[Huda Lutfi \"I Love Egypt\" (2006). Copyright the artist.]

Huda Lutfi: The Artist and the Historical Moment

By : Mai Serhan

Huda Lutfi is a cultural historian. She is also a visual artist; but if you want to cut through classifications and simplifications, if you want to get to the heart of who she is and what she does, nothing reveals more about this historian turned artist than her home address: Champollion Street, in the heart of Downtown Cairo.

At this address, Lutfi has come to inhabit a front row seat before Egypt's most significant historical and cultural moments. If the walls of that time-honored piece of Cairo could speak, they would tell you about how in 1919 Egyptians poured into its streets to protest against the exile of Saad Zaghloul, or about 1967 to demand the return of Nasser after his famous abdication speech. They would tell you about the Bread Riots of 1977, the 2001 protests in solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada, the 2003 rage

against the invasion of Iraq, and the famous eighteen days that toppled the Mubarak regime in 2011. In short, if these walls could speak, they would narrate to you the story of Egypt; its men and women, its trials and tribulations, its highs and lows, what changed over the years and what stood the test of time.

Speaking of her decision in 1997 to move to a Downtown address, Lutfi says, “I wanted to be a real Cairene, enjoying the city’s hustle and bustle, its old souks, flea markets, craft workshops, antique shops and bookstores, countless monuments, Sufi *mulids*, Islamic and Coptic artifacts and rich architecture. I also wanted to become part of its cultural and intellectual life, its cafés, galleries, museums and its intellectual ‘hangouts.’” It is a move she has never regretted. With Downtown as

her gate to the city, she has voyaged into some of its most intriguing pockets: from Souq El Imam, the city's largest repository of discarded objects, to the Azbakiyya bookstalls; from carpenter shops to antique shops; from Bab El Khalk to the shoe factories of al-Ataba, and from the junk and treasures of the Friday Market to the seamstresses of the old quarter of Sayyida Zaynab.

It is in these distinctly Cairene spaces that Lutfi has come to excavate the narratives of her beloved city, an exercise that has enriched both her work as a historian and her art as a bricoleur. With a Ph.D. in Islamic Culture and History from McGill University, a distinguished career as a Professor in the Department of Arab and Islamic Civilization at The American University in Cairo, and a notable body of work as a contemporary visual artist, the symbiotic

experience between all three axes of her life is plain to see. Indeed, much, if not all, her artistic work has been a visual translation of her historical interests in the city. Her academic work on women, gender relations, Sufism, *mulids*, medieval Coptic and Islamic festivals, and dreams permeate her visual work and are transformed, on the canvas and in her installations, into enchanting signs and symbols, Pharaonic scripts and geometric figures, icons and numerals, dancing bodies and androgynous figures —all of which attest to the process of historical layering that she has thoroughly assimilated.

Looking at her whole body of artistic work, from 1992 when she first started experimenting with bricolage to the present day, one gets a strong and consistent sense of purpose, of a need to fulfill a role. The role is one that she is quite familiar with,

that of the archivist. Between documentation and fantasy, she moves, preserving significant memories from erosion and bringing to the fore subjects that have otherwise been neglected in the historical narrative.

Take, for example, the question of women and gender relations in the Arab world. As a graduate student of history and culture at McGill University, Lutfi relates how she had to examine Arabic primary historical sources. What struck her during her readings was the total absence of women from these accounts. “Where was I in the narrative?” she wondered. Acutely aware of what she calls the role of patriarchal conventions in incapacitating feminine potential, one will notice how the artist places the feminine at the center of most, if not all, her creative work, making women the mouthpiece of the city,

voicing both its political and cultural grievances. In her 2003 exhibition, *Found in Cairo*, the feminine even comes to embody Cairo. Speaking of her desire to feminize the city, she reflects, “It seemed fitting to me, for after all, the city’s name, al-Qahira, is in the feminine form.”

