

# Atelier Alexandria International Artists Workshop 2006: A Report

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The AAW International Artists Workshop 2006 provided me with an important opportunity to visit the historic country of Egypt and the city of Alexandria. Workshops provide an enabling space for artists from diverse ethnic backgrounds to commingle, network and learn from each other, and the AAW workshop was no exception. I arrived in Egypt on November 17, two days before the actual start of the workshop and this afforded me the opportunity to spend two days in Cairo.

## **November 17**

In Cairo, I visited the magnificent Egypt Museum where I viewed the spectacular visual history of Egypt that encapsulates its Pharoanic, Coptic and Islamic heritage. It was a very interesting tour that spoke of the magnificence of early Egypt, from the old kingdom, middle kingdom and new kingdom. It was an opportunity for a close encounter visually speaking, to see the burial chambers and the rites of mummification at the museum. It was also an opportunity to encounter globalism and tourism. From the streams of Western and Asian tourists, the museum was bursting at its seams. This was material tourism at its peak. Indeed, I experienced some forms of kitsch and grandiose globalisation; with hurried tour guides chatting in numerous world languages: Arabic, French, Italian, English, Spanish, Japanese, etc. I found all these overwhelming and interesting as I struggled to shake off the lethargy of jet lag and lack of sleep. Other very important sections which had their own distinct security, highly policed with security gates inside the museum complex were the "The Royal Tomb of Tanis," "Tutankhamen - the young pharaoh," and "Ancient Egyptian Jewellery" sections.

I had a walk-about of the inner city of Cairo and could not help being bewildered with the chaotic nature of local traffic. I ate the legendary Egyptian Koshary and drank some sugar cane juice, which my friend and guide, Gamal Abdel Nasser informed, washes and renews the body's inner system. Gamal lives in downtown Cairo, the narrow clobbered street to his house is populated by artisans, craftspeople and carpenters making exquisite and beautifully carved chairs. A small furniture industry. His home is on the second floor of a dust coated building, pushed insignificantly into the corner of the unwinding street. His flat is the typical artist home, a gallery of sort, untidy, bits and pieces of art, furniture, dirt all around but interestingly homely in an arty way. He told me to feel at home, which I did.

## **Smooth, Egypt Museum, Cairo**

The walk-about provided an opportunity to divest myself of certain formed misconceptions and stereotypes inspired by Western media. Although Cairo is actually laid back, it was hardly what I had pre-imagined, with its cosmopolitan and vibrant night life. The men hardly dress in flowing Arab gowns like I had imagined but rather bedecked in European apparels of shirts and pants. It is the women who have the veil around their faces but also bedecked in jean skirts or pants. The cafes are filled with men and women smoking

shisha, or drinking tea or playing the twala. The men actually crack lewd jokes. Cairo is an old city with old stone buildings made from rock boulders and hewn stones but its inner city is almost as dirty as Lagos (Nigeria).

### **November 18**

The maddening early siren call of the muezzin to rouse faithfuls cut through my subconscious disrupted my sleep. My programme for the day was to honour an appointment with the Director of Townhouse Gallery, Mr. William Wells. Townhouse Gallery is a contemporary Gallery on Nabrawy Street, Off Chompollion Street in Downtown Cairo, a new gallery space that promotes conceptual and new media art in challenge to established conventions. I was also to visit Giza for the tourist experience at the Pyramids and complete my walk-about of Cairo. However, I spent a lot of time with Wells and had to cancel my trip to Giza (I hope there will be an opportunity in the future to visit Giza) but did complete my walk-about. I visited the industrial tools market and was told by Gamal with a sense of pride that the Egyptian hardly throws away machine components but is adept at fixing, re-fixing and recycling machine bits. The cloth market reminded one of the cloth markets in Nigeria. I also visited the Islamic Museum.

### **November 19 – 29: Alexandria**

I arrived Alexandria 10.20am in the morning by train; fortunately I made friends with a fellow passenger who made sure I was not ripped off by the cab drivers. We slowly made our way to New Capri Hotel (a walking distant to the Mediterranean Sea). I was increasingly becoming aware of the friendliness and hospitality of the Egyptians. Alexandria is a lot cleaner and saner than Cairo, beautiful beach city, well-paved roads, more luxurious cars but the driving culture is the same like that of Cairo. However the taxi cabs are painted differently. In Cairo, the cabs are painted metallic black while in Alexandria; it is painted yellow with a dash of black on the sides.

