

A Journey through History and Stories, Contexts, Materials, and Techniques. A Conversation with Wael Shawky

—Marcella Beccaria



Wael Shawky in conversation with Marcella Beccaria, Castello di Rivoli, 30 October 2016

It is estimated that during the Middle Ages, the average distance covered by a traveler ranged from a minimum of 20 to a maximum of 60 kilometers per day, depending on whether the person was a messenger on a mission, a soldier marching with his comrades, a merchant accompanying his goods, or a pilgrim heading for Rome or, perhaps, the Holy Land, and depending on the means of transportation—by horse, by cart, or simply on foot. These distances and modes of transport seem laughable by today’s standards. Yet it was with this speed and in these ways that, starting from the main communication axes established in Roman times, the constant transit of people, animals, and goods shaped an important part of the West’s network of roads as well as the history that was written across it.

For visitors today who look out from one of the large windows located on the north side of the Manica Lunga in the Castello di Rivoli (which, by the way, is 20 kilometers from the center of Turin) the distance from that medieval world with its armed soldiers, traders, peasants, holy men and women, a world in slow but constant motion, seems to diminish—in fact, we seem to be transported further back in time. The view embraces the lower part of the Val di Susa, an area whose morphology, characterized by numerous moraine hills, bears witness to the presence and action of ancient glaciers and whose large plains, where the upper Po Valley begins, were probably covered around 10,000 years ago by an enormous lake, Lake Rivoli, whose remains supposedly lie in the current two lakes of the nearby Avigliana. But as soon as one’s gaze rises above the plains and hills, the view from the Castello becomes undeniably medievaesque due to the stately presence of the Sacra di San Michele. Seemingly perched on the rocky spur of Monte Pirchiriano, this Benedictine monastery (which is said to have inspired the description of the monastery at the heart of Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*) was founded between 983 and 987. It can be considered a central juncture on a long pilgrimage route dedicated to the Archangel Michael that, from Mont-Saint-Michel in France, reaches all the way to Monte Sant’Angelo in Puglia.

This area includes the traces of an even more important medieval route: the Via Francigena, a part of the road that once linked Chambery and Turin, overlooked by the Sant’Antonio di Ranverso complex in Rosta and the Benedictine abbey of Novalesa, founded during the Frankish rule in 726 in Val Cenischia on the route to Moncenisio, the main Alpine pass between Italy and France. As clarified



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During the installation of the exhibition, Castello di Rivoli, October 2016

by contemporary historiography, the Via Francigena should not be viewed as a single road, but rather a portion of land criss-crossed with various roads shaped by the constant passage of people and goods between Italy and France and, from there, the rest of Europe. Merchants, pilgrims, and armed soldiers, including the Crusader invaders who were given by the Arabs the generic name “Franj”—meaning Franks—traveled across these areas for centuries, nurturing a dense network of shrines, abbeys, monasteries, and hospitals, which thanks to these multifarious peoples in motion gained their own strategic role as secular power centers and places of culture.

I’m with Wael Shawky in the Manica Lunga, the space where we’re installing his exhibition. Only a few days separate us from the preview and there are many details to finish. We’re working with great intensity but there is great satisfaction in that, after weeks of work, the show is finally within reach. We think back to the artist’s initial site visits, when our conversations turned many times to the features of the land surrounding the Castello. Right from the start, it was clear that an exhibition at Rivoli of the complete cycle of the *Cabaret Crusades*, his films dedicated to the story of the Crusades, would enliven a dense network of meaningful relations between the works on display and the surrounding geographical and cultural area, reawakening the rich layers of history that distinguish it.

