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia*, 109.

associated with the Egyptian environment and that were also mixed using traditional techniques.¹¹¹ Yet, the overall effect of the background is one of Informel-like abstraction, displaying Halim's purposeful and generative intermingling of styles.

Halim's abstraction became a vehicle to express affect in an attempt to capture reality in the present tense, advocating for the necessity of factoring individual subjectivity into collective aspirations for a national future.¹¹² Halim's particular iteration of an expressive social realism illustrates the intertwined nature of aesthetics with Egypt's place of non-alignment from Western and Soviet powers. As Siegel writes of artists in zones of non-alignment:

Many rejected the opposition of abstraction and realism, condemning the terrible choices between East and West, academic convention and soulless modernism, local and modern, particular and universal, and often the very categories of distinction. Their art represented less a moderate compromise than a refusal of the alternatives, a third way.¹¹³

Halim's paintings of Nubia represent a striving for this third way that was becoming all the more elusive as the Egyptian government became more restrictive and all-encompassing. The High Dam and the standardized electrical grid that it established became the antithesis to Halim's claim to a modernity that protects and preserves individual subjectivity at the same time as it makes heritage not ancient, but present.

¹¹¹ El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia*, 82.

¹¹² One might consider here Dominick LaCapra's writings on the relationship of affect to an understanding of history that enables one to connect to the subject of the work. LaCapra asks, "Is affect a crucial dimension of experience and is it related to historical understanding that is not simply objectifying?" See Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 5.

¹¹³ Siegel, "Art, World, History," 50.

In making a Nubian woman who is about to lose her home to Lake Nasser's creation the subject of *In the Old Nubia Town*, Halim communicates the overlooked, human cost of Egypt's utopian revolution: a revolution that was, at the same time, a measured response to colonization. A comparison of perspectives, aerial in Owais's *At the Aswan Dam* and grounded in Halim's, makes these two works a telling indicator of the harsh realities that pressurized Egypt's formation as an independent nation. While in some sense we see the future in Owais's work and the past in Halim's, in reality what the works represent are multiple philosophies, of life and of politics, colliding in the present.

Though Halim's work has received a bit more attention in English-language scholarship than that of Owais, she is still an artist who is underrecognized on the global stage. This gap in the record belies the importance and prominence of Halim's work, both in Egypt and internationally, during the global Cold War era. Halim's use of abstraction and its employment towards social realist ends is a markedly different approach from that of Owais, in whose work the influence of Mexican Muralism is visible both aesthetically and in the work's emphasis on collectivity and state projects. Yet, both represent lived experiences of political prerogatives in Egypt during the revolutionary postcolonial years, communicating the aspirations and failures of interlinked national independence and nationalist ideas of progress. At the same time, Halim's work complicates a propagandistic relationship of Egyptian heritage to Egypt's postcolonial modernity.

CHAPTER 4

INJI EFFLATOUN'S SEARCH FOR THE TIMELESS

When the construction of the Aswan High Dam began, painter Inji Efflatoun (1924-1989) was being held in prison for her leftist political activism. Efflatoun was a member of the first group of women to ever be imprisoned in Egypt—a triumph, as she saw it, as her imprisonment was a sign of the progression that Egypt had made towards gender equality during the Nasser years.¹¹⁴ “Imprisoning women for their political ideas,” she said in a 1987 interview with Liliane Karnouk, “was an irrefutable admission of their political power and a public proof of their equality with men.”¹¹⁵ Efflatoun’s indeterminate alliance with the politics of Egypt’s revolutionary government would also play out in her aesthetic shift from a social realist style to that which she coined “white light”—a mode of abstraction in which lines of white canvas were left visible in between delicate brushstrokes—and which, I argue, signals the complexity of her relationship to the changing sociopolitical and ecological circumstances of Nasser’s Egypt, activated by the construction and infrastructure related to the High Dam.¹¹⁶

While ground was being broken for the building of the High Dam, which was soon to extend the electrical grid throughout rural Egypt and regulate the flow of the Nile into a modernized irrigation system, Efflatoun, painting the one tree that she was able to

¹¹⁴ Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 74.

¹¹⁵ Karnouk, 74.

