

# PRESS KIT

## **YOUSSEF NABIL. ONCE UPON A DREAM**

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PALAZZO GRASSI

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**PALAZZO GRASSI**  
**PUNTA DELLA DOGANA**  
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COLLECTION



# YOUSSEF NABIL. ONCE UPON A DREAM

## 1 THE EXHIBITION

As part of its cycle of monographic shows dedicated to contemporary artists, Palazzo Grassi unveils the first major survey of Youssef Nabil, multi-faceted Egyptian artist, whose work encompasses photography, painting, video and installation art. This project, curated by Matthieu Humery and Jean-Jacques Aillagon, gathers together more than 120 works that trace the artist's whole career. The title, 'Once upon a Dream', evokes both the narrative thread of the exhibition and the concept of a dream-like journey as a fantasy escape. Gently nostalgic, the timeless images of Youssef Nabil transport us to a distant reality. These photographs depict the Egypt of legend that is fading while evoking the troubles affecting the Middle East today. The multi-layering of interpretations and the interplay of description, symbolism and abstraction make up the richness of Youssef Nabil's work, which poetically charts his journey as a personal diary.

Fascinated by the cinema from a very early age, Youssef Nabil would retain a love for the great stars of Egypt, and later for those of the international cinema. He views photography as his way of immortalising the stars in his personal pantheon. His black and white photographs are hand-coloured, a traditional technique widely used for family portraits and the movie posters that adorned the streets of Cairo. Youssef Nabil would perfect this technique, which was still practised in Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s, at the last of the retouchers' studios in Cairo and Alexandria.

Conceived as a narration, 'Once upon a Dream' is an initiatory story, somewhere between fiction and reality, where each theme has both a universal bearing and personal resonance. The search for landmarks in our identity; contemporary ideological, social and political concerns; and the melancholy of a bygone era, are issues that all of us feel, and that Youssef Nabil's photographs highlight during his journeys. This exhibition, which traces the route travelled by the photographer, gives us insight into his vision for his future work. Each thematic section comprises works from his youth along with more recent work. 'Once upon a Dream' shows his film work, without reference to chronology, with the screening of his three films: *Arabian Happy Ending*, *I Saved My Belly Dancer* and *You Never Left*. Although the exhibition covers the artist's entire career, it should not be seen as a simple monograph. It gives a voice to the artist, enabling him to offer a profound insight into his aspirations and his involvement in the art world of the 21st century.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue in three languages, published jointly by Marsilio Editori, Venice, and Palazzo Grassi – Punta della Dogana, with a text by Linda Komaroff, curator and Head of the Art of the Middle East at LACMA, and the conversation between author André Anciman and Youssef Nabil.



## 2 EXCERPTS FROM THE CATALOGUE

**Jean-Jacques Aillagon, *Youssef's dreams***

[...]

### **The artist in his work**

But the work of Nabil cannot be reduced to formal factors concerning the choice of the techniques or even the esthetic in which his work is inscribed. His works, whether photographic or cinematographic, mainly give us a prodigious narrative of the artist's life, his sensibility, passions, disappointments, and expectations. They are his very flesh and soul. This is why we keep encountering his obsessions, memories, and regrets. The theme of absence, exile, departure, and therefore nostalgia for a lost paradise is omnipresent because the need or the choice, no matter which, to leave his homeland has marked his fate forever, like that of the *Yemeni Sailors*. Knowing the difficulties that Nabil met with in trying to leave Egypt and having helped to persuade the authorities in his country to moderate their severity towards him, he went so far as to tell me that this country was definitely fated to be a land that one left to emancipate oneself. The Exodus, this mythical episode in the history of the Jews who, under the leadership of Moses, left the land where Joseph's descendants had settled, constitutes a founding narrative in this respect. Exodus and exile are thus at the very heart of the dramatic plot of the work of Nabil, who incessantly continues to "Say Goodbye" to his land, yet without ceasing to gaze at the horizon of a paradise to be rediscovered, with the risk, as in *I Will Go To Paradise* (2008), of having to sink, to disappear into the ocean of time. This is why the artist is himself, omnipresent in his work, by his own representation as witness to the scenes he describes and by his self-portrait renewing a great genre of European painting that an artist like Albrecht Dürer had illustrated so well. When Nabil, seen from behind, watches the nostalgic spectacle that his imagination has evoked, *Self-portrait with the Nile* (2014) or *Self-portrait with an Olive Tree* (2016), one cannot help rediscovering some of the feelings of German romantic painting, notably that of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840). We naturally think of his *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) or his *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1819), a picture in which a disproportionately large root, as in *Self-portrait with Roots* (2008), also keeps the viewer of this melancholy scene company. Nabil has looked carefully at the painting of the centuries that preceded him. He has seen the intelligence with which Velasquez slipped himself into the scene of *Las Meninas* and that, just as great, in which Gustave Courbet placed himself in the studio of the painter that he was. He does not hesitate to introduce himself as a languid viewer before Botticelli's *Primavera*, in *Self-portrait with Botticelli* (2009). In the narratives of each of his works, the artist is often reclining, thoughtful and dreamy, much like the Jacob of the Bible or the Joseph of the Infancy Gospels with the angel urging him to leave Judea and take refuge in Egypt.