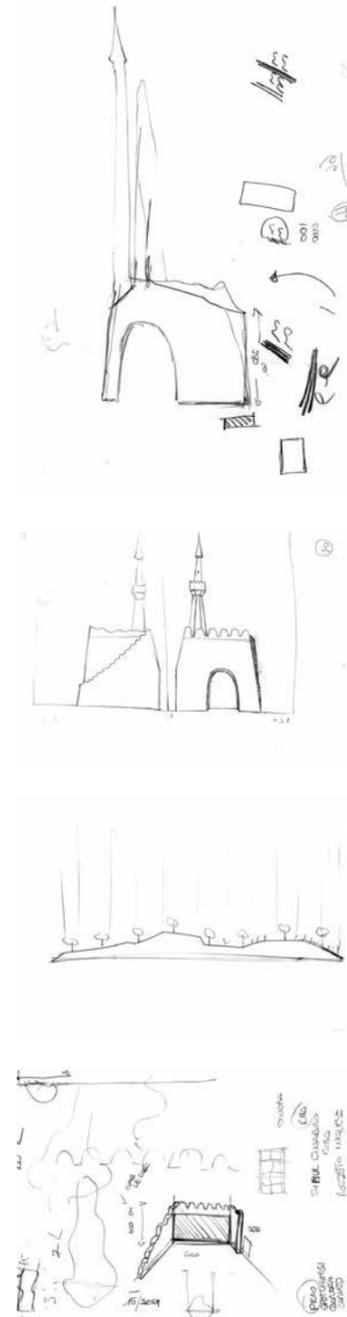
Marcella Beccaria: It seems to me that the relationship between the places of research, production and display has always been part of your practice. For example, I’m thinking about *The Cave*, one of your earliest works that placed you on the international map. The video, which shows you reciting by heart a Surah from the Quran, exists in three versions—one shot in Istanbul (2004), one in Amsterdam (2005), and one in Hamburg (2005). In this way, you restore value to the indissoluble relationship that binds each work of art to a precise context. You also highlight the multiple further meanings that blossom the moment a particular work is moved from one place to another. As regards the works you are exhibiting at the Castello, the *Cabaret Crusades* series, which you’ve been developing since 2010, I’d like to expand on this aspect of the intentional relationship that exists between the place of production and the content of the work. But before talking about the films proper, let’s start with the setting you designed for this exhibition. You’ve conceived a show in which the idea of staging a journey is strongly present—a journey intended as something physical as well as mental, in search of new points of view while touching upon carefully selected locations. Let’s begin with the walls, which you’ve painted blue. As you know, the Manica Lunga hosted an exhibition here just before yours dedicated to Giovanni Anselmo, a pioneer of Arte Povera who, upon returning to painting in the 1980s, began using ultramarine blue, highlighting the emotional and imaginative value of its distant origins, related to the Orient. Lapis lazuli, the stone used to make the precious color pigment, came from places such as Iran and Afghanistan. In the history of Western painting, especially beginning in the twelfth century, blue is the color of Christ’s garments, as well as the Virgin’s cape. Blue covers the vaults and most of the backgrounds conceived by Giotto for his frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (1303–5). It’s the color of transcendence and in medieval Europe, by virtue of its distant origins and the lengthy manual process required to turn it into a pigment, blue was the most expensive color. In fact, some scholars have attributed the triumph of blue in the chapel in Padua to the considerable economic means of the Scrovegni family, who commissioned Giotto to make the paintings. Lapis lazuli decorations have

been found in Egyptian tombs, and blue is also the color used in certain mosques, like, for example, the Sultanahmet Camii mosque in Istanbul. Where does your blue come from and what does it mean?

Wael Shawky: For Manica Lunga it's actually the same blue I used in dOCUMENTA Kassel, the Serpentine Gallery in London, MoMA PS1 in New York, K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf, and Mathaf in Doha, and it's become really significant for the *Cabaret Crusades* cycle. Originally, it came from a painting by Jean Fouquet of Pope Urban II giving his famous speech at the Clermont Council in 1095. What's interesting is that Fouquet made the painting almost 400 years after the actual speech, based exclusively on his imagination. He used this type of blue for the background—or maybe this is my translation of the blue that he used. I decided to make it almost a historical fact by using it as the background for all the *Cabaret Crusades* series. The speech by Pope Urban II was extremely significant for me, because it's a historical speech that led to almost 200 years of Crusades, and it was supposedly the most important factor—the one that really encouraged the Europeans to get involved in these wars in the Middle East. What I find interesting is that this speech wasn't documented at the time but only afterwards, so we now have four or more different versions of the same speech. And for me this speaks a lot about writing history. How can we depend on historical documents and say that this is “the history” of a certain event? We know the result: we know that a war happened and we can guess that Pope Urban II had amazing charisma since he was able to convince all these people to walk to Jerusalem. However, we don't know exactly what he said. So when someone like Fouquet tries after all these years to translate this uncertain historical fact into a new image and then I take this translation and try to translate it once more as a fact, this is for me a way of analyzing the way in which we understand written history. I consider painting as written history as well—that's why I also work with wooden reliefs dealing with historical paintings.