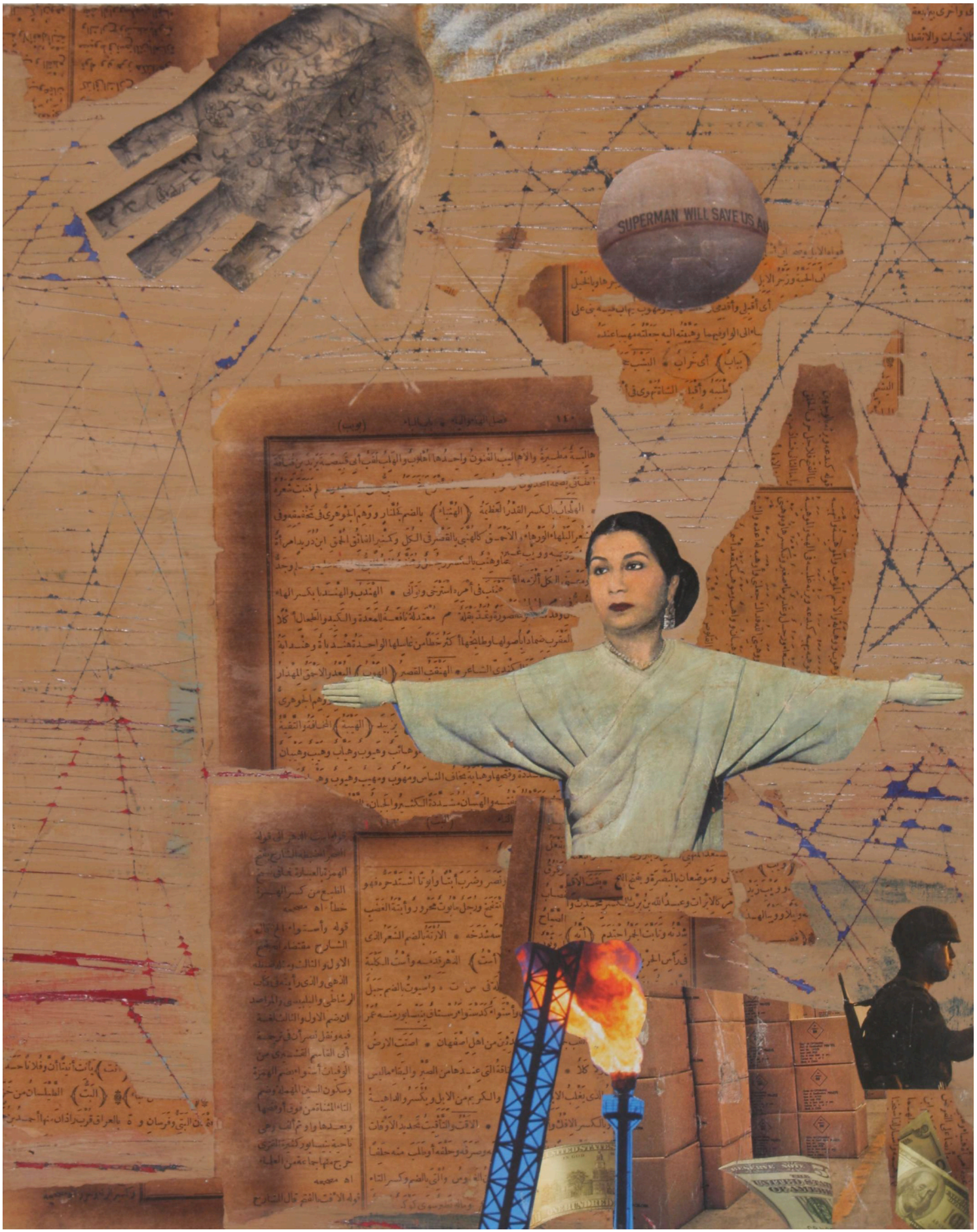
In 2003, *Found in Cairo* coincided with an important historical moment: the US invasion of Iraq. Thousands of Egyptians gathered in protest on the streets of Downtown. In the studio, Lutfi was busy at work, piecing together her findings from dolls and mannequins to chair legs, clock casings, and more. One of the installations that emerged was a response to the political climate. “No to War” featured dismembered mannequins trapped in an old and beautiful encasement with arms flailing in the air, protesting in unison to the war.