Reclining, the artist thus becomes a man abandoned, abandoned by all and yet desired, abandoned to his dreams but always lucid. With restraint, his work is intensely sensuous. This sensuousness is plunged into that of the artist himself, since with delicacy he never ceases to reveal to his viewer fragments of skin that one guesses to be quivering, at the base of the neck or the hollow of the shoulder. This sensuousness is revealed more in the evocation, sometimes even the allusion, than in the raw representation, which would be too easy and wildly vulgar. It is terribly sensitive, perceptible to anyone who knows how to look, while being totally invisible to a cursory view. It is made up of light touches rather than intrusions, evocations rather than revelations. Bodies approach each other without ever touching, but the formidable electricity of desire is concentrated in the distance that the artist keeps between them. In this way *Ahmed in Djellabah* (2004), *Ali in*

## 2

*Abaya* (2007), or even *Ayman Sleeping* (2005) are of an eroticism at the same time restrained and effective, without ever taking the easy option of representing sex in them.

Nabil's work comes from somewhere. It is, as we have seen, deeply rooted. However, it is not imprisoned by any restraints. It is a free work, a work that fixes its project on all possible horizons. It is, therefore, an *oeuvre* that is already rich though far from being concluded. The exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi thus bears magnificent witness to this, while offering us a progress report.

### Matthieu Humery, *The Son of the Nile*

[...]

The quasi abstraction of Nabil's works is capable of embodying, simultaneously, fear and hope. In the monumental series *The Last Dance*, the fear of the disappearance of Oriental dance - reflected through forty-eight images of a frenzied, urgent, and anonymous dance - visually evokes the last beating of the wings of a butterfly in the twilight of its days. Like a biologist, the artist dissects the movement of the dance in the manner of Eadweard Muybridge<sup>1</sup>, as if to archive and keep as precise a record as possible. He seeks to preserve the beauty of this art before its extinction.

His use of color is a way for him to retain what was effaced. Whether portraits or landscapes, his hand-painted silver prints seem to be "out of time." The resplendent colors smooth the surface and tint his faces with a soft timelessness; they are mental images, indelible memories. The polyptych *I Will Go to Paradise*, produced in 2008, epitomizes the artist's whole intellectual and artistic journey. Robed in the traditional Egyptian garment, with his back to the lens, Nabil moves away from us as he approaches the sea. He enters the water and disappears beneath the surface at sunset. An evocation of death and fate, these images are not necessarily ominous—quite the contrary; Nabil poetically embodies his vision of existence in this work. These sequences, like pieces of Technicolor film, are thus tinged with eternity.

Like an initiatory circuit, between loss of reference points, attachment and rebirth, this exhibition unravels an invisible thread inherent to each being. The artist reveals a story through his work that has succeeded, like an outlet, in channeling chaos.