MB: Painting or, as you explain, the way in which painters have interpreted the past, is also the reference for the new *Buildings*, the structures you've designed for the exhibition in the Manica Lunga. These constructions of yours seem to manifest your interest in Giotto and his architectures, which are still far—or rather, free—from rigorous Renaissance perspective. In your interpretation, in which I notice other references at play, like Arab and Persian miniatures, the constructions become 3D set designs, each of which houses a film from the *Cabaret Crusades* trilogy. Overall, the sets—a sort of castle, a structure that alludes to minaret iconography, and finally a more open space culminating in partly breached walls—offer the idea of a city, whose not quite orthogonal architecture with very unreal colors declares that it belongs to a world of make-believe. It's like being in a theatre whose stage can be crossed, or like walking through your own imagination.

WS: What I like about this type of architecture that we've built for the exhibition is that it's not exactly an art piece, it's not a sculpture piece, but at the same time, it's not only an architecture with functional purposes. Manica Lunga, as everybody said from the start, is an extremely difficult space. How to deal with this space, essentially a very long corridor, was quite complex. From the beginning, I thought that if we could succeed in



Wael Shawky's sketches for the Castello di Rivoli exhibition design, October 2016

creating a story it would be amazing, but it was going to be very risky. So, we started to work with the concept that the audience were going to take a trip through the Manica Lunga—that was the goal. I was trying to avoid the idea of exhibiting, let's say, art objects—although of course we are exhibiting art: what's important is to take this trip, as you said, in the sense of looking at history as if you're looking at a scenography.

MB: Yes, what you've conceived is truly an itinerary that highlights something which, in my opinion, is at the heart of the *Cabaret Crusades* project: these works don't exactly deal with the Crusades, but with the history of the Crusades and the cultural constructions that have been made about them through writings and painted images. This is a big difference, in which the use of marionettes for actors obviously plays an essential role.

WS: Yes, and it's also about the idea of the cabaret, the idea of setting up a show, something fake, something that you know is fake but at the same time you enjoy. This is the idea—entertainment basically, a sort of gathering where people speak about political events. There's another element that I find particularly interesting: I was wondering, for example, how to make the setting for *The Secrets of Karbala*. In the end, I based my scenography on Giotto's painting. In *The Path to Cairo*, the scenography is based instead on the miniatures by Nasuhü's-Silahi. So the challenge of the exhibition project here was how to create the same spirit, but without trying to make them as pieces of sculpture, since these architectural structures have to be functional in a way.

MB: There are many attention-grabbing details in these structures: some touches of gold leaf on a wall, small steps running along the sides of a building, and especially the continuous row of battlements—which appear to allude to defense against an enemy—and finally, breached walls, as if the battle had already taken place.

WS: Yes, exactly. I wanted to make certain elements of the architecture recur throughout the entire exhibition. Even in the wooden reliefs, you can see the same details, like the teeth on top of the castles and the mosque and so on. It's as though everything were converging into one only world, without separations. No good and no evil.

MB: And what about the pink color of these buildings? For days, with your assistants, you've been looking for the exact hue of pink to use here.

WS: The pink also comes from Giotto. It's also to do with trying to escape the cliché of stereotypical brown bricks.

MB: You were purposely looking for a color that was unnatural, unreal, I'd say...

WS: Yes, I think we talked about this. Some of the decisions happen subconsciously, almost without thinking... But the main point here is how to try to create a system that looks as if it should actually be this way, as if there were something like this that already existed. It's also a way of translating history, because history can be completely fictional but at the same time, according to the way we put it, the way we reconstruct it, it might make sense.

MB: It often makes sense in relation to one own's time.

WS: Exactly, yes. In the films I was trying to escape things like one particular story or one particular hero, or a specific love affair. I know that these



clichés are necessary in the conception of a film; but I really wanted to avoid them as far as I could... in the end, in most of the *Cabaret Crusades* films you don't see any heroes.

MB: Yes, even if paradoxically, the sequence of the growing number of episodes that structure the entire *Cabaret Crusades* cycle makes me think of Scheherazade and her unstoppable storytelling impulse. So let's talk about the films. From the West we head East and I'm thinking about the historical sources you drew upon to develop the three films, according to a method that Amin Maalouf also used to write his book *The Crusades through Arab Eyes* (1983). Numerous Arab historians from that time narrated the story of the Crusades. In Turin, as early as 1957, Einaudi published one of the first studies in Italy based on this approach, *Storici arabi delle Crociate* (published in English as *Arab Historians of the Crusades*), where the Orientalist Francesco Gabrieli offered the translation of a rich selection of writings by twenty of the most important Arab historians of the Crusades. He recreated a timeline of the Crusades by drawing upon these original Arab sources. You told me that among the historians, you were especially inspired by two of them: Usama ibn Munqidh, who lived at the time of the First Crusade and was an eyewitness to some of the events described, and Ibn al Qalanisi who is considered, if I'm not mistaken, the first Arab historian of the Crusades. Among the many Arab authors who dealt with this subject, why did you choose these two in particular?

