

## Orality, Visuality, and Memory: Wael Shawky at the Fondazione Merz, Torino, Italy

The artist is standing in front of the large screen - actually a whole wall - showing one of his films, *Al Araba Al Madfuna III* (2015-16), with striking images in photographic negative, resulting in colors between green and purple. He is listening attentively to three young women who come from various parts of the world. My companion and myself bow slightly to greet him and wait for our turn; he reciprocates joining his hands and smiles to us. We have already gone through the exhibition, walking on the thick layer of soft sand that now covers the floor of the gallery, among the high walls that are painted blue for the occasion. Visitors pass by the yellow pigeon house, springing like a big egg from the sand, they look at the tall palm tree and the small but impressive dune, and descend the stairs to the underground floor. Here too the atmosphere is grey-blue, between light and shadow, and the wall at one extreme of the elongated space is occupied by the screening of a black and white film, *Al Araba Al Madfuna I* (2012). The titles of the films are taken from the name of the Egyptian village where the artist shared the life of the villagers for some weeks. In the first one of the film series, Wael Shawky has used as script a short story by the Egyptian writer Mohamed Mustagab, recited by children with grown-ups's voices. The kids wear big moustaches on their smooth faces. Against the landscape of the Nile, a parable about future prosperity unravels. The pigeon house reappears, as a protecting shelter excluding larger birds, hospitable only to the initiated. We sit in awe, wondering at the kids' images and their meanings. The same feeling seizes us in front of the second film of the series, *Al Araba Al Madfuna II* (2013), in black and white too, which we watch when we go back up the stairs, based on two short stories by Mustagab. All the films combine a theatrical approach with a complex cinematic shooting and montage. The third film, which is the first one to appear in the exhibit, casts the mythical and historical past of Egypt by images such as the temple of Pharaoh Seti in Abydos, covered by hieroglyphs. It shows the temple explored by the children, who act out a story about sunflowers, useless but beautiful, as a symbol of change and novelty. We are back to *Al Araba Al Madfuna III*, and to the artist himself, to whom we try to express the powerful impression that the exhibition has made on us. I particularly wish to convey to him the impact that his art bears for my work as historian as well as for the research project "Bodies Across Borders", which concerns the oral and visual memory of migrants. Wael Shawky is interested in what I have to say about BABE, of course very briefly under the circumstances. As the winner of the [First Mario Merz Prize](#), he also shows interest for future contacts and a possible future exhibit of our results at the [Fondazione Merz](#). I would like to know more about the contrast between the images of the children and the voices and words that come out of their mouths. This counter-position generates a sense of estrangement and transmits the tension between the visual and the oral - and the written, here present in the English subtitles, but one cannot help visualizing in an imagined way the rich writing of the original Arabic quotations. Is there an ironic usage of this contrast between the fake moustaches and the solemn words? I can see the link between the past and the present in their images, but... The artist anticipates my question, asking it himself: "Why the kids?. Yes indeed, why the kids. And with which implications? Wael Shawky evokes with freshness, as if it were the first time, the moment when he saw one of the villagers at Al Araba Al Madfuna dig out one of the archaeological remains: "I saw the past emerge from the ground. I could feel the weight of that past". He describes the village and his life there, and continues: "The kids do not bear the weight of the past, the weight of memory". He adds that they can recite innocently with the voices of adults, but their tone is not intended to be ironical. In fact, at the same time they are a link to the future. We thank him and part, hoping in future contacts. We go over his words, spoken with such clarity and kindness. I still see the irony, understood in the sense of the Romantics, meaning that while being immersed in the passion for an undergoing creation, the artist is able at the same time to step back and contemplate. So would like to do the historian, especially the historian of memory. Besides, Wael Shawky's installation combines history, literature and mythology. This allows him to explore the tension between the oral and the visual that

we try to catch in our collection of oral and visual interviews and in our efforts for interpreting them. It is another sign, very significant for the BABE project, which points to art as a field of knowledge from which various disciplines can draw inspiring insights.