*Once Upon a Dream* ends with the image of a seaside scene from which the figure of the artist has disappeared. However, the last works that one can see while leaving the exhibition, through the colonnade, are five painted landscapes. This interlude then becomes an epilogue. This composition channels all the themes of a cinematic fresco: exile, travel, or refuge are the materials. The disappearance of the boundary between dream and reality, figurative and abstract, is henceforth acknowledged. The extremities of the polyptych represent this physical and mental journey that leads us to a silent contemplation of nature, land, or sea, universal symbols and recurrent motifs in the artist's work. At the center, spread out is a multibranching road; whichever the chosen path, one will keep to its course and give rise to hope. A new tranquility emanates from this appeased uncertainty. This symbolic reversal is in fact rooted in most of Nabil's works.

1 E. Muybridge, *The Human Figure in Motion*, London, Chapman & Hall, 1907.

### **Linda Komaroff, Youssef Nabil and the Stuff of Dreams**

[...]

Nabil's longing for the past, one that he lived vicariously through the old movies he watched obsessively on television while growing up in Cairo, is integral to his career as a photographer, which he began in 1992 by recreating famous scenes from the Egyptian cinema. This pursuit of an imagined past was subsequently made tangible in his photographs of elegant models with retro hair-styles and clothes posing nonchalantly among old-fashioned klieg lights and studio lights or smoking, drinking, and playing cards as though waiting to be called to the set or perhaps to their real lives. These images harken back to the glamorous celebrity photography common in mid-twentieth-century Cairo, as in the work of Nabil's mentor and friend Van-Leo (Leon Boyadjian, 1921–2002). Also related to the earlier Cairene photographs, as well as to Egyptian cinema, is Nabil's dazzling series on Natacha Atlas, known for her fusion of Arabic, North African, and Western electronic music (particularly hip-hop). Depicted as a belly dancer in a strong and sexually unabashed manner, the Natacha photographs, especially those where she reclines with eyes closed or even with her head cropped from the picture altogether, seem to exist outside of time and space. The seen but unseeing Natacha is eternally fixed in the artist's mind (and therefore the viewers gaze) as both a remembered and an imagined memory. More will be said below about the artist and the belly dancer.

Perhaps the most compelling of Nabil's images are those that are blatantly autobiographical, as in his many self-portraits shot after he left Egypt in 2003. Usually photographed from the side or back, we rarely see the artist head on, sometimes just his toes on the edge of a prayer mat. Nabil pictures himself as a stateless wanderer in a variety of international locales; even his self-image sleeping among gnarled, ubiquitous tree roots in Los Angeles serves to emphasize his own rootlessness. Gazing out to sea or at a dense cityscape, dreaming, asleep or feigning death, lying on a bench in the Uffizi before a Botticelli—the settings change but the artist remains singular, alone, and unconnected to his surroundings. Rather than the artist trying on different guises—like the many self-portraits of the French painter Courbet (Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet, 1819–1877)—Nabil's self-defined persona as an exile is immutable.

The videos *You Never Left* (2010) and *I Saved My Belly Dancer* (2015) are more subtly autobiographical. In each, the French actor Tahar Rahim, who resembles Nabil, merges seamlessly as the artist's alter ego. These, along with the related photographs that parallel the filmic storylines, are among the artist's most important and strongest works. Their extreme beauty is based not so much on their connected themes of sleep, death, exile, rebirth, and home, but rather their remarkable picturing of such abstract and complex subject matter, which is rendered acutely, physically palpable by the artist in the manner of an especially vivid dream. Like dreams, the videos combine a powerful sensory of sight and sound; in terms of the latter, the haunting soundtracks for each were provided by the Tunisian composer Anouar Brahem. Also, as in dreams, the settings are undefined and unbounded, their otherworldliness further delineated by the unearthly intensity and tonality of the color palette.

[...]

**Youssef Nabil in conversation with André Aciman**  
**New York, February 21, 2019**

[...]

**Youssef**

I had to leave Egypt mainly because of my work as I needed to feel free, but also I wanted my work to evolve and grow outside of my country.

One of my main subjects is the body, and many Egyptians are obviously conservative or religious. I couldn't live there with the idea that I must be always careful with what I want to show or say in my art. But I always loved my country and never felt miserable there. I just understood that it is giving me the best it could give. It is one of those feelings in life, like loving your parents although certain things they couldn't understand or afford to offer you, but you still love them for what they have given you.

