



LARA BALADI

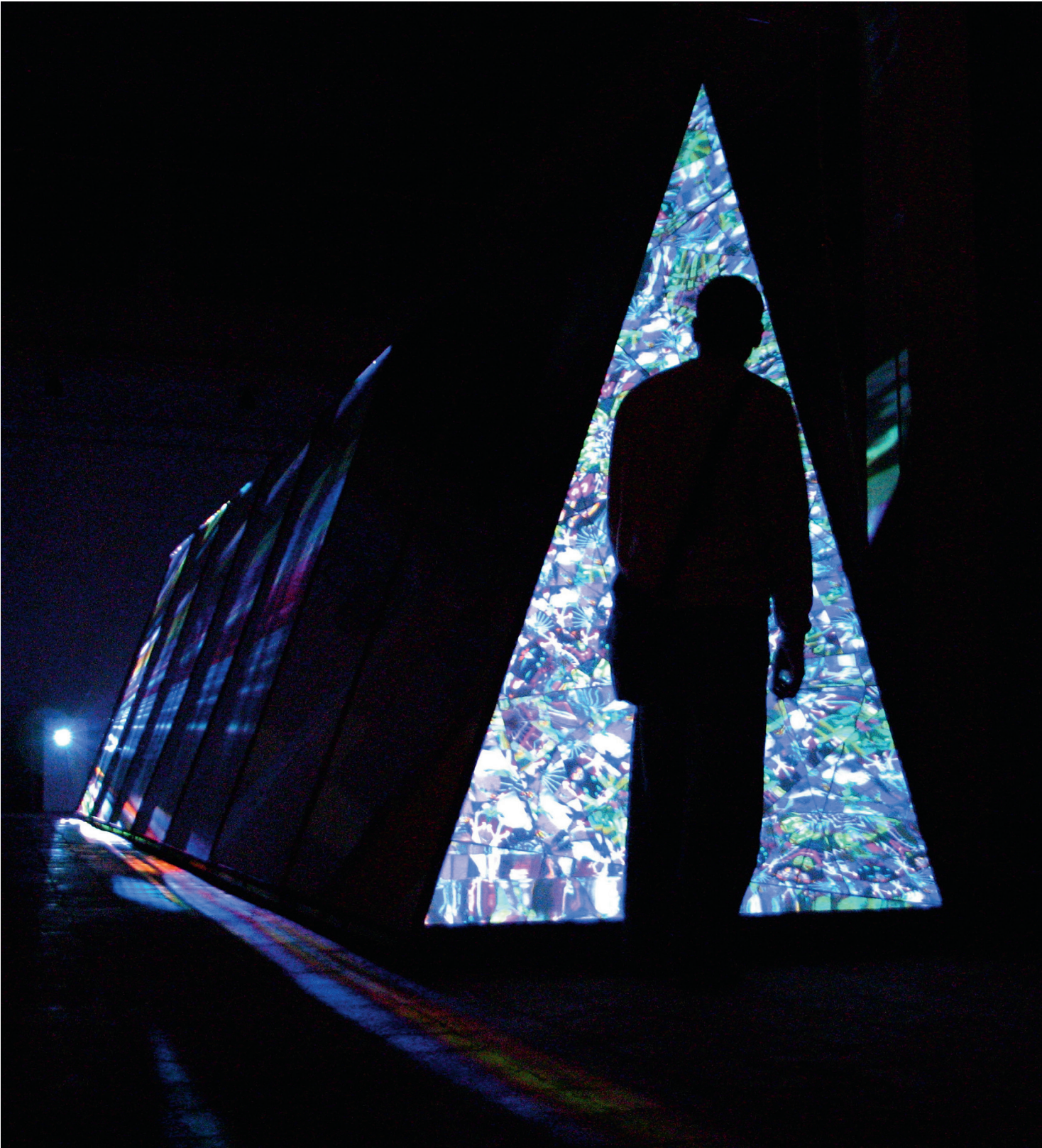
NARRATOR OF INVISIBLE THINGS

SHE WAS BORN IN LEBANON, STUDIED IN PARIS, LIVED IN LONDON AND CURRENTLY LIVES IN CAIRO WHEN SHE'S NOT IN RESIDENCE AT THE PRESTIGIOUS MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (MIT) IN BOSTON, WHERE SHE IS A RESEARCH PROFESSOR. LARA BALADI IS ONE OF THE ARTISTS WHO WAS INVITED TO CREATE HER OWN VISION OF THE HOUSE'S MYTHICAL FRAGRANCE FOR THE *MISS DIOR* TRAVELLING EXHIBITION THAT TOUCHED DOWN AT THE ULLENS CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART IN BEIJING THIS YEAR. HER WORK, *DON'T TOUCH ME TOMATOES & CHACHACHA*, IS A VIBRANT HOMAGE TO FEMININITY IN ALL ITS STRENGTH AND FRAGILITY, PERSONIFIED IN A COLLAGE OF ANIMATED PAVLOVA AND ISADORA DUNCAN AMONG MANY OTHERS. BY JÉRÔME HANOVER.

DON'T TOUCH ME TOMATOES & CHACHACHA. VIDEO STILL. VIDEO AND SURROUND SOUND INSTALLATION. 980 X 300 CM. 8:42 MINUTES. PRODUCTION URUBU. ARTWORK COMMISSIONED BY DIOR. COPYRIGHT LARA BALADI 2013.

LIKE LONG ECHOES THAT INTERMINGLE FROM AFAR
IN A DARK AND PROFOUND UNITY, VAST LIKE THE NIGHT
AND LIKE THE LIGHT, THE PERFUMES, THE COLOURS
AND THE SOUNDS RESPOND.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, CORRESPONDENCES, FROM LES FLEURS DU MAL.



EL HOREYA GAVYA LABOD (FREEDOM IS HERE), SCULPTURE, IRON AND LEATHER, VARIABLE DIMENSIONS, 2012.
OPPOSITE: ROBA VECCHIA (RAGMAN), INSTALLATION, DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY, COMPUTER PROGRAM, MIRRORS
AND METALLIC STRUCTURE, TOWNHOUSE GALLERY, CAIRO, 2006.

Jérôme Hanover: *You began your career with documentary photography; how did fiction become a part of your work?*

Lara Baladi: It happened in 1997. I had just moved back to Egypt, which my parents had left just before the Nasser revolution. I travelled through Cairo, the Nile delta and northern Egypt, and I discovered a country that was at once familiar and foreign. Everything was photogenic; everything seemed extraordinary. I realized that I had a special relationship with this country but I couldn't explain it, either in words because I no longer spoke Arabic, or in photos because I was just an amateur starting out. I shot documentary images inspired by my favourite photographers, Diane Arbus, Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Josef Koudelka. In working with the Egyptian film director Youssef Chahine and watching him set up scenes with hundreds of extras to fulfil his creative vision, fiction became obvious to me. I continued my photographic quest and accumulated documentary images, from portraits and still-lives to pictures of public and private spaces, and I discovered the importance of detail. I assembled my photos freely, using representations of reality to draw out a fictional narrative.