In 2006, the artist pushed the feminine to the fore once more; this time to contest a cultural blunder, the disappearance of one of the most creative traditions in Egypt, doll making. On her many trips to the Friday Market, she came across heaps of discarded plastic dolls that were made in China or Korea. Her findings brought to her attention the fact that these mass-produced dolls seem to have replaced the more personal ones, handmade by Egyptian women. In response, Lutfi collaborated with women from the old quarter of Sayyida Zaynab, Suhag in Upper Egypt, and the village of Tunis in Fayyum who taught her how to design patterns, cut and sew fabrics, and stuff the dolls. The result was her 2006 exhibition, *Arayis*.

In 2008, another politically charged moment saw the artist piece together objects from the city to make

another statement for the annals of time. In her exhibition *Why Not?,* Lutfi made a series of installations reflecting on the Israeli siege of Gaza and the subsequent air strikes that left approximately 1,417 Palestinians dead. Again here, we see the feminine being the mouthpiece. In her installation, “Entrapped,” a mould of the artist’s own head is snared in what looks like a cross between barbed wire and the signature pattern of the Palestinian *kufiya*. Both the wire and the pattern are imprinted on the face. The piece is a reference not only to the Palestinian predicament but also to the artist’s total affiliation with the Palestinian plight.

["Entrapped" (2008). Copyright the artist.]


SUPERMAN WILL SAVE US

["Superman Will Save US" (2008). Copyright the artist.]

It is in *Why Not?* that a sense of weariness and tedium with the state of affairs in the Arab world becomes quite evident. The United States had invaded Iraq and plundered its resources, the Palestinian situation was stuck in what seemed like a perpetual downward spiral, dictatorships were abound, and many Arab autocrats were essentially US clients. In Egypt, the deteriorating living conditions and stale political climate left the man on the street apathetic and struggling for the minimum, to get by. There was a cloud of despair, alleviated only by the occasional trademark Egyptian joke. In her piece, “Superman Will Save Us” Lutfi addresses these issues. At the center of this collage, we see

Umm Kulthum. A recurrent icon in the artist's work, she is time and again depicted as the symbol of female strength, of tradition, resistance and national identity. Around Umm Kulthum, we see oil wells, US dollar notes, and soldiers standing on guard. At the top, we see a dismembered hand, a recurrent symbol of incapacitation, and an ironic statement that pokes fun at American pop culture and White House rhetoric alike.

In the couple of years leading up to what has now come to be known as the "Arab Uprisings," feelings of discontent had reached an all-time high and exasperation was palpable on the streets. "I was living in a state of denial," Lutfi says, "I did not follow the news regularly and I rarely read the newspapers."* The last time she had joined a demonstration was when Israel invaded Lebanon in

2006 only to be outnumbered by Central Security Forces. Disappointed with the empty rhetoric, she left the Tagammu' party. As old leftists, they seemed to have lost the kind of energy that can bring about change, she says. In class, she congratulated herself for teaching her students how to practice critical thinking. In her artwork, she was content poking fun at the political violence and injustices that dominate daily life.

But, as they say, *the darkest hour is just before dawn*. In 2011, Lutfi's son urged her to get on Facebook and watch the call for a general protest on 25 January. What she witnessed took her by complete surprise: a *veiled*, *young*, *woman* was announcing her dramatic call to action and urging men and women to heed her call. The young girl was Asmaa Mahfouz, the 6 April activist, and the

call was to come down and say no to corruption and no to the regime.