I actually had the best years of my life living in Cairo, although I always felt that I don't really fit there and that I must leave one day. Then I left at age thirty—to Paris then New York—so I spent most of my life till now there. I started my career as an artist in Cairo and I've met so many incredible people there. My first exhibition was in Cairo, the first photo I ever took was there. So part of me is still living in Egypt, it has been sixteen years now that I left, but I am still connected to Egypt in so many ways.

But there are also many different Egypt[s] living together. That was another reason that made me want to leave. I couldn't deal with the fact that you have to create a bubble for yourself pretending you live in Europe or the USA, because you hover on life there going from one chic neighborhood to another. I always associated myself with the real part of Egypt, the middle class one [that is] in touch with the real issues, never chose a filtered lifestyle.

But in which way do you still feel Egyptian?

**André**

Let me start by telling you about my father. My father was Turkish, but he had acquired many Egyptian habits, because he had come to Egypt at the same age I was when I came to the United States—that is, seventeen. He taught me the word “Mazag.” It is the cultivation of pleasure, but it's not enough to cultivate pleasure or eat good food. You want and need to tell people that you are experiencing Mazag, that the food is good, that the company is pleasing, that the world, for all its troubles, is there to be enjoyed. He coined the word “mazaguiste.” Some people were born mazaguistes, others were not. You need to communicate the pleasure that you experience, and this is something that nobody does in America. The sense of plenitude when you take time off to really enjoy the things of life needs to be verbalized to capture the essence and fullness of pleasure. I learned this in Egypt; there is a joy in speaking that fullness. And the joy of going to the beach for me, which was very important, needs to be shared. There was a sense of absolute pleasure in small things the moment you spoke that pleasure.

**Youssef**

For me “Mazag” is also related to the Mediterranean rhythm of enjoying life, of knowing that you could simply live happy with so little. Just the sea, sun, friends, and good food are enough to make your life full. But [it's] because of that Mediterranean Sea that we are actually what we are today. When you have this experience and this understanding within yourself and within your soul, you

can travel far and go to many places, because that was your first place. And you know that it will always be there for you, we can always go back and live near it.

My favorite poem ever is “Ithaca” By Constantine Cavafy. It is the poem of my whole life, which is about what I am talking about, this nomadic life I’ve been experiencing since I left Egypt.

In many of my travels, it happens often that I say something like “this reminds me of the Mediterranean” or “this reminds me of Alexandria,” but it is actually not exactly the Mediterranean or Alexandria. It is just my reference to the best way to live life. It is the “Mazag” and taking the time to enjoy some moments during the day, which is very rare to find or feel elsewhere.

[...]

### **Youssef**

One of the things that kept me happy in Egypt was cinema. I used to go always by myself to watch movies—sometimes I go watch the same movie two or three times. For me I discovered a whole new world through cinema, the idea that you can escape your own life and story for two hours or so, watch someone else’s story. Then again go back to reality, was just a magical discovery. It gave me hope but also opened my eyes on that art, which is the reason behind many of the inspirations in my work, the idea of wanting to tell stories. Even mixing paint and photography for me comes from my love [of] cinema—I’ve been doing that technique since I was nineteen years old.

I saw so many old films in my childhood. I was always wondering about the actors I was watching and loving in those films. Where are they? I would ask my mother, and most of the time, the answer was “They are all dead now.” So I discovered another dimension to cinema and to the camera, which is keeping the people I love alive, whether through photography or film.

When we went out with my parents, me, my twin brother, and my little sister, I used to sit on the back seat of the car, and my favorite thing to do was to look outside the car’s window to watch the films’ billboards. They were all lining up one after the other in Cairo’s streets and avenues—we are talking late 1970s and early ’80s. I used to love them because they were all hand painted. Later on I wanted my work to look like those movie posters I grew up loving.

### **André**

In Alexandria, aside from going to the beach, there was only one thing to do as a family—you either went to the Sporting Club or you went to the cinema. From three to six, or from six to nine and sometimes—which was a luxury and reserved for grown-ups—you went from nine to midnight. With my friends, it was always three to six.