JH: *Is that your way of distracting attention from the visible?*

LB: As I developed my own photographic process, I was naturally attracted by fiction not only because I was disinterested in reality as such, but also, above all, because I was fascinated by mythology and its archetypes. I cared about my vernacular images. Working for the press didn't offer me that freedom. I am Lebanese, Egyptian and French: I belong to all of these cultures and, at the same time, none. At the time I didn't identify with any political or social movement. I was searching for myself. Like a free electron, I latched onto my camera and positioned myself

as an observer. Even today my multicultural roots (and lack of roots) are my strength and my weakness; it's what I'm made of. I was intrigued by the invisible, what lies beyond reality, and I was looking for symbolism in images. I was interested in what different cultures have in common rather than what separates them, in the similarities that exist between them and have overflowed, seeping across borders like a liquid you can't control. I wanted to break through the veneer of reality and move beyond the socio-cultural anchors that limited me; I created mythological capsules and hooked into fiction in order to develop my own visual language.

JH: *Was that when you began working with collages?*

LB: At the time, photography was in a state of flux. Digital was just beginning but everyone already saw that it was the future. Silver prints by the great photographers had saturated [the market], no one was printing anymore, and major manufacturers like Kodak stopped producing the most beautiful paper in favour of digital. But digital photos were no bigger than two megapixels, which was theoretically unusable professionally. To make things even more complicated, technology was not up to date in Egypt. And yet I was determined to realize large-scale works even though I only had access to 35-mm silver film, and I could only print my photos in postcard format. There was no professional lab. To get around the problem, I borrowed David Hockney's technique and made collages. At the dawn of digital, when the trend was toward ordinary photos, what was the value of an image if, as Ben puts it, "there's no such thing as a failed photo"? Charles Baudelaire's famous sonnet "Correspondences" struck me as self-evident. The resonance between images became the foundation of my photographic language.