¹¹⁶ Anneka Lenssen describes Efflatoun’s “white light” style at length in “Inji Efflatoun: White Light,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 42 (Autumn/Winter 2016): 85-95.

get a decent view of through the window of her cell, began a project of attempting to capture the timeless quality of the Egyptian light and environment within a painterly method comprised of kinetic, shimmering brushstrokes.¹¹⁷ In the work *Trees Behind the Wall*, painted circa 1960 and possibly one of her earliest endeavors in her “white light” style, the optics of a near-Fauvist abstraction of the color and form of the world beyond prison take precedence over the dismal environs in which she stood with her canvas. Soon Efflatoun was also able to establish permission to escape to the roof of the prison washhouse in order to paint the sailboats that passed by on a tributary of the Nile.¹¹⁸ “I painted many pictures of those sailboats, depicting our immobility against the movement of the sails,” wrote Efflatoun in her memoirs.¹¹⁹

Yet suppression and control of the Nile’s flow by the High Dam project was imminent, and unlike many of her contemporaries who received grant money from the Ministry of Culture to depict the High Dam construction and the villages of Nubia before the deportation of their inhabitants to Kom Ombo in 1962, Efflatoun would likely have been impeded from doing so by the physical fact of her captivity. The disjuncture of her over-four-years-long removal from society during a time of great changes is worthy of further inquiry. Egypt’s attempt to assert its role as the center of a utopian postcolonial non-alignment in the face of Cold War politics drew it into projects of modernity that, as

¹¹⁷ Efflatoun’s experience in continually painting the same tree is described in Inji Efflatoun, “Recollections of Imprisonment,” in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, eds. Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 195.

¹¹⁸ Efflatoun, 195.

¹¹⁹ Efflatoun, 195.

such, generated a new temporal sensitivity. While the quest for hydroelectric power pressed Egypt into a new future, Efflatoun sought to locate a notion of a true and timeless Egypt through her abstraction in a way that made its own political claims adjacent to but outside of those of the Egyptian government.

In a sense, Efflatoun's abstraction suspends or stops the time of modernity within the frame of her canvases that reach back in search of qualities inherent to the Egyptian light, landscape, and people.¹²⁰ In addition to considering the construction of the Aswan High Dam as a political, social, and technological backdrop for Efflatoun's "white light," it is also important to consider international discourses of abstraction which Efflatoun was connected to, and their relationship to the art history that informed her aesthetic choices. In particular, I suggest that Efflatoun chose to engage with discourses related to the reclamation of Orientalism from Western painters in her development of "white light," and that she did so at a moment in which it was critically relevant to Egyptian nationalist projects like the construction of the Aswan High Dam; not in the sense of supporting the project of the dam, but rather searching for a truth and a heritage beyond its faltering promises.

¹²⁰ Pertinent to a discussion of temporality and painterly method is André Dombrowski's study of time and Impressionism, particularly the way in which "every tangible stroke" became "an index of the time in which it took to apply it" in "Instants, Moments, Minutes: Impressionism and the Industrialization of Time," in ed. Felix Krämer, *Monet and the Birth of Impressionism*, exh. cat. Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 2015, 38.

Politics, Identity, and Representation

Emerging from the milieu surrounding the Surrealist movement in Egypt, Efflatoun had received international acclaim throughout her lifetime for her concerns that were both political and aesthetic. Today, as Kaelen Wilson-Goldie writes, Efflatoun “is now considered a national hero, a feminist icon and one of the most important figures in the history of modern Egyptian art.”¹²¹ Initially trained by Kamel Telmisany of the Egyptian Surrealists, Efflatoun’s engagement with the politics of the Surrealist *Art et Liberté* movement solidified her role as a political agitator who advocated for both working-class and women’s rights in Egypt.

Efflatoun’s work had, over the course of her lifetime, evolved through several styles of representation. Her earliest endeavors took shape in an explicitly surrealist mode before changing into a form of expressive social realism in which she often depicted scenes of labor and oppression among the working classes, until finally, following her imprisonment, Efflatoun’s work took on the characteristics of her “white light” period. Efflatoun’s imprisonment had begun in 1959 and would last for over four years, with her release occurring in the midst of the High Dam construction.

Efflatoun exhibited work throughout the varied stylistic eras of her career, both in Egypt and abroad. She first exhibited work with *Art et Liberté* in 1942.¹²² Her first solo

¹²¹ Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Public/Private: The Many Lives of ‘Rebel Painter’ Inji Efflatoun," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 42 (Autumn/Winter 2016): 74.

