

HOPE

LARA BALADI



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tang



Ein Museum der



Gefördert durch die



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My memory of Cairo as a child is an image of the pyramids in the distance, pointing to the sky. As we drove towards them on occasional family excursions along the Pyramids Road, the landscape unfolded, forever flat and green. This is a visual cliché of Egypt, an almost biblical one of its countryside. By contrast, urban Egypt is growing so fast today that some experts predict its original agricultural land is well on the way to disappearing.

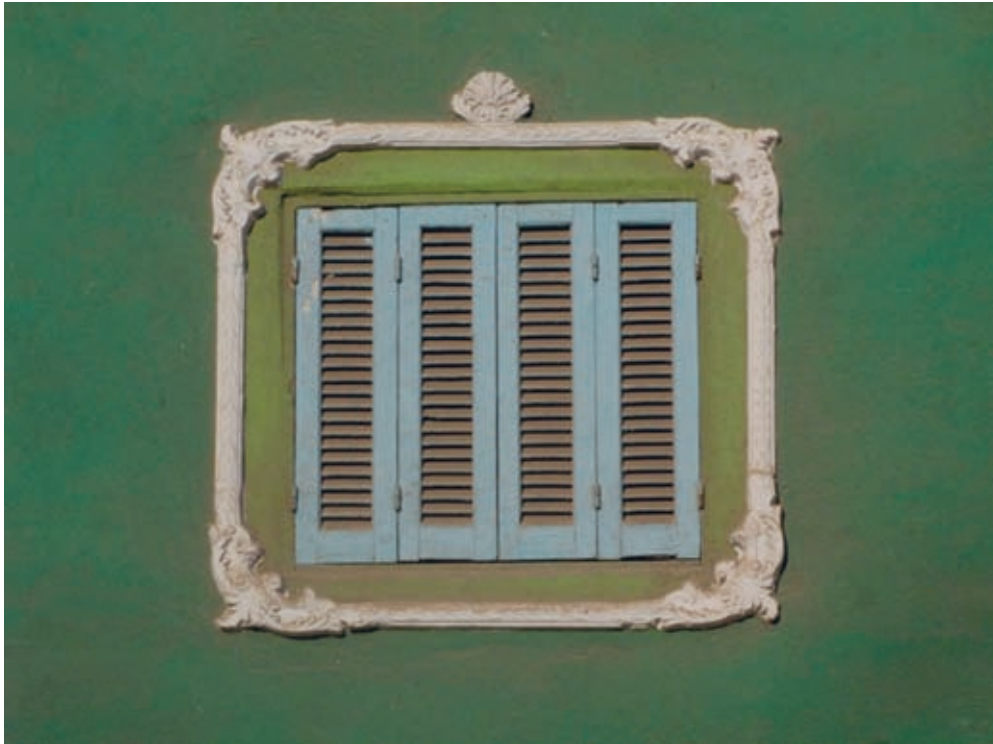
In Cairo, forty percent of the city is now composed of *ashwa'iyat* (literally “haphazard things”), commonly translated in this context as “informal housing.” These illegally built slums expand relentlessly in and around Cairo like mushrooms after the rain, suffocating the fertile soil beneath them. This “Red City,” as some architects refer to it, consists of endless rows of almost identical brick and cement buildings, long stretches of often windowless towers, random, informal constructions lacking in all public amenities. These slums are generally regarded as frightening spaces, dangerous and crime-ridden. Politicians debate whether to upgrade or eradicate them, without much of either happening so far.

Watching Cairo expand and spread over the last decades has brought me to ask what lies in store for its people. It seems to me that these *ashwa'iyat* represent a false promise – the promise of a heavenly new way of life amidst green pastures, a vain hope for a better tomorrow. The stark reality is that none of these towers of Babel is ever finished and that the green fields in which they are planted are now urban sprawl and refuse. The following images of the *ashwa'iyat* were taken in 2009, a stone's throw from the Cairo ring road. The *Da'iri*, as this highway is called, is the new road to the pyramids. Its flyovers soar above the ocean of red bricks and cement, beyond which the pyramids rise up in all their majesty.

Along with millions of *fellaheen*, “peasant farmers,” the donkey has made the transition from the cliché of a biblical landscape into this new reality of the *ashwa'iyat*. The sound of the donkey braying has always broken the silence of the Egyptian countryside, and now it breaks through the noise of the Red City in an agonising cry – is it in ecstasy or in despair? This fine line between heaven and hell resonates in all of my experiences of the *ashwa'iyat*. In popular belief, the donkey represents submission, stupidity, stubbornness and even evil. In urban Cairo it is the garbage collectors' mode of transportation, the beast of burden that connects Egypt to its past – humble, patient and wise. All of these associations have inspired me to create a “Donkey Symphony,” a sort of requiem, a hymn to the beauty that lies in horror, a hymn to hope in the midst of misery.



Agricultural land on the outskirts of Cairo







Crash barrier on the *Da'iri*



Flyover of the *Da'iri* under construction



Phone number for the “Hope Medical Clinic”



Waiting for a bus on the *Da'iri*





“Knowledge Valley School”



Fellah, “peasant farmer”



Decorative plasterwork for buildings





Allahu Akbar, El Hamdulillah, "God is Greater, Thanks be to God"





Staircase from the *Dai'ri* to the *ashwa'iyat*



Allah





Advertisement for an apartment building under construction











Pigeon fancier calling his pigeons back to the coop



Unofficial garbage sorting area





Canal-side garbage dump in residential area



Garbage collector



Garbage sorting area





Street decorations for the holy month of Ramadan





“Moonlight Tower”



Cattle Egret, popularly known as *sadiq el fellah*, “the peasant’s friend”



Symphony inspired by Henryk Gorecki's symphony #3, op36, 1976

Idea & Direction

Lara Baladi

Composition

Nathaniel Robin Mann, Angel Lopez de la Llave

Arrangement, Processing & Production

Nathaniel Robin Mann

Instruments recorded at Play Art Studios, Madrid, by Andy Duffill

Soprano

Monica Muñoz

Flute, Reed & Wind Instruments

Jose Manuel Pizarro

Cello & Viola da Gamba

Angel Lopez de la Llave

Violin

Dacian Marin

Donkeys

Burrolandia, Tres Cantos, Madrid

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