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'Cairo is my muse': ≡
Artist peels back the

layers of the city she loves

Leading Dubai gallery, The Third Line, opens an important new exhibition of works by Egyptian artist Huda Lutfi, running until 4 June

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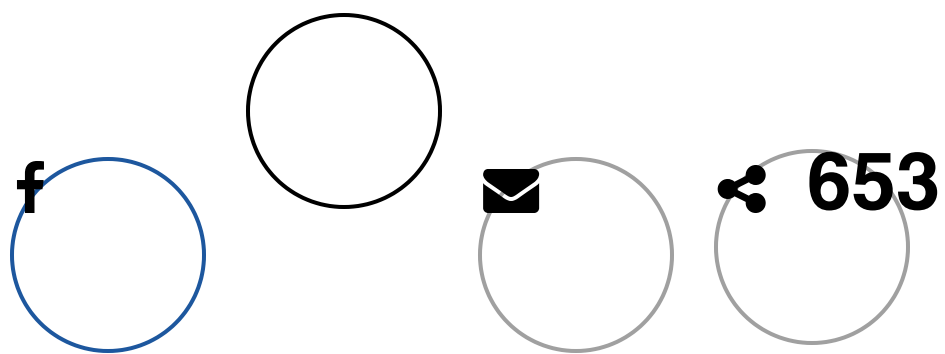


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Huda Lutfi's *Imagining the City*, 2016, composed of photographs, acrylic and oil paint on wood panel, part of her work featuring her home city of Cairo (Image courtesy of Huda Lutfi)

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DUBAI, United Arab Emirates - “Cairo is my muse, my home,” says Egyptian artist Huda Lufti. “I have a love-hate relationship with the city.”

Lufti speaks to Middle East Eye during a private walk through the artist's new exhibition at The Third Line's (<http://www.thethirdline.com/>) impressive space in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. She talks at length about the catalogue of tragedies that have befallen the Townhouse Gallery (<http://www.thetownhousegallery.com/>) in Cairo over recent months. Lufti has had her studio in

the same building as the city's leading arts space for 15 years, frequently held exhibitions there and had been involved in regular educational initiatives in the space.

In December, Egyptian authorities closed it down amid a cultural crackdown. Then just before its planned reopening in early April, the 1890s building partially collapsed, destroying the recently renovated Townhouse library, the first-floor gallery extension, and some administrative offices as well as an adjacent community work space.

Following the partial collapse, the municipality turned up and started to aggressively tear down wood on the exterior. The building was scheduled for immediate demolition and she had

a few hours to empty her studio to the nearby factory space. Thankfully the Department of Urban Harmony has stepped in and is currently working towards declaring it as a listed property. What they need now, according to Lutfi, are funds to restore it to its former glory. She says she is devastated by the situation, which has even affected her health.



The Third Line director Sunny Rahbar (L) with artist Huda Lutfi (R) in front of Lutfi's painting Inside the Box (MEE/Laura Egerton)

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Cairo as a muse

Huda Lutfi has been described as a "seminal cultural figure" among a generation of artists by Emirati commentator and art collector Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi.

Al-Qassemi was speaking at the 25 April opening of *Magnetic Bodies: Imaging the Urban*, The Third Line's (<http://www.thethirdline.com/>) fourth show at the Alserkal Avenue extension. Combining paintings, bricolage installations and video, it brings together over 35 works by Lufti from the last eight years and offers a unique insight on present-day Cairo.

“She has taken time to develop a newer body of work that pushes herself to engage at a very physical level with the neighbourhoods, streets and corners of Cairo,” said The Third Line co-founder Sunny Rahbar.