¹²² Lenssen, "Inji Efflatoun," 85.

show was in Cairo in 1952 and was followed soon after by the exhibition of her work at the inaugural Egyptian pavilion at the 1952 Venice Biennale, the 1953 Bienal de São Paulo, and the 1958 Alexandria Biennale.¹²³ The works of her “white light” turn were shown in 1977 in an exhibition in Cairo of the same name.¹²⁴

Once she had departed from her Surrealist traversals, Efflatoun began depicting women at work, as in *Ezba (Farm)* of 1953, in a social realist manner inspired by the work of the Mexican Muralists.¹²⁵ Efflatoun’s ongoing interest in the representation of Egyptian workers was iterative from this point forward, with her changes in artistic style related to the intersections between her particular goals and the urgencies of the moment, but still always orbiting around the lived conditions of peasant women, or *fellahin*. Such concerns would continue for the rest of her life, not least throughout her “white light” era.

Anneka Lenssen writes that Efflatoun’s visual experiments surrounding the subject matter of labor and women’s rights form “an ongoing negotiation, through painting, with the technologies of visibility that would both buttress and destabilise her political claims as a (radically) creative and female subject” and engage with tensions of embodiment and somatophobia as they related to women’s rights in Egyptian society.¹²⁶ Considering this, we may locate Efflatoun’s political concerns aesthetically in terms of their relationship to “technologies of visibility.” The way in which Efflatoun chooses to

¹²³ Wilson-Goldie, “Public/Private,” 74.

¹²⁴ Lenssen, “Inji Efflatoun,” 93.

¹²⁵ Betty La Duke, “Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun: The Merging of Art, Feminism, and Politics,” *NWSA Journal* 1, no. 3 (Spring, 1989): 479, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4315927>.

¹²⁶ Lenssen, “Inji Efflatoun,” 85.

represent a subject, in her early work as well as in her “white light” era, always connects to broader social or political concerns. Somewhat similarly to Owais and his Group of Modern Art, the social realist aesthetic of Efflatoun’s representations of women in the 1950s emphasized ideas of collective needs rather than the individual liberation of Surrealism—though the radical social politics of the Egyptian Surrealists had been a formative spark within her thought and practice.¹²⁷

References to photography or film in writing on Efflatoun tend to follow her after her turn to social realism. Telmisany was a filmmaker as well as a painter, and Mostafa El Razzaz has written that Telmisany’s work generated a cinematographic influence in the way Efflatoun frames scenes.¹²⁸ By Liliane Karnouk’s account, Efflatoun took on the characteristics of a documentarian in her practice and “carried her sketchbook like a camera.”¹²⁹ In a similar vein, Lenssen offers the insight that Efflatoun’s “white light” visually parallels photographs found in her archive, in which 1970s-era photo processing produces glimpses of white similar to those found in Efflatoun’s later work.¹³⁰

However, Efflatoun sought to inhabit the world of the Egyptian peasant in addition to documenting it. It was around the time of her shift to social realism that Efflatoun decided to learn Arabic in order to connect with the *fellahin*.¹³¹ Efflatoun,

¹²⁷ Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 75.

¹²⁸ El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia*, 63.

¹²⁹ Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 74.

¹³⁰ Lenssen, “Inji Efflatoun,” 95.

¹³¹ La Duke, “Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun,” 478.

typical of someone from an upper-class family in Egypt, had grown up speaking French, and so for her learning Arabic was a political act as well as an attempt to locate a true sense of an Egyptian identity by associating with the *fellahin*.¹³² Efflatoun had also refused her family's offer to send her to France to study art.¹³³ Despite these politics, which might seem in line with Nasser's nationalism, Efflatoun always remained apart—even before her imprisonment. While Efflatoun's oeuvre is implicitly tied to the structural course of events of Nasser's revolution in Egypt, her work responded to the political landscape in critical ways and its alliance with the state was an uneasy one.

Heritage versus Hydroelectricity

In the 1950s, Efflatoun began studying in Hamed Abdalla's studio in Cairo (though the two had been acquainted since the 1940s).¹³⁴ Despite her association with Abdalla and his school of modernist abstraction (which I have discussed in Chapter 3), the style of Efflatoun's work prior to her imprisonment diverged greatly from his. Efflatoun's practice in the 1950s instead exhibited a structured yet painterly social realist

¹³² El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia*, 40.

¹³³ El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia*, 40.