Cinema was all there was—there was really nothing else. We saw every movie, we knew all the actors by name, and the movies used to come to Egypt immediately. When I later moved to Italy, many films that were already playing in Egypt hadn’t even been released yet.

Eventually I wrote a book about a house on an Italian coast town. But guess where that fictional house really was? I set it in Italy, but of course that real house never belonged in Italy.

### **Youssef**

You mean your novel *Call Me by Your Name* was about a house in Egypt!?

**André**

Not about a house in Egypt but about a translocated house—that is, a house moved from Egypt to an imagined spot in Italy. In many respects, I was reliving an adolescence unthreatened by anti-Semitism, unthreatened by the very difficult and dangerous conditions in Egypt—a world altered to become safe and serene. *Call Me by Your Name* was really my attempt to make up a life that never happened but that could have been.

[...]



## 3 LIST OF WORKS

*Kairo, Les pyramides, femmes arabes*  
(unknown author), c. 1890  
21 x 27 cm  
photochrome  
Private collection of the artist

*Le port Said, le quai et la rue  
du commerce* (unknown author), c. 1890  
21 x 27 cm  
photochrome  
Private collection of the artist

*Kairo, un bédouin* (unknown author), c. 1890  
21 x 27 cm  
photochrome  
Private collection of the artist

*Kairo, danseuse égyptienne*  
(unknown author), c. 1890  
21 x 27 cm  
photochrome  
Private collection of the artist

*Kairo, mosquée rue de la Citadelle n. II* (unknown  
author), c. 1890  
27 x 21 cm  
photochrome  
Private collection of the artist

*Kairo, marchands ambulants*  
(unknown author), c. 1890  
27 x 21 cm  
photochrome  
Private collection of the artist

*Kairo, paysans et femmes rentrant  
des champs* (unknown author), c. 1890  
21 x 27 cm  
photochrome  
Private collection of the artist

*Layla, 1942*  
100 x 70 cm  
original movie poster  
Private collection of the artist

*The Lady of the Palace, 1958*  
100 x 70 cm  
original movie poster  
Private collection of the artist

*One Day of My Life, 1961*  
100 x 70 cm  
original movie poster  
Private collection of the artist

*I, He and She, 1964*  
100 x 70 cm  
original movie poster  
Private collection of the artist

*Take Care of Zouzou, 1972*  
100 x 70 cm  
original movie poster  
Private collection of the artist

*Forbidden on the Wedding Night, 1975*  
100 x 70 cm  
original movie poster  
Private collection of the artist

*The Lovers, 1976*  
100 x 70 cm  
original movie poster  
Private collection of the artist

*Night's Whispers, 1977*  
100 x 70 cm  
original movie poster  
Private collection of the artist

*Portrait of Youssef Nabil by Van-Leo 1995*  
39 x 29 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Private collection of the artist

### Works by Youssef Nabil

*Four Pyramids, Giza 1992*  
26 x 39 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Sweet Temptation, Cairo 1993*  
75 x 50 cm  
archival pigment ink on archival  
cotton-rag paper  
Pinault Collection

*Female Cactus, Hurghada 1998*  
115 x 75 cm  
archival pigment ink on archival  
cotton-rag paper  
Pinault Collection

*One Lonely Star, Alexandria 1999*  
115 x 75 cm  
archival pigment ink on archival  
cotton-rag paper  
Pinault Collection

*Fifi Smoking, Cairo 2000*

75 x 58,5 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Youssef Nabil Studio

*Mealema-Fifi Abdou, Cairo 2000*

75 x 50 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Youssef Nabil Studio

*Natacha fume le Narguilé, Cairo 2000*

115 x 75 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Pinault Collection

*Natacha sleeping, Cairo 2000*

75 x 115 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Pinault Collection

*Natacha with eyes closed, Cairo 2000*

115 x 75 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Youssef Nabil Studio

*God Saves us All 2001*

115 x 75 cm

archival pigment ink on archival

cotton-rag paper

Pinault Collection

*Lonely Pasha, Cairo 2002*

75 x 50 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Youssef Nabil Studio

*Rania, Cairo 2002*

75 x 50 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Youssef Nabil Studio