OUM EL DOUNIA (IN ARABIC, "THE MOTHER OF THE WORLD" AND AND EXPRESSION TO DESIGNATE EGYPT), 360X120 CM. PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINT 10X15 CM. CREATED WITH THE SUPPORT OF LA FONDATION CARTIER POUR L'ART CONTEMPORAIN. COPYRIGHT LARA BALADI 2000.

JH: *And so you created Oum El Dounia ...*

LB: Yes, I created that collage in 2000 in response to a commission for an exhibition on the desert at the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain. *Oum El Dounia* (in Arabic, "Mother of the World") is a parody of the Orientalist postcard in which I brought together mythological characters, essentially drawn from fairy tales. As a counterpoint, I took a shot that represents the desert as a symbolic place of adventure, one sometimes populated with Bedouins and dromedaries, such as can be seen in the work of European photographers in the second half of the nineteenth century. They discovered the Middle East at the same time as they were exploring the nascent art of photography. Then I imitated children's drawings: a line through the middle of the page, a sun at the top and three pyramids underneath, without regard for perspective – everything is on the same plane, flat. I treated the desert like a primordial place, the bottom of the sea or the origin of the world ("Oum El Dounia" is also an expression that refers to Egypt as the cradle of all civilizations). With help from my friends, I created costumes and accessories that I staged in the Libyan Desert. As the main characters to represent

the birth of humanity, I chose Alice in Wonderland, the symbol of childhood and virginity, and the Little Mermaid, who represents the temptress, the woman as object, the doll (from the Arabic *aroussa*, which also translates as "the bride" or "the virgin"). These two timeless characters reflect human duality as well as humanity's innocence when the world was created. [A tapestry version of *Oum el Dounia* is currently on show at the Institut des Cultures d'Islam in Paris, as part of an exhibition that runs through 17 January 2016. JH: *How is your work expressed within the framework of the Miss Dior exhibition?*

LB: This exhibition recalls that, behind this luxury brand, there is a man and his story, and that there are more hidden riches than one can imagine in so familiar a name as Christian Dior. My point of anchorage in the designer's universe is the moment when Christian Dior the gallerist turns around and becomes Christian Dior the couturier. It's the moment when the perfume *Miss Dior* was born, inspired by Dior's love for his sister, who was part of the French Resistance and had just been liberated from the concentration camps following the Second World War.

JH: *You created Don't Touch Me Tomatoes & Chachacha in the form of a collage, like your early works. What were your references?*

LB: After ten or fifteen years of various and multidisciplinary works, I returned to a kind of fictional collage and contemporary myth writing, but this time in the form of a video installation that relies more on new technologies and archival videos than my own photographs. I was certainly inspired by the story of Isadora Duncan, whose biography I had read the year before, and for whom freedom of expression was at the heart of her artistic quest. As to my visual references, those are more on the order of classical painting, like the work of Hieronymus Bosch and medieval tapestries, in which esoteric language describes the invisible in vivid colours. JH: *Miss Dior was created within a particular context: it was 1947, the war has just ended, times are difficult and Christian Dior is speaking of beauty, happiness and rediscovered femininity. How does this paradox form the starting point for your work?*

LB: Yes, that period and context were a source of inspiration for *Don't Touch Me Tomatoes & Chachacha*. Christian Dior created *Miss Dior* at a very dark time in history. He dared to

remind us that lightness is a necessity. I was living a similar experience in Cairo, where the post-revolution was more violent than the revolution itself. I was worried because I knew that it was only the beginning. For the first time in twenty years, I felt attacked as a woman. So, following Christian Dior's example, I anchored myself in beauty to counter it and, in a sense, survive an acute ambient misogyny. I documented the revolution, among other things, by archiving videos, images and articles that were making the rounds on the Internet. At the same time, I researched historical references that resonated with the political situation in Egypt. It was then that I discovered a video of Anna Pavlova, the prima ballerina of the early twentieth century. In watching this dancer dressed all in white twirl against a black background, the idea came to me to create a work in which women are fireflies, like the ones that inspired Christian Dior to create the perfume *Miss Dior*. He wrote: "And then *Miss Dior* was born. It was born of those Provençal evenings filled with fireflies, when green jasmine serves a counterpoint to the melody of the night and the earth."