

TAKING A STAND

photo series, Cairo 2006-2009

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When Swiss artists Karin Wälchli and Guido Reichlin (Chalet5) came to Cairo in 2006 to spend a 3 months residency sponsored by Pro Helvetia Cairo, their artistic works on ornament seem to have been reaching a critical mass. Working for a long time with ornament as their chief medium and source of inspiration, the two artists were repeatedly facing resistance within their artistic circles. Following the aesthetics of European modernist thinkers and critics, contemporary artists in Western circles came to regard ornament as both unnecessary and superfluous, and thus should be repudiated in their artistic endeavours.

In defiance of this predominant modernist stance, Walchli and Reichlin did not repudiate the ornament; instead, it occupied all their artistic efforts and became the central focus of their works. In their long-time passion for ornament the two artists produced explosive, unexpected patterns and grids in their large sized works. By being radically different, and with their large-scale manufacturing processes, the artists have established an unmistakable and distinct body of works, which despite all the odds, became internationally recognized.

Nevertheless, when Walchli and Reichlin accepted their residency in Cairo, they felt that they needed to push their artistic endeavours in new directions. And as Reichlin explained to me, they found the presence of ornament in the public spaces of Cairo to be highly inspiring to their work. They roamed the streets of Cairo photographing and meticulously documenting public space ornaments decorating the wide range of shops and coffee houses of the city. The artists also documented the countless and nameless installations and murals, which they viewed on the streets and walls of the city. The photographs taken became inspirational images for the large number of works they produced in the following short period, and which were shown in three major group exhibitions in Switzerland and Egypt: *In the Shadow of the Pyramids*; *Dream and Reality. Contemporary Art from the Middle East*; *Where are You?* These large series of photographs became a sort of reference manual for the production of their artistic pieces, a large number of which were used in their mixed media installation shown at the Townhouse Gallery in 2009, and which was given the carefully chosen title: “Karin takes a stand.”

In their work Walchli and Reichlin deliberately try to reverse the common artistic strategy of “collecting” images and iconic fragments as a personal archive. Thus instead of simply manipulating these archives as background to their works, the artists reverse this artistic strategy of “collecting” by transforming it into a project in its own right. In their attempt to do so, “Karin” appears standing in the photographs to express a statement of personal commitment, her appearance serving as a gauge of the human scale, as well as a testimony to the presence of street art in Cairo. And although the individual authorship of such art is unknown, its manifestation all over the city points to the collective creativity of its inhabitants. Walchli and Reichlin tell us, “In Cairo art is happening everywhere on the streets. But this is not the case in Western cities, where the creative traces of the inhabitants have been wiped away.” Admittedly, there are also efforts being taken in Cairo by the authorities to ‘clean up’ the city, which is most obvious in the surrounding suburbs of New Cairo. The aesthetic core of old Cairo, however, still stands strong.

The stance the artists assume makes this project a “research based art,” where the photographs not only serve as inspiration for the artists’ production, but are also used as an artistic project, whose purpose is to document the public creativity of Cairo’s urban space. Shifting between background and foreground, Walchli and Reichlin engage in a dynamic collaborative process in which the aesthetics of Cairo’s urban spaces seem to merge with their own.

As an artist living in Cairo, however, Walchli’s and Reichlin’s stance on the aesthetics of Cairo’s public ornaments surprised me, particularly when it comes to the ‘gatekeepers,’ for I have always found these ornamental structures hanging on top of the shops’ facades to be rather ugly and devoid of any aesthetic value. During my conversation with the artists I explained how these ornamental structures were not only unattractive, but they also seemed to disturb the architectural integrity of the city’s old buildings. Based on their research on Islamic art and architecture, the artists explained to me how they see a close association between these ornaments and the muqarnas structures commonly used in old mosques and schools built during the Mamluk period in Egypt. They also showed me how these structures could be viewed as ‘gatekeepers,’ iconic structures that were commonly used as safeguards to the entrance of old European buildings. Gatekeepers, they explained, protect and attract at the same time. Walchli’s and Reichlin’s incisive perceptions were eye openers to me, and I was willing to look at these ornaments in a new light. Shortly after, as I was doing my regular rounds in the city, I took notice of the ornamental façade of a juice shop, and immediately made the association between this ornamental façade and the old muqarnas style. However, instead of stone and granite, it was constructed of modern colourful tiles, so popular in decorating the facades of many Cairene shops today. For the first time I began to see how these shop facades around the city seemed to imitate and popularize an ornamental style that has been formerly restricted to religious buildings only.

I decided to go back and look more closely at the three works that the two artists produced for the *Where are you?* Exhibition at the Townhouse, comparing these to the photographs the two artists took of the original ‘gatekeepers’ hanging on top of the shops of Cairo. I recognized at once how much energy and time they put in order to replicate the original structures. In order to find the materials necessary to construct their works, Walchli and Reichlin visited the markets of Cairo searching for inexpensive materials, such as wood, cardboard, steel, stickers of different colours and patterns. To produce some of these works for the exhibition in Cairo, the artists worked closely with the city’s craftsmen who were familiar with the local style of ornament. And while the artists’ works may appear as faithful replicas of the originals, these were ultimately transformed into impressive and jewel like sculptures. As Reichlin and Walchli explained to me, “The process of rebuilding Cairo’s gatekeepers is not a simple act of copying and pasting, we view this as an act of enhancement. Our most recent works and projects represent the power and the spirit of abstraction and ornament in the public spaces of Cairo. During our daily walks through the urban landscapes of Cairo we focused on that which was barely noticed, that which was easily forgotten.”

Reichlin’s and Walchli’s sculptural works not only repositioned these ornamental structures in new spaces and venues in the city, but gave them a new life, as well as a radiant presence and energy. What was once hardly noticed and easily forgotten was transformed into newly formed sculptures, allowing us to appreciate more seriously the popular aesthetics of urban Cairo.