At the hotel, I met the early arrivees, Ellis Oyekola (the other Nigerian), Eva Caridi (Greece), Akanksha Dhepe (India), Miha Boljka (Slovenia), Magdi Mousa (Egypt, Canada), Mirna Bamieh (Palestine), and the organisers, Reem Hassan and Moataz El Safty. In the evening, 80% of the participating artists had arrived; and it was a very international mix.

November 20, things were up in full swing with the presentations by the different artists of their arts and contemporary art in their different countries. The presentations kicked off with the presentation by Ellis Oyekola of his paintings. His technique echoes the “action painting” style of Jackson Pollock, but differs in some aspects. As a graduate of Zaria Art School in Nigeria, his technique was more of the dripping style invented by Gani Odutokun, and popularised by former students of the college. Other presentations were made in quick successions and I made mine as well which was well received. Presentations continued the next day and other artists who did not present on the first day had the opportunity of showing their works.

The presentations by artists of their works and contemporary art from their countries was an opportunity for one to gauge art practice in other climes as well as the realities under which artists make art in their different spaces. One comes to the conclusion that artists worldwide deal with common issues that affect their practice and this helps to shake off the idea that privileges come as result of one living in more advanced societies. Although this could give one some leverage, it does not necessarily translate into an advantage.

The other activities outside of the workshop included a visit to the Alexandria Bibliothéque on November 23, a massive historical library. The modern Bibliothéque designed by a Norwegian architect replaced the old one that was destroyed during the sacking of Alexandria in the distant past. The new library houses three permanent exhibitions: an exhibition of "Rare Manuscripts", "The world of Shadi Abdel Salam (1930 – 1986)", the multi-talented celebrated Egyptian filmmaker, movie director, set and costume designer and scriptwriter, famed for his feature films - *Al-Mummia – The Night of the Counting Years* (1969), (this work took him 12 years to complete), and *The Tragedy of the Great House*, a film on Akhenaton that he never completed before his death. The other permanent exhibition is "Impressions of Alexandria" from Awad Collection. This is a visual historiography of Alexandria and its architecture that was influenced by the Pharaonic, Greek, Italian and French periods. There was also a visit to the Hussein Sobhy Museum of Fine Arts to see the exhibition of artists from Saudi Arabia, a visit to the Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum on November 24 to see a collaborative project between arts students of the University of Alexandria and some visiting students from Berlin (Germany). There was also a visit to Degas Gallery to view the works of Alexandrian artists on November 29.

The Open Day of the workshop on November 29 met with a roaring success and had a large turn-out. The exhibition was opened by the representative of the Minister of Culture, certificates of excellence were presented to the participating artists and the viewing public was treated to a creative feast by the artists.

The exchange between the artists at both creative and cultural levels was a very significant one. The workshop space was fantastic; the organisers did a yeoman's job in making the artists feel at home. The local artists were very friendly and the local Alexandrians were very accommodating. The city was a source of inspiration and the Alexandria library provided sufficient food-for-thought. However there is room for improvement at the level of organising and I think part of that could be traced to the fact that there were very few hands doing a lot of things at the same time. I also think that the exhibition space(s) was/were not enough. Some works would have looked better at the open day if they had more spaces to flourish, as against the manner in which works were compressed to fit the available spaces.

The workshop provided an opportunity for artists from different cultures to interact and mingle. There were more than thirty-nine participants from about 15 countries. This was a welcoming breather from the prevailing reality where global peace and meaningful co-existence is under threat.

### **The participating artists**

All in all, I think coming to Alexandria has been a most wonderful experience and I look forward to further collaborations with artists in the workshop as well as participating in future activities of AAW.

I am most grateful to Africalia Belgium for providing me with the enabling funds that took care of my living expenses, accommodation, cost of materials, stipend and feeding, and to Art Moves Africa for providing the Mobility Grant, without which I would not have been able to make the trip in the first instance. To the two organisations, I say a very big thank you.

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