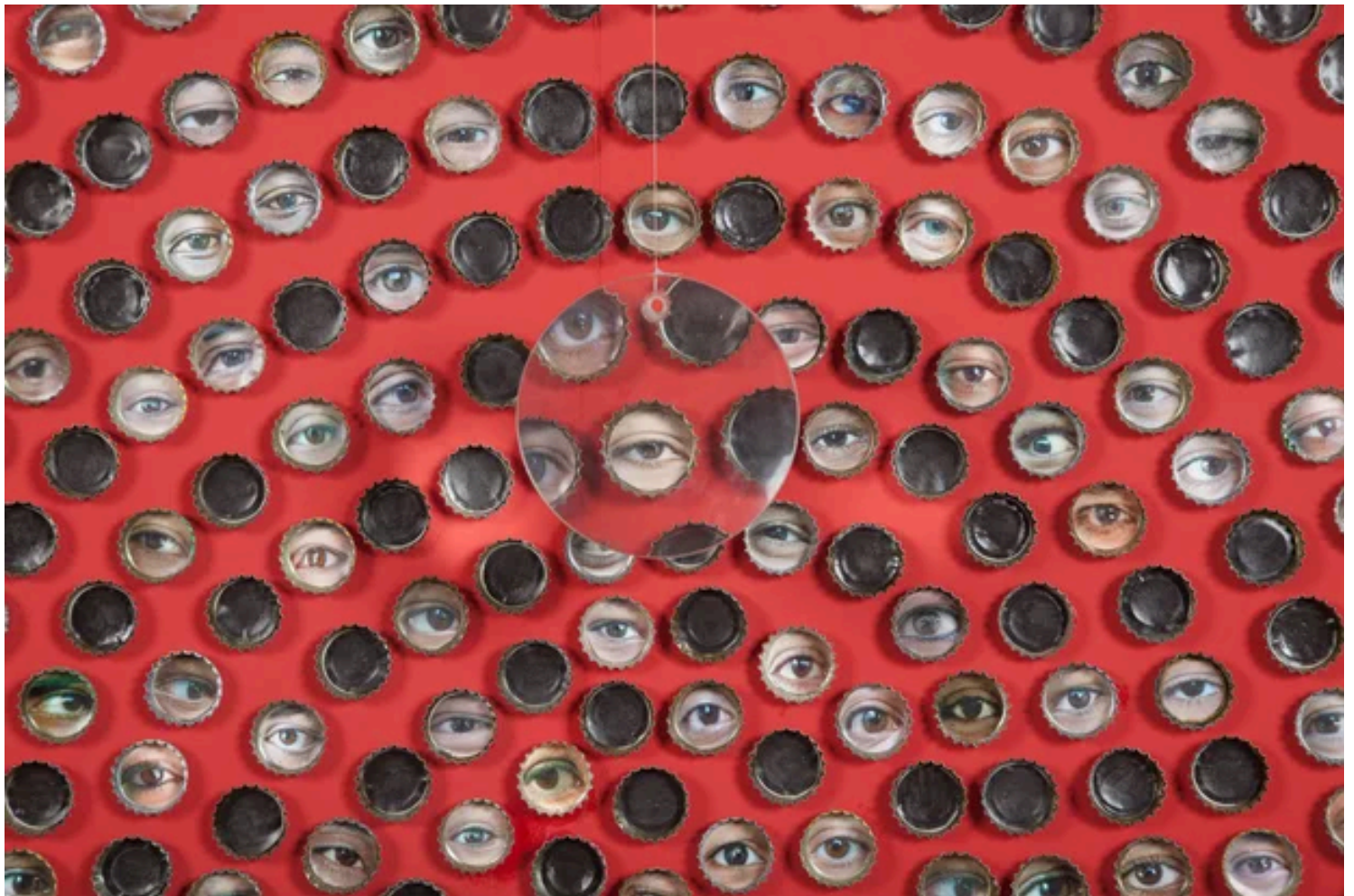
You Dont Want To Upset Me (2013) Mixed Media
Plastic Dolls (Image courtesy of Huda Lutfi)

Inspiring the next generation

Egyptian artist and graphic designer Nadine Noor el-Din (<http://dessinatrice.tumblr.com/>) attended the opening. “As an Egyptian living in Dubai, I think it’s really important that Egyptian artists exhibit here,” she told Middle East Eye. “It gives them exposure to a different audience and starts a discourse that allows their work to be seen conceptually.”

El-Din studied at the American University of Cairo and knows the city intimately. For her, “Huda Lutfi’s work represents Cairo in the literal sense – in her collages and elements of visual documentation you can literally feel the essence of downtown Cairo.”

About the show itself she says: “I think it’s really important in the context of Egypt’s current situation. I am personally very inspired by her work. I love that she is a historian as well as an artist. I find her work very political without being overtly so, which is a difficult balance to strike.”



Discarded (2012-2013) Wall Installation with newspaper and bottle caps (Image courtesy of

Cultural historian to artist to activist

Lufti is a cultural feminist historian by professional training, with a PhD in Arab Muslim Cultural History from McGill University, Montreal. She continues to lecture in both history and art history in Cairo and translates this background to a visual arts context in fascinating, complex ways.

At the entrance to the exhibition leaning against the wall are a pair of fragile female forms in metal, with coils around their necks: these are enlarged *masha*, tongs used to hold hot coals for shisha pipes which she had found in her local coffee shop.

Other sculptural pieces examine the restricted role women have in Egyptian society.

Throughout her work we find mutilated body parts, suggesting the lack of freedom for self-expression. Another familiar symbol is the crutch: a major installation in the show is a group of crutches and mutilated feet covered with photographs of cacti.