*Ahmed in Djellabah, New York 2004*

50 x 75 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Youssef Nabil Studio

*Feels Like Home, Self-portrait, Paris 2004*

115 x 75 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Youssef Nabil Studio

*Ayman sleeping, Paris 2005*

75 x 115 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Youssef Nabil Studio

*Amir, New York 2006*

75 x 115 cm

archival pigment ink on archival

cotton-rag paper

Pinault Collection

*The Yemeni Sailors of South Shields 2006*

75 x 50 cm each

12 hand-colored gelatin silver print

Pinault Collection

*Ali in Abaya, Paris 2007*

50 x 75 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Youssef Nabil Studio

*Deux Djellabas, Paris 2007*

75 x 115 cm

archival pigment ink on archival

cotton-rag paper

Pinault Collection

*Red Egyptian Nightgown, Harlem 2007*

75 x 115 cm

archival pigment ink on archival

cotton-rag paper

Pinault Collection

*Dreams about Cairo 2008*

115 x 75 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Youssef Nabil Studio

*Dreams about Cairo 2008*

115 x 75 cm

hand-colored gelatin silver print

Youssef Nabil Studio

*Dreams about Cairo 2008*

115 x 75 cm

archival pigment ink on archival

cotton-rag paper

Pinault Collection

*Dreams about Cairo 2008*

115 x 75 cm

archival pigment ink on archival

cotton-rag paper

Pinault Collection

*Dreams about Cairo 2008*

115 x 75 cm

archival pigment ink on archival

cotton-rag paper

Pinault Collection

*Dreams about Cairo 2008*

115 x 75 cm  
archival pigment ink on archival  
cotton-rag paper  
Pinault Collection

*I Will Go to Paradise, Self-portrait,  
Hyères 2008*

50 x 75 cm each  
4 hand-colored gelatin silver prints  
Pinault Collection

*Self-portrait, Beverly Hills 2008*

50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Sphinx, Giza 2008*

115 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Self-portrait with Roots, Los Angeles 2008*

115 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Pinault Collection

*You live with me, Self-portrait,  
Harlem 2008*

50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Say Goodbye, Self-portrait,  
Alexandria 2009*

50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Pinault Collection

*Self-portrait with Botticelli, Florence 2009*

50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Pinault Collection

*Alicia Keys, New York 2010*

75 x 50 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Catherine Deneuve, Paris 2010*

75 x 50 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Fanny Ardant, You Never Left # II 2010*

75 x 50 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*You Never Left # I 2010*

26 x 39 cm each  
2 hand-colored gelatin silver prints  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*You Never Left # III 2010*

50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*You Never Left # XI 2010*

50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*You Never Left # VII 2010*

50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Anouk Aimée, Paris 2011*

75 x 50 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Charlotte Rampling, Paris 2011*

75 x 50 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Marina Abramović, New York 2011*

75 x 50 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*In Love, Denver 2012*

75 x 115 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Pinault Collection

*Isabelle Huppert, Paris 2012*

75 x 50 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Short Life, Self-portrait, Los Angeles 2012*

50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*The Last Dance # I, Denver 2012*  
50 x 75 cm each  
12 archival pigment ink on archival  
cotton-rag papers  
Pinault Collection

*The Last Dance # II, Denver 2012*  
50 x 75 cm each  
12 archival pigment ink on archival  
cotton-rag papers  
Pinault Collection

*The Last Dance # III, Denver 2012*  
50 x 75 cm each  
12 archival pigment ink on archival  
cotton-rag papers  
Pinault Collection

*The Last Dance # IV, Denver 2012*  
50 x 75 cm each  
12 archival pigment ink on archival  
cotton-rag papers  
Pinault Collection

*Isabelle Adjani, Paris 2013*  
75 x 50 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Self-portrait, Hawaii 2013*  
50 x 75 cm  
Archival pigment ink on Archival  
cotton-rag paper  
Pinault Collection

*Untitled, Self-portrait, Hawaii 2013*  
115 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer # I 2014*  
26 x 39 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Self-portrait next to the Wall, Luxor 2014*  
50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Self-portrait with the Nile, Luxor 2014*  
50 x 75 cm  
archival pigment ink on archival  
cotton-rag paper  
Pinault Collection

