

**YOUSSEF NABIL**

Egyptian, born 1972



Nabil is now based in New York, but grew up in Cairo recalling the golden age of Egyptian cinema. Discovering, when a child, that most of his favourite Egyptian film idols were no longer alive, a desire was kindled to meet those who remained and to immortalise them for himself by photographing them. And he began his professional photography career aged 20 by staging tableaux in which his friends acted out melodramas recalling film stills from Egyptian cinema.

While working as a photographers' assistant in prominent studios in New York and Paris in the mid 1990s, 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 consciousness and far from their public personas. On his return to Egypt in 1999 he further developed his distinctive approach to hand painted photography, with portraits of writers, singers and film stars of the Arab world.

Nabil's artistic vision, coupled with his method of hand-colouring his photographs (which was first used in the early period of photography in the 1840s), portrays a reality which has then been turned into a fiction. The effect is a unique

fusion of photography and painting. Nabil's intervention after taking the photograph is reminiscent of film making itself, as he lovingly stages theatrical compositions of made-up and costumed women who hold gripping poses in dramatically lit studio settings.

Nabil is particularly drawn to strong characters and most notably strong women like Shirin Neshat, Tracey Emin, Zaha Hadid or Fifi Abdou, all of whom he has previously worked with. He comments that "they are already icons of their times without really choosing to be." Mark Gisbourne notes that Nabil "has created an imaginary reality that reflects both the paradoxes of the Middle East in our times as well as the fantasies and flamboyance of Egyptian movie stars in the cosmopolitan pre-revolutionary years in Cairo."

**Brief Biography**

Nabil studied literature at Ain Shams University in Cairo and started taking photographs in his early 20s. He currently lives and works in New York.

Nabil's work has been presented in numerous solo and group exhibitions at venues including the British Museum, London; North Carolina Museum of Art, North Carolina; BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Newcastle; Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town; Townhouse Gallery, Cairo; FotoFest Houston, Texas; Centre de Cultura Contemporànea de Barcelona; Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris; Kunstmuseum, Bonn; The Third Line, Dubai; Volker Diehl Gallery, Berlin and Aperture Foundation, New York.

Two monographs have been published on Nabil's work: *Sleep in My Arms* (Autograph ABP and Michael Stevenson, 2007) and *I Won't let you die* (Hatje Cantz, 2008).