





photography

youssef  
nabil  
time to be alone

# photography

TEXT BY JAMES PARRY

S

nstalled in a grand apartment overlooking the parkland and trees of the Bois de Vincennes, Youssef Nabil shrugs his shoulders and grins. "I don't mind being on my own. In fact, I rather like it. Finally I have time to think." And let's face it, there's a lot to mull over. Still only 32, Nabil has established himself as one of the most stimulating art photographers of his generation and a powerful voice for new approaches to photography in the Arab world and beyond. His distinctive style - whereby he hand-colours black and white prints to create powerful and highly individual artworks combining beauty, glamour and sexuality - has brought him to the attention of celebrity clients and fellow artists alike. Increasingly admired for the swanky retro feel of his work, Nabil has been based in France for almost two years now, following the offer of an initial artist's residency from the French Ministry of Culture. His international reputation is now well established, with shows in venues ranging from Barcelona to Bamako and Mexico City to Cape Town. In many senses he seems to have 'outgrown' his native Egypt, yet identity and location continue to preoccupy him. "Deep inside you prefer to be supported in your own country, but it doesn't always work out like that. Even so, I can't live without going to Egypt regularly."

Nabil's recent achievements belie his somewhat uncertain

start into the world of photography. After initially wanting to be a movie director, he turned to photography instead, trying his hand at a range of different subjects in Cairo. His striking ability to create drama and sensuality in his pictures drew the attention of visiting maestro David LaChapelle, who hired Nabil as his local assistant. New York beckoned soon after, followed by a stint with Mario Testino in Paris - possibly no better springboard for a photographer at the start of his career?

Yet, despite the early presence in his professional life of such global 'big guns', Nabil retains a curiously homespun quality. An early influence, and one that was to develop into a close friendship, was the Armenian-Egyptian photographer Van Leo, who specialised in studio portraits, particularly of famous Egyptian actresses of the 1950s and 60s. This aspect of his work fascinated Nabil, who would visit Leo regularly in his studio and sit with him while he worked. Such attention notwithstanding, Leo felt generally unappreciated in his native city, only attaining some degree of recognition when he was in his mid 70s. "I never felt the age difference with Van. It was as though we were of the same generation", Nabil recalls. Deep frustration at the reluctance of the Egyptian authorities to understand

Previous page  
Self-portrait, Bois de Vincennes,  
2003. Hand coloured gelatin  
silver print.

Facing page  
Top right: Rosy De Palma,  
Madrid 2002. Hand coloured  
gelatin silver print.

Bottom right: Nefertiti, Berlin,  
2003. Hand coloured gelatin  
silver print.







Previous page  
Natacha Atlas, Cairo  
2000. Hand coloured  
gelatin silver print.

Facing page  
Natacha fume le narguillé,  
Cairo 2000. Hand coloured  
gelatin silver print.

and appreciate photography as an art form struck a mutual chord within both. Nabil extends this idea further, to a general criticism of the way in which the Egyptian artistic establishment still operates as an 'old guard', working against the emergence of new generations of artists. "People like me have always had to rely on non-Egyptians and private galleries to support us, places such as the Townhouse Gallery and Cairo Berlin Gallery". The Cairo Berlin, owned by Renate Jordan, has since closed, but the Townhouse continues to flourish under the stewardship of William Wells.

Nabil has made his name primarily with extravagant and revealing portraits of singers and movie stars, including works such as Youssra (1996) and the outstanding Rossy de Palma (2003). Natacha Atlas, one of the Middle East's biggest singing stars, has sat for Nabil several times and British artist Tracey Emin has also subjected herself to the Youssef Nabil 'treatment', as Nabil recalls: "Tracey was in Egypt for the Biennale in 2001 and came to one of my exhibitions in Cairo, where we met at a party organised by the British Council. Two years later, a

## At the other end of the lens

**Natacha Atlas** reveals what it's like to be on a shoot with Youssef Nabil.

**"Working with Youssef is for me an exciting experience. Being photographed by him gives me confidence in myself, as he always makes me feel like I'm the only one that matters. He gets very intense with what he sees in the lens and you just know he's completely focused at all times. It's almost an erotic experience, as he sees and creates through the lens and encourages you to reveal yourself. A vulnerable look for just one moment, and he'll catch it with incredible timing and ease. Usually I'm really shy about being photographed, but with Youssef, I feel simply that he will bring out the best in me and make me feel like a star. He certainly makes me look better than I ever imagined possible! He understands aesthetics and how to achieve them, and all his work resonates with beauty."**





# photography



Above: Anna Boghiguan, Cairo 2004. Hand coloured gelatin silver print.

Right: Naguib Mahfouz, Cairo 2003. Hand coloured gelatin silver print.



# photography



Above: Tracey's Egyptian bag,  
Tracey Emin, London 2003. Hand  
coloured gelatin silver print.

Right: Shaaban Abdel Reheim,  
Cairo 2002. Hand coloured gelatin  
silver print.

Following pages

Left: Ghada Amer, New York 2002.  
Hand coloured gelatin silver print.

Right: Self-portrait, Naples 2003.  
Hand coloured gelatin silver print.



# photography



friend rang me to say that Tracey had nominated me in a UK magazine as a future top artist. So I rang her and suggested we do something together. We did, and are both very pleased with what came out of it.”

Although depictions of people, and especially women, are the most obvious component in the Nabil portfolio, closer examination reveals a surprisingly detailed and well-crafted attention to context and environment, such as with ‘In the Circus’ with Nan Goldin (2001). In some more recent works Nabil appears to draw back from his subject to allow the setting to come to the fore. In ‘Tracey Emin’ (2003), Emin is shown mid-distance, sitting in her lingerie in a ‘nest’ of laundry baskets surrounded by bare floorboards. Hardly a tectonic shift in style, but arguably the sign of a more detached and maturing eye. Furthermore, in Paris, Nabil has begun to move away from portrait format towards landscape, and is enjoying working on a bigger scale, something he could not do in Egypt simply because the larger format paper on which he would

have liked to print his images was unavailable there.

Perhaps most significant is the fact that, after several years of creating a dramatic and sumptuous limelight for others to inhabit, Nabil has now decided that it is time to turn attention onto himself. A couple of intriguing self-portraits have resulted, works that represent his first foray into this particular territory and build quite clearly on the emotions and aspirations that drove many of his earlier compositions. Surely the pensive young man in ‘Can’t Wait to Fly Again’ (1997) was a direct representation of the young Nabil planning his next escape from Egypt? Either way, Nabil enjoys the space that life in France is currently providing. “I had a very busy life in Egypt, but here I have more time for myself and have been able to develop a clear idea about what I want to do. I am able to create my own world here inside the French world.” Cosy as that may seem, one doubts if Nabil’s creative energy will be quite so easily satisfied. The urge to fly is always there - it is only the destination that is in doubt. □