*Self-portrait, Luxor 2014*  
115 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer # XVII 2015*  
75 x 115 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer # XV 2015*  
50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer # XXVI 2015*  
26 x 39 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer # XII 2015*  
26 x 39 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer # IV 2015*  
115 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer #II 2015*  
50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer #III 2015*  
115 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer # IX 2015*  
50 x 75 cm each  
2 hand-colored gelatin silver prints  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer # XXV 2015*  
75 x 115 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer # XXIV 2015*  
75 x 115 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer # XX 2015*  
50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Arabian Happy Ending 2016*  
still from video  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Arabian Happy Ending 2016*  
170 x 30 cm  
neon  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Self-portrait with an Olive Tree, Kéa 2016*  
50 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Pinault Collection

*Your Heart knows the Way 2019*  
115 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*No one knows but the Sky 2019*  
115 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Le chemin commence et  
le voyage est déjà fini 2019*  
115 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Here to Go 2019*  
115 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*Your Life was just a Dream 2019*  
115 x 75 cm  
hand-colored gelatin silver print  
Youssef Nabil Studio

## Films

*You Never Left 2010*  
film  
8 min  
Youssef Nabil Studio

*I Saved My Belly Dancer 2015*  
film  
12 min  
Pinault Collection

*Arabian Happy Ending 2016*  
film  
28 min  
Youssef Nabil Studio



# YOUSSEF NABIL. ONCE UPON A DREAM

## 4 EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

160 pages

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### **With texts by :**

#### **Jean-Jacques Aillagon**

Curator of the exhibition

#### **Matthieu Humery**

Photography specialist and curator of the exhibition

#### **Linda Komaroff**

Curator of Islamic Art at LACMA, Los Angeles

And a conversation between **Youssef Nabil** and writer **André Aciman**



# YOUSSEF NABIL. ONCE UPON A DREAM

## 5 BIOGRAPHY OF YOUSSEF NABIL

Youssef Nabil began his photography career in 1992 by staging tableaux in which his subjects acted out melodramas recalling film stills from the golden age of Egyptian cinema. Later in the 1990s, while working as a photographers' assistant in studios in New York and Paris, he began photographing artists and friends, producing both formal portraits as well as placing his subjects in the realms of dreams and sleep, on the edge of awareness, far from their daylight selves.

On his return to Egypt in 1999 he further developed his hand-painted photography, with portraits of writers, singers and film stars of the Arab world. In these years, and especially since returning to Paris and New York, he started producing self-portraits that reflect his dislocated life away from Egypt. This series that has evolved over the past fifteen years is characterised by liminal scenes in which he lingers between worldly realities and serene dreams, loneliness and fears of death.

Nabil's distinctive technique of hand-coloring silver gelatin prints removes the blemishes of reality. Nabil disrupts prevalent notions of color photography and painting, as well as assumptions about the aesthetic sensibilities associated with art and those identified with popular culture. His hand-colouring evokes a sense of longing and nostalgia and allows his photographs to flicker between our time and another era.

The artist presented his first video in 2010 entitled *You Never Left* which featured the actors Fanny Ardant and Tahar Rahim. It is set in an allegorical place that is a metaphor of a lost Egypt, sketching an intimate and solemn parallel between exile and death. This video in which he reverently and inventively revisits the characteristics of Egyptian cinema's golden age, with its movie stars and Technicolor film stock, he reconnects with the source and inspiration of his photographic imagery with which it shares the same personal, diaristic quality.

In 2015, Nabil produced his second video, *I Saved My Belly Dancer*, with actors Salma Hayek and Tahar Rahim, a narration around his fascination with the tradition of belly dancers and the disappearance of the art form that is unique to the Middle East. The 12-minute video also explores shifting perceptions of women in the Arab world and the tensions between the amplified sexualisation of their bodies and the continued repression of women in modern Arab society.