Installation view of the exhibition with Lutfi's
Cactus Crutches (MEE/Laura Egerton)

'The female body can represent humanity too'

The artist strongly believes that “the female body can refer to all of humanity, that it is not just the domain of the male.” She frequently uses the

female form as a wider metaphor. These include *Housebound*, a pair of legs protruding from a wall covered in photographs of Egyptian women; and *The Perfumed Garden*, an assemblage of over 70 recycled perfume bottles collected from local markets in Cairo, each one stuffed with pictures of female friends, family members, celebrities such as Umm Kalthum, and peasants she met on the road by her rural family home.



Recycled perfume bottles collected from the local markets in Cairo are lined up, each one stuffed with pictures of female friends, family members, celebrities (Image courtesy of Huda Lutfi)

Both of these works date from 2008. A new interpretation of this theme is found in *Plastic* from 2016. Replacing the glass bottles with disposable plastic ones, she is offering a comment

on today's throwaway culture and globalisation. Instead of individual women, the images enclosed are of repeated, sometimes overtly sensual models, wearing military garments, inspired by the mannequins which dominate the shop fronts of downtown Cairo.



Mannequins have become a go-to object for Lutfi, a continuation of her fascination with dolls

(Huda Lufti)

Mannequin as muse

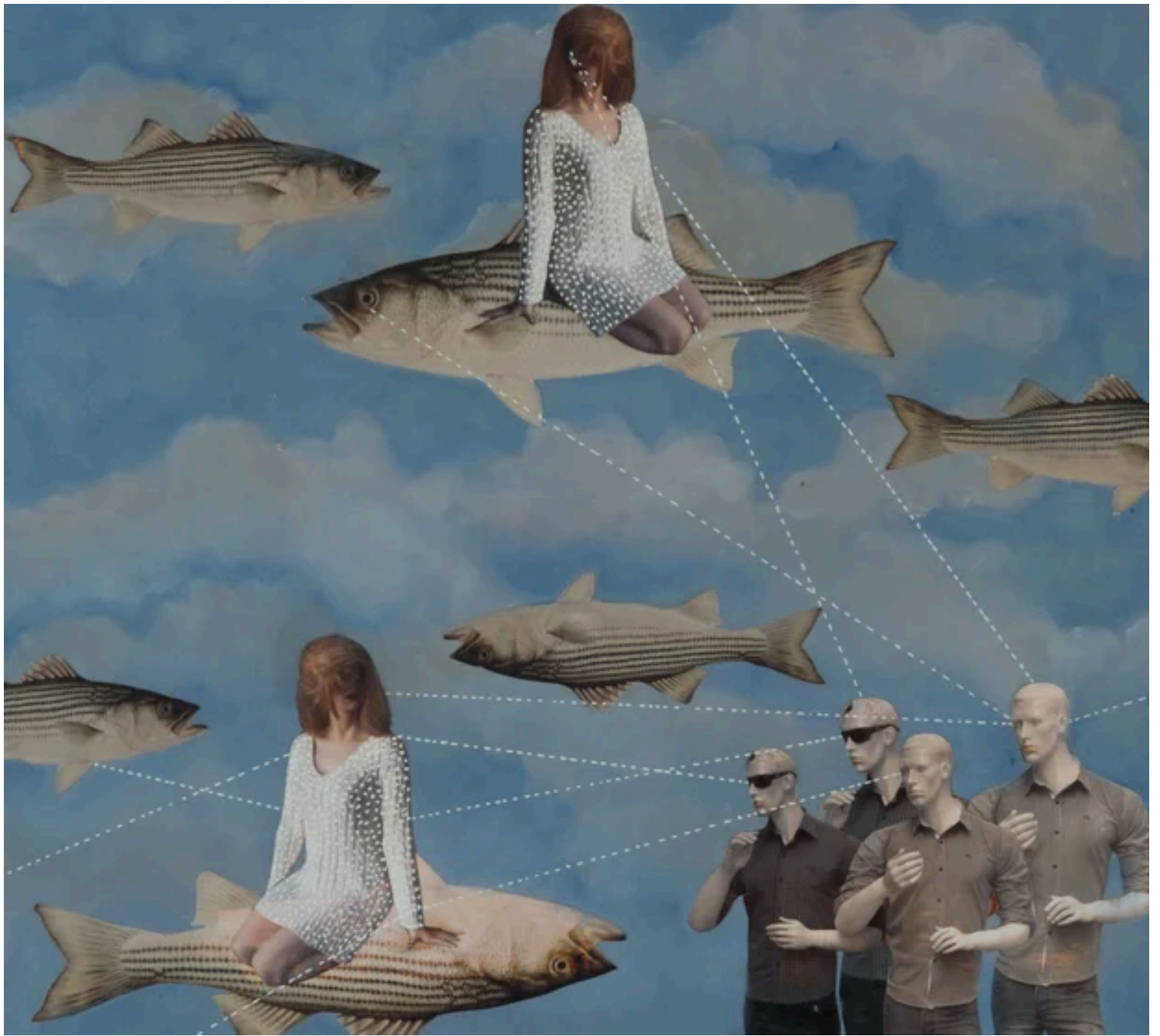
Mannequins have become a go-to object for Lutfi, a continuation of her fascination with dolls: they represent consumerism but are also a sign of the quirkiness of Cairo. There is a specific ideal of beauty reflected in Lutfi's depiction of the female form as a doll. In this way her practice differs from artists whom she cites as influences, Hans Bellmer or Louise Bourgeois, who verge on the grotesque, although she does share their fascination with the fetish.

