
This item was submitted to [Loughborough's Research Repository](#) by the author.
Items in Figshare are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

Fouad Elkoury's Suite Egyptienne

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://view.publitas.com/thethirdline/fouad-elkoury-suite-egyptienne/page/1>

PUBLISHER

© All rights reserved by the Artist & The Third Line™ of The Third Concept LLC

VERSION

VoR (Version of Record)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

LICENCE

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

REPOSITORY RECORD

Brown, Kathryn. 2019. "Fouad Elkoury's Suite Egyptienne". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/24927>.

Fouad Elkoury's Suite Égyptienne
by Dr. Kathryn Brown

Fouad Elkoury's *Suite Égyptienne* retraces a journey to Egypt made by two nineteenth-century French artists: the novelist, Gustave Flaubert and the photographer and journalist, Maxime Du Camp. These two friends embarked on their trip in 1849 as part of a longer tour of the region and recorded their impressions of the country and its people in extensive journals and photographs. For the twenty-eight year old Flaubert, Egypt was an 'immense and merciless' country that both seduced and overwhelmed the visitor with a prodigious variety of sensations.¹

While Flaubert's diaries are characterized by a tone of exhilaration, Du Camp's visual record of the trip offers a different perspective on the journey. Carefully composed and ordered, his images were conceived as an archeological record and were published in Paris to great acclaim in 1852 and 1860. Du Camp carried a portable, wooden camera and produced photographs using a calotype process in

which negatives were created by exposing treated, high quality writing paper to a chosen scene. His resulting work marked an exciting development in publishing history. It anticipated the modern 'travelogue' and purported to convey the truth about a place by capturing its image in the new 'objective' medium offered by the camera. This was a work, the publisher told audiences of the period, that conveyed the 'finest details' of each place visited by Du Camp and that constituted a 'true monument of art and philosophy'.²

While Elkoury derived inspiration from the books, images, and diaries produced by his nineteenth-century counterparts, *Suite Égyptienne* is far from a simple 're-enactment' of the journey made by Flaubert and Du Camp. Produced between 1985 and 1998 and comprising over 80 photographs of varying dimensions, Elkoury's suite questions the truth-telling promise of Du Camp's images. Whereas the latter

trained his camera lens on ancient monuments and purported to catalogue and communicate unbiased knowledge about the sites that he visited, Elkoury's photographs privilege the haphazard, the elusive, and the fleeting: a ghostly hand protrudes into the picture frame, a body is glimpsed as it disappears behind a pillar, a dog wanders into the scene. In contrast to the use of lens-based technologies to suggest the artist's control over a particular environment, Elkoury acknowledges the intervention of external forces and their potential for disruption. As he puts it: the photographer can often be 'surprised' at producing an image that differs from the one that had been planned: 'One can never quite predict the moment of the shutter's release'.³

Elkoury's acknowledgment of the role that chance plays in his works has important consequences for the role of the photographer. No longer a person who has complete directorial control over the outcome of an image, the photographer is required to admit

a vital link between creativity and uncertainty. In a book published in 1999 from a selection of photographs comprising *Suite Égyptienne*, Elkoury emphasized the impact of chance on the unfolding of his own Egyptian journey. Whether subject to the contingencies of weather conditions, the interruption of crowds, a model's lack of co-operation, or abrupt changes to the itinerary, Elkoury repeatedly found himself in a condition that mirrored that of life itself – one in which an individual remains 'balanced between action and submission' to forces beyond his or her control.⁴

The effects of chance have extended to the curation of the present exhibition. In contrast to the suite of images in the artist's book published in 1999, this exhibition comprises all of the photographs that Elkoury retained from his trips to Egypt during the 1980s and 1990s. The result is the inclusion of some works that the photographer himself had forgotten or had failed to notice on previously produced contact

sheets. The exhibition at The Third Line marks, therefore, a new and unexpected stage in a creative journey that has its roots in the nineteenth century, that was transformed by Elkoury in the twentieth century, and that continues to unfold spontaneously in the twenty-first century.

Throughout *Suite Égyptienne* haunting landscapes are juxtaposed with the bustle of urban life. The grandeur of ancient monuments is tempered by the quiet of domestic interiors. While, for Du Camp, Egypt was a country comprised primarily of romantic relics and ruins, Elkoury's photographs show different ways in which history permeates the present. Whether encased in museum displays, crumbling in a field of grazing sheep, or commemorating individuals from an ancient or recent past, monuments break into the everyday and demand to be negotiated by contemporary audiences both physically and imaginatively.

