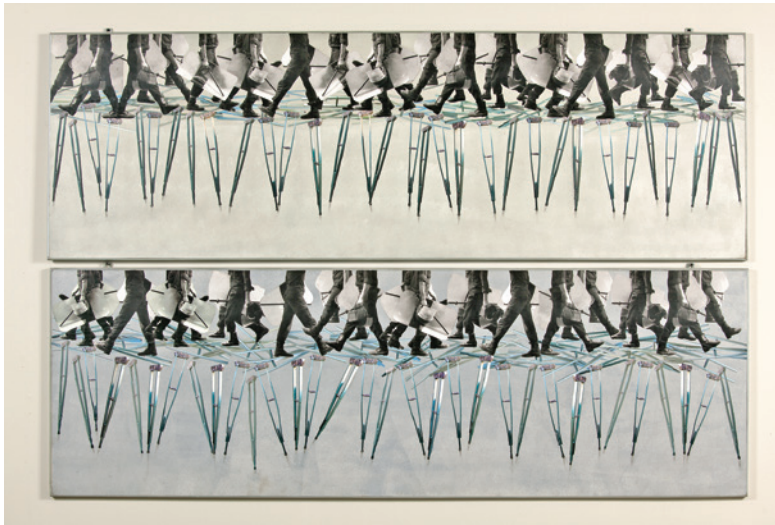


HUDA LUTFI

MAGNETIC BODIES: IMAGING THE URBAN



Every historian is a bricoleur. Documenting and manipulating in equal measure, the historian sits at the fulcrum of twin impulses: to conserve and to craft; to decipher reality and to dramatize a narrative. Cairo-based artist Huda Lutfi, true to her training as a historian, excavates, documents and narrates. What Cairo spits out—the flotsam and jetsam of the heaving metropolis’s flea markets and junk merchants—she takes in. Following the so-called Egyptian Revolution of 2011 her resolve to record the events unfolding on her very doorstep intensified. Assembling these findings into a variety of works, including sculptures, photomontages, collages and videos, Lutfi “images” her urban surround.

Like a historian stringing together facts to concoct a coherent narrative, Lutfi’s “imaging” is not a mere transposition of Cairene cosmopolitan reality. Rather, her bricolages constitute a willfully critical chronicle of a lame, bumbling state, hobbling through a metropolitan maelstrom.

At the heart of “Magnetic Bodies: Imaging the Urban,” held at Dubai’s the Third Line gallery, were her new works of collaged photos on painted wood panel. Big open skies and vast, monochromatic grounds frame carefully composed clusters of mannequins, buildings and Cairene street scenes. The sheer formal appeal of these works—like *Red* (2016) with its tiers of gray mannequins against a crisp vermilion ground—seems to preclude any potential sting; it looks too aesthetically pleasing to be critical. Yet in *The Fool’s Play* (2016), a lineup of Sufi-verse-inscribed torsos crowned with dunce caps, picks up where the artist’s scathing *The Fool’s Journal* (2012–13), comprising similar headwear fashioned out of Egyptian newspapers, left off. In *The Fool’s Play*, a chorus line of armless, blinded, mismatched figures (male torsos atop female legs) sways in a muddled dance. The works in this first part of

“Magnetic Bodies” set the normally static figure of the mannequin to coordinated movement: in *Red* they reel at some out-of-sight scene; in another work, *Abundance* (2015), they are corralled and bound, as if to prevent their flight; elsewhere they are winged and aloft.

This stylized, composed movement was also at the core of a second series of work, in which the ubiquitous mannequins rub shoulders with photos of actual Cairenes. In *The City Goes Pop* (2015), collaged towers spike up into a cloud-dotted sky above syncopated streets; everywhere, various symbols foreground a sense of precariousness and authority. Mannequins teeter across a tight rope, or dangle on broken ladders; a statue of noted Egyptian economist Talaat Harb is covered and bound like a stifled hulk. Identifiable places—the Cairo cemetery, the Franciscan convent—are collaged into an intricate, unreal urban amalgamation in *Mannequins and the City* (2015) and *On the Way to Mother’s House* (2016). Busty mannequins in slinky, leatherette faux-policeman outfits and fishnets pepper the foreground in *Ard Al Liwa* (2016).

As the exhibition’s title states, the body is fundamental to urban imagery, but it is also one of Lutfi’s long-standing preoccupations. Between eyes (*Discarded*, 2012–13), legs (*House Bound*, 2008), busts (*Metamorphosis II*, 2009) and a multitude of mannequin limbs, the body is repeatedly evoked through a concerted metonymy. Crutches in *Cactus Crutches* (2015) and *Marching on Crutches* (2012) are stand-ins for an absent body, as well as a symbol of ailing authority. Even her 2013 video *Cairo Resonances*, which pans through a crumbling building, captures traces of humans long gone, fathoming the edifice’s eerie corporality. Windows and hallways are orifices and arteries; shutters twitch and drapes breathe.

The success of “Magnetic Bodies” may well be that it added another layer, literally, to Lutfi’s practice. The Third Line’s new, generously proportioned space provided ample latitude to show her older works alongside her new cacophonous collages. Indeed, some of the former had inspired the latter: *Plastic* (2016) is an updated take on *The Perfume Garden* (2008), whose glass perfume vials, housing painted images depicting smiling paradigms of feminine beauty, have morphed into photos of scantily clad mannequins set in mangled plastic water bottles. Yet what ultimately defines her years of tinkering with artefacts and images is Lutfi’s singular vision of Cairo as a site of flux and metastasis—at once her material and her muse.

KEVIN JONES

Opposite page

BAKTASH SARANG JAVANBAKHT

Tower

2015

Mixed media, 190 x 178 x 20 cm.

Courtesy Total Arts at Courtyard, Dubai.

This page

HUDA LUTFI

Marching on Crutches

2012

Mixed-media photomontage, diptych:

each panel 65 x 201 x 2 cm.

Courtesy the artist and The Third Line, Dubai.