

CITY

"Perspectives: Lara Baladi"

Baladi is a refreshing choice in this series.

BY KRISTON CAPPS — SEP 4, 2015 12 AM



"Oum el Dounia (The Mother of the World)" by Lara Baladi (2007)

Stand back when you see Lara Baladi's "Oum el Dounia (The Mother of the World)." All the way back: Only from across the room do the details in this 29-foot-long artwork make the right kind of sense. The 2007 piece is a photo collage—or at least, it started out as one. Baladi printed this tapestry (so to speak) using a digital loom, stitching together this playful vision of an oasis from dozens of picture postcards, personal snapshots, and other images. From afar, the overlays of the photo images stand out as clear tiles.

The composite tells a story about popular Egyptian narratives using myths that aren't native to the country. Characters from *The Little Mermaid* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (childhood folktales born in Denmark and England, respectively) populate the scene in "Oum el Dounia." The piece looks like a storyboard for a Disney mashup of these myths, perhaps adapted for a Middle Eastern audience. According to the artist's statement, the mermaids are meant to represent the person of Alice's sister as well as Mary Magdalene, but they look a lot like go-go dancers from New York's Mermaid Parade.

The picture plane is divided into two horizons, desert and sky, but the vibe is much beachier, even kind of mod, groovy. The piece draws on an especially touristy vision of Egypt, one that Baladi appears to embrace as fun, or at least amusing. The Egyptian-Lebanese artist is looking at pictures of her homeland through a Western lens and laughing along. With "Oum el Dounia," the artist is reappropriating the cliché.

Up close, “Oum el Dounia” is abstract in a Pointillist way. Like any collage, this is a piece that ought to reward close looking. Just as the piece signifies how popular photography misrepresents place—and how, in a desert oasis, even nature strives to trick the eye—there ought to be something about the construction of the work that delivers some sense of the uncanny. But “Oum el Dounia” is an illusion in the most disappointing sense. The physical texture produced by the digital loom doesn’t render any secrets of the desert. The grain is blurry.

Baladi is the latest artist to appear in the Freer and Sackler galleries “Perspectives” series, one of the Smithsonian Institution’s best forums for showcasing contemporary art from Asia and beyond. Among the likes of Ai Weiwei, Chiharu Shiota, and Do-Ho Suh, Baladi is a refreshing choice for her lack of pretense. There’s something subtle and subversive about her depiction of the Great Sphinx of Giza as it might appear in a souvenir tchotchke: cartoonish, framed on both sides by beautiful brown women in bright-colored dresses. But to see the pop appeal, take the long view.

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