This confrontation with the monumental is also given an ironic inflection in *Suite Égyptienne*. In one of only two colour images included in this exhibition, the famous brand of the French company, Michelin – 'Bibendum' or the 'Michelin Man' – stands tall in an otherwise deserted landscape. The smiling figure's placement next to a road reinforces the principal product with which it is associated (the car tire), but also suggests another aspect of Michelin's business, namely, tourism (the Michelin guide). Adopted by Michelin as a brand in the late nineteenth century, the original Bibendum was adorned with European cultural symbols – including a top hat and cane – that signalled the figure's aristocratic class, gender, and power.⁵

In *Suite Égyptienne*, the historical associations of this figure function as a reminder of the voyages from Europe to the 'Orient' that were undertaken by privileged individuals throughout the nineteenth century, including the colonial assumptions that

informed their perspective. If Elkoury's photographs undermine the idea that a country can be fully known through, or captured by, a series of images, the absurd presence of Bibendum in the empty surroundings calls into question the power of a more modern style of image-making in the form of global advertising.

Whereas Bibendum appears only briefly in *Suite Égyptienne*, another character recurs as a more potent presence: a woman – Nada – to whom Elkoury introduces his readers in an essay included in his book of 1999. Nada is an elusive and changeable form throughout the photographs. Whether a spectral shape before a pyramid, a bird, a chimera, an explorer, or simply a silhouette, Nada becomes an insistent object of pursuit for the camera lens. As Elkoury ponders in his essay: 'Who was I really following: Nada, Flaubert, or Du Camp...'.⁶

The strong presence of a woman within this narrative

recalls Flaubert's own 'feminizing' of Egypt, a history that was epitomized in the writer's imagination by Cleopatra's rule. For Flaubert, however, the most compelling encounter of his own journey was with a dancer known as Kuchuk-Hanem. The writer's strong physical attraction to, and short-lived relationship with, this woman is acknowledged by Elkoury in a photograph that bears her name. Reclining playfully on a sofa, Nada is momentarily transformed into the heroine of Flaubert's adventure, the outstretched folds of her white skirt mirroring the feathers of the fan that hides her face. In a combination of seduction and unknowability, this hybrid figure – Nada/Kuchuk-Hanem – is simultaneously present in, and absent from, the photograph. Although the woman's body is visible, the viewer is forced to accept information about her that remains incomplete. There is, this image suggests, no refuge of certainty. Rather, the woman's face, thoughts, and emotions remain as obscure as the unseen image in the frame above her head.

As the photographs comprising *Suite Égyptienne* become physically larger, they become increasingly devoid of human presence. In a collection of works published in 2011 (some of which are taken from *Suite Égyptienne*), Elkoury recalls meeting a guard at the entrance to one of the temples he visited. The guard was sitting, he mentions, ‘in complete submission to time’.⁷ It is a metaphor that also closes Elkoury’s essay in *Suite Égyptienne*, the final paragraph of which describes the temple guards as individuals who watch over silent tombs in a state that is suspended between the transitory and the eternal.⁸

The same could be said of Elkoury’s landscapes. Like Du Camp’s images, they are records of a journey, a visual archive that evidences specific times and places. Yet, Elkoury works against any historicizing drive of this enterprise. The largest landscapes included in The Third Line’s exhibition have been printed on specially prepared paper that is glued directly to the

wall. The only way of removing these prints from the installation space is to peel them from the support and, hence, to destroy them. The material features of these works, combined with the way in which they are displayed, guarantees their ephemerality and requires them, like the temple guards described by Elkoury, to submit to time – in this case, the duration of the exhibition itself. As a subtle dialogue with histories of Egypt, of colonial adventure, of personal relationships, and of photographic image-making, *Suite Égyptienne* enquires into the durability of human production and creativity. Ultimately, this exhibition suggests, it is the Egyptian landscape itself that prevails.

Dr. Kathryn Brown is a Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Art at Loughborough University in the UK. She holds a D.Phil in French (University of Oxford) and a PhD in Art History (University of London).

End notes

- 1 Gustave Flaubert, *Voyage en Égypte*, ed. Pierre-Marc de Biasi (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 81–2.
- 2 Maxime Du Camp, ‘Prospectus’, *Égypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie* (Paris: Gide et J. Baudry, 1852), n.p.
- 3 Fouad Elkoury, *La Sagesse du photographe* (Paris: L’Œuil euf, 2004), 80.
- 4 Fouad Elkoury, *Suite Égyptienne: Sur les traces de Gustave Flaubert et Maxime Du Camp*, with a text by Pierre Dumayet (Arles: Actes Sud, 1999), 116.
- 5 Stephen L. Harp, *Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 24–34.
- 6 Elkoury, *Suite Égyptienne*, 114.
- 7 Fouad Elkoury, *Be...longing* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011), 68.
- 8 Elkoury, *Suite Égyptienne*, 116.