

Youssef Nabil

English



I Saved My Belly Dancer

Youssef Nabil is primarily known for his distinct hand-colored silver gelatin photographs that explore memory, exile, and the artist's relationship with his native Egypt. The hand-coloring process allows Nabil to transform what the camera captures as a black-and-white print into a palette of light, pastel colors. This lends a soft, delicate appearance to the works, invoking a nostalgic quality that recalls early Egyptian cinema.

After Nabil departed his homeland in 2003, he began producing works that recorded his nomadic experience—as seen in the *Self-Portraits* series (2003–present)—which now radiate as an evocative testimony of his strong ties with Egypt. These works, as well as other hand-tinted photographs, capture the charm of the golden age of Egyptian cinema in the 1940s and 1950s. Cinema is a major influence on Nabil's work, not only on his photographs, which borrow the tinted film technique from early films, but also on his recent ventures into video, including *I Saved My Belly Dancer* (2015).

I Saved My Belly Dancer addresses concerns as Egypt's cultural heritage surrenders to its changing ideological conditions. The work's title posits the artist's wish regarding the fate of a cultural tradition. In the Middle East, belly dancing was once respected as an art form, regularly performed by professional dancers at weddings and other celebrations.¹ In Egypt, the dance was particularly cherished; it is believed that its movements date back to ancient Egypt and were inspired by the fluctuating tides of the Nile. In recent years, particularly after the January Revolution of 2011, such elegant customs—together with their associations of a relatively liberal attitude toward women—have been increasingly threatened by the rise of conservative religious sentiments on the one hand and the objectification and sexualization of women within commercial imagery on the other.

Nabil's distress spiked after hearing of the closure of various belly-dancing clubs in Egypt, indicating the country he remembered was being threatened by conservative ideas and cultural impositions.² He first approached the increasing social ban on belly dancing in the Middle East through his work *The Last Dance* (2012). Consisting of 12 photographs composed as

a grid, the work captures a dozen movements of a belly dancer dressed in gold as she is reprimanded for performing the once-revered dance.³ Her face is covered and parts of her body rarely surface, suggesting that although the movements seem to evolve gracefully, she is trapped in an uncomfortable and uncertain circumstance. The artist has described the woman as resembling a butterfly, struggling to survive during its transformation.

This investigation continues in *I Saved My Belly Dancer*—a lavish, hallucinatory production filmed in high definition, with a color treatment reminiscent of the pastel palette found in Nabil's hand-tinted photographs. Featuring actress Salma Hayek, of Lebanese and Mexican ancestry, and the French-Algerian actor Tahar Rahim, the video begins with a panoramic shot of a desert landscape that ends at a tranquil sea. While Rahim reclines, a captivating score by Tunisian composer Anouar Brahem plays as scenes from a dream sequence come and go. A succession of images appear before the reclining figure—a line of men in early 20th century military garb, royal personages in tiaras and sashes, a bride and groom, and a group of belly dancers—ghosts from the protagonist's memory. In the next sequence these figures appear lifeless on the ground, scattered like bodies strewn across a battlefield.⁴ As the protagonist weeps, a single dancer—Hayek—appears alone. She begins stroking the protagonist's body with her



2

¹ See Najwa Adra, "Belly Dance: An Urban Folklore," in *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy*, eds. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2005). ² See Natasha Morris, "I Saved My Belly Dancer," *Reorient*, February 23, 2016. ³ See Anna Seaman, "Egyptian artist Youssef Nabil on Exile and Rebirth," *National*, May 23, 2013. ⁴ See Natasha Morris, "I Saved My Belly Dancer."



3

hands and hair in an attempt to console him. Overcome with emotion, she launches into a sensual dance. In the next scene, the dreamer and the dancer kiss, immersed in a fiery halo created by the sun setting against the sky, in a composition that suggests classic Hollywood melodrama. In the final, incongruous sequence, Rahim and Hayek ride off into an arid landscape atop a white horse, the former now dressed like a cowboy.

Freed from the threat of fading into history, the belly dancer—a symbol of Nabil's memory of Egypt—transitions from an Egyptian coastline to a landscape reminiscent of the deserts of the American West. The cowboy in the video represents the artist as he moved to the United States in 2006 and in his memory, brought the image of the belly dancer along with him. *I Saved My Belly Dancer* is ultimately a self-portrait, visually interpreting Nabil's reflections of his country and recalling his personal concerns for the future of Egypt's culture. In this sense, the film laments the fading of once-proud traditions and egalitarian values amid the changing ideological circumstances of the artist's native country. At the same time, it hints at the possibility that such legacies may yet survive, both in memory and in exile in the West through Nabil's work.



4

Jennifer Inacio, Assistant Curator
René Morales, Curator

Youssef Nabil: I Saved My Belly Dancer
May 5–November 5, 2017

Youssef Nabil
b. 1972, Cairo; lives in New York

I Saved My Belly Dancer, 2015
Digital color video, with sound, 12 min.
Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, museum purchase with
funds provided by Joan Weberman

Youssef Nabil: I Saved My Belly Dancer is organized by Pérez
Art Museum Miami Assistant Curator Jennifer Inacio. This
exhibition is presented by Bank of America and Roberto Cavalli
with additional support provided by Knight Foundation.

Bank of America  **roberto cavalli**

KF Knight Foundation

Biography

Youssef Nabil was born in 1972 in Cairo, and lives in New York. His work has been featured in solo exhibitions at venues including the Villa Medici, Rome; Centro de la Imagen, Mexico City; SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia; Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris; Third Line Gallery, Dubai; Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town; Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris; and Rencontres d'Arles, France. His work has been included in group exhibitions at venues such as the Centre Pompidou, Paris; British Museum, London; Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Newcastle, United Kingdom; Aperture Foundation, New York;

Gemäldegalerie, Berlin; North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC; Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Sevilla; and Centre de Cultura Contemporànea de Barcelona. His work is part of various international collections including Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; La Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the joint collection of British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Collection François Pinault, Paris; SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia; The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi; and The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

Images

Cover, 2–4 Youssef Nabil, *I Saved My Belly Dancer* #XXIV, #X, #XII, and #XX, 2015.
Hand-colored gelatin silver prints.
© Youssef Nabil

P
Pérez
Art
Museum
Miami
M

A 1103 Biscayne Blvd.
Miami, FL 33132
305 375 3000
info@pamm.org
pamm.org

Accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM) is sponsored in part by the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs, and the Florida Council on Arts and Culture. Support is provided by the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Council, the Miami-Dade County Mayor and Board of County Commissioners. Additional support is provided by the City of Miami and the Miami OMNI Community Redevelopment Agency (OMNI CRA). Pérez Art Museum Miami is an accessible facility. All contents ©Pérez Art Museum Miami. All rights reserved.