Lutfi talks animatedly about her relationship with Amm Khalil, a mannequin maker

on Sherif Street close to where she lives. Lutfi bought a group of hand-painted gypsum busts (they allowed her to as she also purchased the expensive turbans they were promoting) and displays them in the gallery as she found them in his shop, with garish make up and the odd chip on the nose.

Khalil has recently passed away and so the tradition will no doubt stop, replaced by mass-

produced mannequins made in China. The artist jokes that they are easy to play with, you do not need permissions to work with them. It is her intimate relationship with traditions such as this which leads al-Qassemi to talk of her work as being “somehow strongly and palpably Cairene”.



Floating (2015) Photographs, acrylic and oil paint on wood panel (Image courtesy of Huda Lutfi)

The revolution: cut and paste memories

Egyptian artists have responded to the revolution and ongoing political upheavals in Cairo in a number of ways. For Lutfi, already in her 60s, experiencing first-hand events in Tahrir Square galvanised her to reach for a camera for the first time in her practice as an artist. “It was suddenly ok to take pictures on the street,” she explains. “Taking photographs was the only way you could document events immediately as they unfolded.”

Her subsequent work uses elements from the images she had captured as material in her compositions: photography for her is a tool, a way of generating content, but she does not present her work as straightforward photography. A powerful work from 2012-2013, *Discarded* is a circular installation of found bottle caps filled with photographs of cut out eyes, of those who lost their sight during the revolution.

Bidayaat is a video animation from the same time which uses photographs of policeman's feet chasing protestors, their jarring movements reinforced by a techno soundtrack. Repetition is a frequent factor in her practice; it gives emphasis and comments on the rituals of daily life, and can at times become meditative.

Lutfi is constantly playing with “cut and paste memories”. Scissors are as important to her as a camera or paintbrush – indeed she even includes a photograph of a pair of scissors in two small, square paintings on panels produced last year, *Juxtapositions* and *Playing with Scissors*.

Surreal undertones

Influenced by the Dada and Surrealist movements, in particular Man Ray, Lutfi often adds bizarre elements to her pieces. Women float on the back of fish, limbs fly around an aubergine, skies become a brilliant blue or shocking pink. These seem at odds to the typically grey, smog-filled skies of Cairo, which is intentional.

The artist explains: “In Cairo I felt very enclosed, we all feel constrained and I wanted to breathe.” Al-Qassemi reflected that they give her compositions freedom, a sense of space: “a wide-open sky which contrasts with what is happening below.” Colour is essential to Lutfi, both aesthetically and to suggest a mood. She explains that a bright colour can lessen the disturbance of the content of the work. Some of the exhibition walls are painted an exquisite teal.



The City Goes Pop (2015) Mixed media on wood panel (Image courtesy of Huda Lutfi)

Layer by layer

Two works in the exhibition have been acquired by al-Qassemi's Sharjah-based Barjeel Art Foundation

(<http://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/>) and they are arguably the most relevant and powerful works on display. *Cairo Resonances* is a video and sound work produced in 2013, inspired by the many derelict buildings in downtown Cairo.

Produced in collaboration with a Danish sound artist, the work takes a ghostly tour of an abandoned hotel, shutters open and close, and piles of archives quiver in the breeze.

The monumental photomontage *The City Goes Pop* brings together images the artist has taken on her walks around the city, meshing together significant monuments, buildings, mannequins and elements of street culture, creating a psychological map of her preoccupations with daily life. She is constantly learning more about her city, entrenched as it is in the past.

An urban archaeologist, Lutfi's works examine the inner fabric of the city of Cairo, peeling it off, layer by layer.

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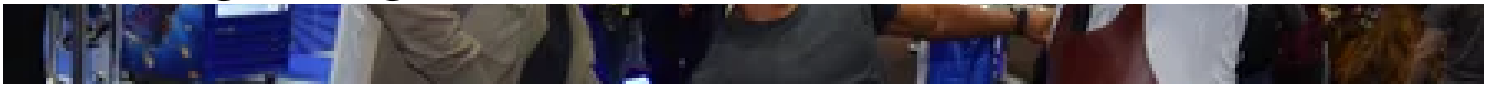
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