The rest, as they say, is history. Yet, for a resident of Downtown, the eighteen days that followed literally hit home. Abrupt and important changes took place in her daily life. She became addicted to Facebook, started reading the Arabic newspapers everyday, and became glued to the morning and evening news. She was in Tahrir almost daily. Whatever artwork she was creating at the time was placed on the back burner, she abandoned her studio, and the camera became her preferred artistic tool.

Tahrir became the battlefield but was also the home, the stage, and the gallery. Young activists painted scathing and subversive graffiti on its walls, political drawings, cartoons and manifestos were on exhibit

everywhere. Puppet plays were improvised, installations were spontaneously constructed out of stones and found objects, and printed images of the martyrs were strewn throughout. The artistic experience on the street was more organic, instant and inherently political than what any gallery exhibition could ever hope for: "Like many artists, I was daunted by the spontaneous creative impulses of the square. The only thing that I felt I could do at the time was build some kind of archive, if only to preserve a memory of what I have seen and emotionally experienced."

Suffice to say, those turbulent and inspiring times left Lutfi humbled. Like many artists, she became confused about the direction of her artwork. Where to go? Where to begin? This period of anxiety and lack of focus lasted for more than a year, after which

she started gaining distance and perspective. Eventually realizing that her venture into activism was perhaps an inescapable phase of her aesthetic investigation, Lutfi returned to the studio.

In the work that followed, one can trace a continuation of many of the elements that make up Lutfi's artistic world. For one, the bricoleur returns as an archivist and a collector of the city's discarded goods. In her work "Discarded," for example, we see discarded bottle caps inlaid with photographs of the eyes of those who had lost their sight at the hands of Mubarak's snipers during the eighteen days. As is her trademark technique, she uses repetition here to intensify the impact of her statement.

["Discarded" (2012). Copyright the artist.]

In another piece, we again see women take center stage, this time to commemorate the eighteen female protesters who were subjected to virginity tests by the Egyptian military. The military man is deliberately silhouetted in black, while the women

are depicted as one-legged, with their bodies half erased to evoke a sense of helplessness and humiliation.

["Tested!" (2012). Copyright the artist.]