WS: This Italian book you talk about is very interesting, and way before Maalouf's! As regards the Arab historians, yes, I read Usama ibn Munqidh and Ibn al Qalanisi closely, but also others such as Ibn al Athir and Ibn Kathir. I also used the writings of Baha' ad-Din Ibn Shaddad, who was the assistant of Salah ad-Din and one of his main biographers. I read these particular historians because they were incredibly generous in writing—they wrote very much, and this also made me think a lot. Actually, in the case of someone like Baha' ad-Din Ibn Shaddad this is perhaps a problem, because not only was he the assistant of Salah ad-Din, but he wrote a good deal about the many feats that made him the most amazing leader in the Islamic world, so of course we believe in what he did but...

MB: ... but we might think that as his assistant he wasn't very objective, right?

WS: Yes, because in the end he belonged to the system, to the regime. However, this is the case with many of them. During that time, each one of these big leaders had someone writing about them, talking about them everywhere. It's something like "the media" of that time. Usama ibn Munqidh instead was a political ambassador who traveled a lot across the lands where the Crusaders arrived. In a sense, he was almost an anthropologist and I found out that a number of later historians used his writings.

MB: After you first mentioned him to me, I went to look for his book whose English version I found is titled *An Arab-Syrian Gentleman and Warrior in the Period of the Crusades*. It has been interesting to read it while thinking about your work: as you know, it's not a history book but rather a book of stories, some of which regard the Franks. Rather than the grand picture, he observed the details of daily life, looking at the Crusaders, the foreign invaders, with the same curiosity he would have had for an alien species.



WS: I used one of the stories he narrates as a song in the film. It's the one about the Crusaders setting up a competition between two very old women. They're supposed to run but they can't and everybody is laughing; in the end, the prize is a pig, which for a Muslim is the worst thing ever.

MB: Let's talk about the films now, focusing on the relationship between the places of production, the materials, and the contents—something that, as I mentioned above, seems central to your work, in particular as regards the marionettes who star in each of the *Cabaret Crusades* films. The first film, *The Horror Show File* (2010), covers a precise period in history, from 541—when a terrible pestilence struck the city of Constantinople—to 1099, the year Pope Urban II died. The film was shot in Italy, at the Fondazione Pistoletto in Biella, with antique wooden marionettes from the Lupi collection in Turin. You designed their costumes and accessories. This is the first time you used marionettes in your work and their presence would accompany you for the next five years. Could you tell me where this idea of using marionettes came from?

WS: I always connect this idea of using marionettes with having first worked with kids for *Telematch*, a series of videos I made before the *Cabaret Crusades*. Working with children was very important to me: if I want to talk about a certain political or historical event or a massive social change (such as the transition from nomadism into agricultural systems, for example), I try as much as possible to remove all the drama from the performance. Kids don't really know anything about the events we're dealing with, so they're just following what we say to them. There are no clichéd aspects in any of the actions they do—they don't know if it's good or if it's bad. To me, this means erasing drama from the performance. Also, when you work with kids, you don't add any layer of gender to the film; it's not about men and women but only about a society. The idea of working with marionettes came out of this way of thinking. However, it really took shape when I was reading about Pope Urban II's speech. I was trying to imagine the speech, because as I said it wasn't documented. As you know, the Church was very strong at that time. I can't say that it would manipulate people—maybe the Pope himself was manipulated—but for me it was actually all about manipulation and how to convince people who were extremely poor to walk toward Jerusalem. It took some people over four years to reach Jerusalem and half of them died along the way. The whole story involves a lot of manipulation of the population by the system. So that's the main reason behind using marionettes. Once I started to think about the history of the marionettes, their look, the idea of mechanism, and so on, it all became more complex. I started wondering if it should have been realistic, or draw more from my imagination. In the second film, the idea of staying closer to my imagination and to my drawings became more important. Here, I made a very precise script, which I wrote according to what I was reading from Ibn al-Qalanisi and Ibn al-Athir. At the same time, the visual aspect is very free—I'd say almost surreal sometimes. Again, this is a way of translating history according to my own vision but without trying to invent historical facts; it's only about the look.