¹³⁴ Montazami, ed., *Arabecedaire*, 135. In addition to Abdalla's views on the reclaiming of "Eastern" aesthetics from European modernism, Kamel Telmisany's 1937 "Manifesto of the Neo-Orientalists," a document which outlined his stance that authentic "Oriental" art forms should be embraced and that European academicism should be rejected, is also relevant here. Surely Telmisany's views on this matter would have been available to Efflatoun as well as Abdalla's. See Kamel Telmisany, "Manifesto of the Neo-Orientalists," in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, eds. Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 86-87.

approach in works like *Construction Workers* of 1953. According to Patrick Kane, this work was based on a photo of the old Aswan Dam published alongside a 1953 newspaper article in *al-Ahram*, Egypt's national newspaper, about the Egyptian government's plan to construct a new dam at Aswan.¹³⁵ This older, partially effective dam had been built by the British occupation between 1899 and 1901.¹³⁶ Immediately following the 1952 Revolution, plans were established to upgrade the electrical output from the old dam as well as to build the new High Dam to its south.¹³⁷ The *al-Ahram* article, according to Kane, advocated for the importance of the new project and the potential of rural electrification—a view seen by many as a matter of social equality, since oftentimes the elite were the only ones with access to electrification, while rural populations were put at a disadvantage because of its absence.¹³⁸

According to Kane, Efflatoun's *Construction Workers* plays off the image published in *al-Ahram*, but removes the backdrop of the dam itself from the image and instead only focuses on the scaffolding and the workers who are embedded within it.¹³⁹ These laborers, who in the photograph were employed in heightening the masonry of the old dam, are interwoven throughout the grid of Efflatoun's scaffolding.¹⁴⁰ As in Owais's

¹³⁵ Kane, *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt*, 143.

¹³⁶ Kane, 142.

¹³⁷ Kane, 142.

¹³⁸ Kane, 143.

¹³⁹ Kane, 143.

¹⁴⁰ Kane, 143.

Factory Workers, the hard realism of labor is acknowledged while the potentiality of social collectivity is suggested. But significantly, the dam itself is left out, signaling Efflatoun's ambivalence in supporting a particular nationalist project and posing the question of what, in fact, this social collectivity will contribute to.

Efflatoun's choice to portray this scene in a social realist aesthetic may be viewed as a calculated decision: one in which Efflatoun, though she would have been familiar with Abdalla's project of reclaiming "Eastern" abstraction from European modernists, preferred to reference the work of the Mexican Muralists in the 1950s due to her political goals. Efflatoun's affiliation with the Mexican Muralists during this time contributes to the complexity of how one might understand her relationship to Nasser's government in the years immediately following the 1952 Revolution.

In particular, Efflatoun became friends with David Alfaro Siqueiros during a visit he made to Egypt in 1956.¹⁴¹ According to Betty La Duke, Siqueiros himself commended Efflatoun's body of work with a quote, published as the preface to a 1959 exhibition catalogue of Efflatoun's work, that links her artistic endeavors to those of utopian, collective nation-building:

Her art has the quality of good plastic (aesthetics) as far as structure, form, colour and texture are concerned, while showing no lack of those attributes which make for a realism more eloquent and richer than that of the past. . . . She is propelled by the powerful individual emotion that she possesses towards a National Art of universal impact.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ La Duke, "Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun," 479. However, another account states that Efflatoun and Siqueiros first met at the 1956 Bienal de São Paulo (Montazami, ed., *Arabecedaire*, 39).

¹⁴² David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Preface," in *Inji Efflatoun Retrospective, 1942-1985*, ed. Galeria Akhenaton (Cairo: Le Haut Conseil pour la culture centre national des artes plastique, 1985), quoted in La Duke, "Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun," 479. According to La Duke, this preface was originally used for an exhibition catalogue in 1959. Unfortunately the exhibition catalogue is not currently obtainable in the U.S.