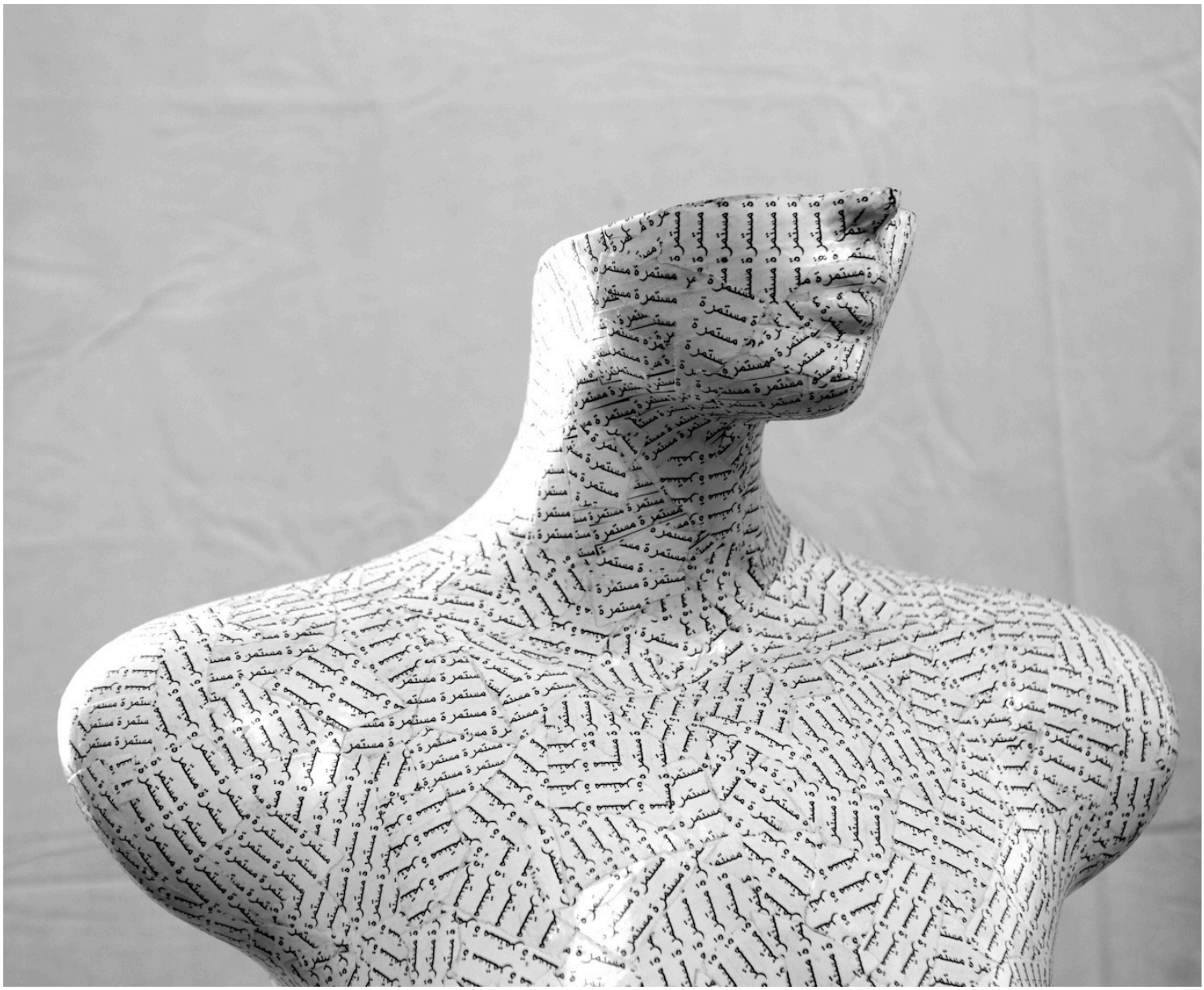
Yet, even though there is a sense of continuation, there is also an unmistakable sense of a paradigm shift. One major change is the use of the camera to document the most important moments and faces of the uprising. In her piece “Crossing the Redline,” for example, one can identify a new sense of innocence and even romanticism. Instead of the recurrent theme of women being entrapped or incapacitated in one way or another, here we find women on the streets, liberated and taking charge. Dressed like

soldiers, they are seen crossing the "redline," or what Egyptians have come to coin, *the fear barrier*.

["Crossing the Redline" (2011) detail. Copyright the artist.]

In her installation “Lipstick & Moustache,” we witness a departure from her critical approach to the

binary discourse, assigning clichéd roles to both men and women. Here the mould of Lutfi's face returns. This time, however there are two of them, Lutfi the man, in a moustache and Lutfi the woman in lipstick, practically interchangeable. This playful take on the binary discourse is a direct reference to the changing dynamic that had taken place in the square. For the first time, women assumed an equal footing as men. They treated casualties, took bullets, directed protests and led chants. No longer obliged to step in, in order to assert presence or contest a reality, the artist here simply, and humorously, mirrors the change on the street.



["Mustamerra" (2012). Copyright the artist.]

So now that the artist is back in the studio, what is it that she wants to convey? Perhaps the most fitting answer would be in the form of one of her latest

installations, a French mannequin covered in shredded pieces of paper that read, “Mustamerra,” meaning, *I will continue*. Like all of Lutfi’s artistic statements, this one too is feminine on multiple levels. Here, the city, al-Qahira, the revolution, *thawra,* and the female figure represent one and the same thing, the spirit needed to move forward. “Keep the energy alive,” she says, “for the only constant is change.”

*A full account of Huda Lutfi’s artistic work can be found in the newly released book, *Huda Lutfi: A Retrospective.*

*The artist’s account of the January 25 uprising is part of The International Summer Academy at The American University in Cairo, on the theme of

Aesthetics and Politics: Counter-Narratives, New Publics, and the Role of Dissent in the Arab World.