Nabil's work has been presented in solo exhibitions at venues including The Villa Medici, Rome; Centro de la Imagen, Mexico City; Nathalie Obadia Gallery, Paris; The Third Line Gallery, Dubai; Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town; Savannah College of Art and Design, GA; Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris; Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie, Arles and The Pérez Art Museum, Miami. Group exhibitions at venues including The Centre Pompidou, Paris; The British Museum, London; Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence; The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, LACMA; Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver; La Maison Rouge, Paris; MMK Museum für Modern Kunst, Frankfurt; BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Newcastle; MASP Museu de Arte de São Paulo; Aperture Foundation, New York; Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; Museum of Photography, Thessaloniki; North Carolina Museum of Art; Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Biennale of the Visual Arts of Santa Cruz; Kunstmuseum, Bonn; Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C; Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Sevilla and Centre de Cultura Contemporànea de Barcelona.

# 5

Youssef Nabil is part of various international collections including the Pinault Collection, Paris; LACMA Museum, Los Angeles; The Louis Vuitton Foundation, Paris; Sindika Dokolo Foundation, Luanda; La Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris; the joint collection of The British Museum and The Victoria & Albert Museum, London; SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA; Centro de la Imagen, Mexico City; Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; the Guggenheim Museum, Abu Dhabi; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York and Pérez Art Museum in Miami.

Three monographs have been published on Youssef Nabil's work – *Sleep in My Arms* (Autograph ABP and Michael Stevenson, 2007), *I Won't Let You Die* (Hatje Cantz, 2008) and *Youssef Nabil* (Flammarion, 2013).

Youssef Nabil was born in 1972 in Cairo and currently lives and works in Paris and New York.

## 6 BIOGRAPHY OF THE CURATORS

### **Jean-Jacques Aillagon**

From 1973 to 1976, Jean-Jacques Aillagon was a history and geography teacher. 1976 marked the start of a distinguished career in France's most illustrious cultural institutions. His first post was in Paris at the Ministry of Culture's Architectural Studies and Research Centre, followed by the "Fine Arts" years (at the *École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts*), during which he was responsible for external relations, exhibitions, and later the cultural and scientific programme of the prestigious institution. In 1982, he became a trustee of the National Museum of Modern Art at the Georges Pompidou Centre. In 1985, he joined the Cultural Affairs department of the City of Paris, where he was Director from 1993 to 1996, before being appointed Chairman of the Georges Pompidou National Centre of Art and Culture.

As Minister of Culture from 2002-2004, Jean-Jacques Aillagon brought in an important law on patronage and promoted the autonomy of public establishments and the decentralisation of cultural events. While President of the Château de Versailles in 2007-2011, he was able to combine his passion for heritage and contemporary art, by exhibiting the works of Jeff Koons, Murakami, Xavier Veilhan and Bernar Venet in the gilded corridors and gardens of the royal palace.

He now advises François Pinault, whom he supported in the creation of the Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana art museums in Venice and is currently advising him on the contemporary art museum, housed at the Bourse de Commerce in Paris. Jean-Jacques Aillagon is also chairman of the mission seeking to get Nice included on UNESCO's world heritage list. He regularly curates exhibitions such as "Jacques Chirac or cross-cultural dialogue", held at the quai Branly - Jacques Chirac Museum in 2016.

### **Matthieu Humery**

Curator and photography expert, Matthieu Humery lives and works in Paris, Arles and New York. After heading up the photography department at Christie's auction house, where he arranged numerous monographic sales in New York and Paris, Matthieu Humery curated several exhibitions including *Irving Penn, Resonance* at Palazzo Grassi in 2014, *Annie Leibovitz, The Early Years: 1970-1983* in 2017, and *Jean Prouvé, Architect for Better Days* in 2018 at the Luma Foundation in Arles. He also presented the Sylvio Perlstein Collection in the exhibition *A Luta Continua, Art and Photography from Dada to Now* at the Hauser & Wirth Gallery, New York, in 2018.

His latest exhibition, *50 years, 50 books. Masterworks from the library of Martin Parr* was presented as part of the 50th anniversary of *Rencontres d'Arles* festival in 2019.

Co-founder of the Los Angeles Dance Project, Matthieu Humery has launched numerous projects integrating choreography and contemporary art, such as *Reflections Redux*, a collaboration between Barbara Kruger and Benjamin Millepied, presented at the Studio des Acacias in 2017.