Siqueiros's quote obliquely suggests one of the central questions within Efflatoun's change from social realism to "white light": as an aesthetic interrogation, Efflatoun's stylistic shift may be read as a consideration of the degree to which nationalism and timeless universals can serve or coexist within each other. During her imprisonment under Nasser, the gridlike structure in *Construction Workers* became a sign of confinement in *Dormitory of the Political Prisoners* (1961), a work in which Efflatoun painted a group of other women who were jailed along with her. Finally this grid formation, before dissolving completely in her later work, morphed into a new conception of space portrayed by the visual rhythm of Efflatoun's depiction of the natural environment in *Trees Behind the Wall*, with curving tree branches and "white light" just beginning to show through the undulating brushstrokes.¹⁴³ The connectivity of the nationalist grid, having become a sign of confinement, is abandoned in favor of an abstraction edging towards the universal and the timeless. Yet just as Efflatoun's *Construction Workers* displays an ambivalence towards the state even before her imprisonment, a belief in the possibility of eliding an incommensurability between the radical individual and the once-revolutionary government followed her in the years after. As Efflatoun reported in an interview with Betty La Duke, "Nasser, although he put me in prison, was a great patriot."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ I thank Dr. Mariola Avarez for pointing out the shifting grid structure among Efflatoun's works during this period.

¹⁴⁴ La Duke, "Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun," 483.

Abstraction Beyond Walls

In Efflatoun's *Gamea Al-Bortoqai (Orange Picking)* of 1973, a figure of a female worker is depicted right up against the picture plane. Composed of the brushstrokes typical of Efflatoun's "white light" era, the woman's clothing, skin, hair, and head covering are treated in lines of distinct, shimmering color. The same style of stroke extends throughout the composition, including in the fields of swirling color that make up the landscape, and in the repetitive bright orange spheres of fruit in the bins that the woman is working to fill. Though the orange bins recede into space as they would in any perspectively-based composition, Efflatoun's continuous use of bright color in these receptacles resists conventions of atmospheric depictions of distance; the color of the oranges, even those in the back, brings them forwards and emphasizes a sense of flatness in the picture plane. This flatness is particularly conveyed by the bold green which dances around the woman's head, as well as by a mass of gold that enters into the frame from the top right. When considering what was taking place beyond their edges, however, Efflatoun's canvases like this were a reflection back to earlier times. As I have discussed in relationship to Owais's work, Egyptian peasant workers had been pulled from their farms, set to work on the High Dam, and then released under conditions of rampant unemployment and a new system of land ownership. Just as we consider Halim's paintings of Nubia to be the invisible palimpsest behind Owais's *At the Aswan Dam*, Efflatoun's "white light" paintings are layered over the recent history of the transformations wrought by the dam.

Considering that Efflatoun would have encountered the idea of a reclaiming of “Eastern” forms of representation from modernist abstraction in her time spent studying with Abdalla, but did not choose to emulate such styles of abstraction in the 1950s, the specific reasons why she chose to move to abstraction during and after her imprisonment merit consideration alongside these discourses. Aesthetically, Efflatoun’s “white light” paintings take on characteristics of the works of modernists whose practices hinged upon such appropriations. These artists include Matisse, with his play with figure-ground relationships, and Van Gogh, with his interest in *japonisme* and divisionist lines of color that emphasize the surface of the canvas. The resemblance of Efflatoun’s “white light” paintings to the work of these artists, rather than being derivative, is instead based on a struggle against colonial entanglements; at the same time, these aesthetics hold in delicate tension myriad factors that made up possibilities for a postcolonial Egyptian subjectivity.

A comparison of Efflatoun’s “white light” paintings to Owais’s contemporaneous works is telling of the ways in which their approaches diverged after the mid-1960s and yet exemplifies a common need for artists to respond to the changing political landscape in Egypt. Efflatoun’s *Battlefield* of the early 1970s and Owais’s *Al Aabour* (1974), both depict the 1973 October War.¹⁴⁵ As Liliane Karnouk writes of Efflatoun’s painting, “Commando fighter, trees, or a mountain are treated equally, as patterns in narrative figuration as in Persian miniatures or in traditional women’s arts such as stitching and

¹⁴⁵ See Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 145 for details on Efflatoun’s *Battlefield*, and Christie’s, “Hamed Ewais (Egyptian, 1919-2011), *Al Aabour (The Crossing of the Suez Canal)*.”

weaving.”¹⁴⁶ Rather than seeking to display Egypt’s might through compositionally dominant weaponry, as Owais does, Efflatoun instead connects the modern Egyptian nation to concepts of heritage through her throwback to older art forms, such as the two-dimensional conception of space within an Islamic manuscript. Efflatoun’s approach unites the subjectivity of the Egyptian fighter with the landscape, establishing a territorial claim based on a sense of ethnic belonging. While guns appear in Efflatoun’s work, and while the protagonist of Owais’s painting is an Egyptian farmer turned fighter, these elements are given inverse emphasis in the two works. As opposed to Owais’ display of technological might, Efflatoun’s focus does not linger on modernized technologies of war: instead, it favors an interweaving of the subject and the landscape at a time in which the relationship between the two was being reconfigured by the conditions of labor and ecological changes caused by the High Dam.

As she remarked in an interview with *Cairo Today*, Efflatoun considered “white light” to be “one step on the road to expressing another of the special attributes of Egypt.”¹⁴⁷ Efflatoun’s “white light” aesthetics were also part of her search for authenticity: during and after her imprisonment, Efflatoun chose to employ forms of European modernisms that had been appropriated from “Eastern” art to emphasize qualities considered to be inherent to Egypt and its geography. At a time when the rural landscape was being electrified by the turbines of the Aswan High Dam and many homes in Egypt were able to acquire televisions for the first time, Efflatoun’s paintings tell a

¹⁴⁶ Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 75.

¹⁴⁷ Saleh, “From Surrealism to Socialism,” *Cairo Today*, August 1986, 18.

different story. As she remarked in her prison memoirs, popular songs about the Aswan High Dam, like one by Abdel Halim Hafez, had become like a “nightmare” to her during her time of captivity.¹⁴⁸ The electrical grid that now connected the nation, so championed in works like Owais’s *At the Aswan Dam*, was revoked by Eflatoun in her project of generating the concept of a timeless heritage that belonged to the Egyptian individual.

¹⁴⁸ I am most grateful for access to Alex Dika Seggerman’s preliminary English translation of Inji Eflatoun’s memoirs, which are currently only published in Arabic. For the published version, see Said Khayal, ed., *Muthakirat Inji Eflatoun: Min al- Toufoula ila al-Sign (Inji Eflatoun’s Memoirs: From Childhood to Prison, 1993)* (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa al-Jadida, 2014), 230.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In the era after the 1952 Revolution, postcolonial Egypt underwent transformations in every possible sphere: politically, culturally, technologically, and ecologically, to name but a few. As I have explored, the ways in which these changes coincided with aesthetic decisions made by Egyptian artists were not matters of chance. Crucially, aesthetics and politics were intertwined in ways that were particular to Egypt's role as a non-aligned center during the global Cold War era. In addition to Egypt's long history of correspondence with European modernisms, artists in Egypt also were in contact with the Mexican Muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros and participated in exchanges within the Soviet cultural sphere. In this way, Egypt's non-alignment was reflected in the blurred aesthetic boundaries that comprised the works of its most well known artists. In addition, these interchanges reflected Egyptian artists' active selection and employment of visual elements and styles in order to achieve their particular goals. For many, this included the reclaiming of "Eastern" motifs from European modernisms in order to stake claims in an Egyptian or Islamic heritage.

Within this framework, Kobena Mercer's principle of examining global modernisms on their own terms and within their own cultural settings becomes especially important.¹⁴⁹ Considering that the construction of the Aswan High Dam in Egypt was an ever-present rallying cry within Nasser's presidency following the 1952 Revolution, it is

¹⁴⁹ See Kobena Mercer, introduction to *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London: Institute of International Visual Arts and Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 7.

a necessary cultural factor to consider as not just a backdrop for art in postcolonial Egypt, but as a modulating and implicit element within the work itself. The massive scale of the High Dam construction necessitated the restructuring of many aspects of Egyptian society in the postcolonial years. Because of the ways in which the modernization enacted by the High Dam affected labor relationships and transformed the ecology of the Egyptian landscape at the same time as it increased Egyptians' access to electricity, its construction marked a shift in the ways that artists conceptualized time in their work, as well as how they chose to represent these concepts aesthetically.

In this thesis, I have posited that the connection of state hydropower to temporality factored into particular stylistic developments in the work of Hamed Owais, Tahia Halim, and Inji Efflatoun. The moment of the High Dam played out in Owais's mechanized responses to visions of the future, Halim's affective documentary expressionism, and Efflatoun's "white light" in ways that, in all cases, were tethered to the aspirations and failures of the Egyptian government as it sought independence from imperial powers on the world stage. So too did these aesthetic choices display artists' struggles for liberation under the threat of eclipse by newly emerging and competing forms of power. Their works serve as compelling documents that bespeak the urgencies of art production in postcolonial Egypt in ways that resonate both locally and globally.

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