MB: For the second film, *The Path to Cairo*, which covers the years between 1099, with the capture of Jerusalem during the First Crusade, and 1146, with the death

of the *atabek* Zengi, the ruler of Mosul, you shifted from Italy to France. It was produced in Aubagne, near Marseille. The production was bigger than the first film, in that the marionettes here were specifically based on your drawings and made by ceramicists from Aubagne, where there's a tradition of crafting "san-tons" for manger scenes. Why did you decide to make this film in France, with local artisans and materials?

WS: Honestly, some things I didn't plan...

MB: But it makes a lot of sense if you look at the entire picture of the production locations for each one of the films: Italy, France, and then Germany. These were amongst the main countries from which the Crusaders came.

WS: When we finished the first film and presented it, it was really successful. Otherwise, I couldn't have produced the second one! In 2012, while I was planning to do this second film, I received an invitation from Marseille, which that year was the Capital of Culture. I asked if they'd be willing to make a new big production. I told them about *Cabaret Crusades* and my intention to produce the second part. After some discussion, they confirmed that they were interested and so we did the second film there. It was quite a big production, which as I said, wasn't really planned in that way. However, what is quite unbelievable is that Aubagne is just a few minutes away from Clermont, the place where the Council of Urban II was held. So we were using this ceramic technique that belongs to this specific area (which is Christian, so we're talking about a European Christian technique), in order to tell the history of Christianity, but from the Arab point of view... that shift is really incredible for me. I worked with all these craftsmen there, who knew that the project was about the history of the Crusades from the Arab point of view and everyone tried their best to make the level as high as possible. That was really great.

MB: Let's discuss the setting. The film, which opens with the sequences where Jerusalem is burning after the 1099 devastation, deals with events between the First and Second Crusade and unfolds in various locations including, besides Jerusalem, also Damascus, Tripoli, Aleppo, Baghdad, Edessa, and the Jaabar fortress. As we mentioned, in this second film there's a new element represented by the in-depth analysis of iconographic sources that you conducted to create the set designs. In this catalog, for the first time, we are publishing the entire file of your iconographic notes. Your sources were ancient Arab and Persian miniatures, images that we know were used at the time as actual maps of the cities they portrayed. In what way has the portrayal of three-dimensional space become a part of your work?

WS: I wanted to make each one of the three films unique and different, with its own language, its own way of making scenography, music, and so on. As regards scenography, the first film has a feeling of Renaissance perspective: we made the elements at the front of the set bigger than those at the back, so that the latter looked smaller, and with this we created this fake idea of perspective. We could say that the first film is more European in the way it creates its visual language. I think this is important, also because the marionettes came from here, from Italy, and they're historical—they're 200 years old. And even though we changed all their costumes and so on, the story wasn't yet very Arabian as it is in the sec-



ond film, because we were only talking about Constantinople, about Pope Urban II's speech, and this was before the Crusaders' arrival in Jerusalem. Of course, there are some Arab writings that record these events, and I did use these sources, but most of them date from after the Crusaders had reached Jerusalem. So, you have a far greater number of European writings dealing with this period. Anyway, I also used the Arab writings...

MB: So you're saying that the sources for the first film had to include European texts, because that's the majority of the writings out of which the history of the First Crusade has been constructed?

WS: Actually, for some points I could use Arab writers, but in the end that story is mainly based on European sources. *The Horror Show File* is just half an hour long: the first part includes the Pope's speech and the idea of reaching Jerusalem; the second is more about the relationship between the various Arab Muslim leaders—the Crusaders had already settled in the area by this time and we see the Arab leaders trying to protect themselves.

As regards the scenography of the second film, my perspective becomes more about the Arab point of view. This also includes the idea behind the marionettes, because even though they were made with this European Christian technique we talked about, there's something deeply Islamic about them: the concept in the Quran that describes humanity as built out of clay. This is very strong in the Islamic mind.

MB: This is a concept that also belongs to Christianity, and as we know is found in several cultures and different myths.

WS: Yes, and in the second film there is also the idea of animals telling tales—all the faces that you see are based on animals, such as camels or cats, and are a mix of animal and human forms. Very few characters, like Nour ad-Din for example, have a more human appearance; they are thin and tall.

MB: That's interesting, animals characterizing the appearance of humans. Could you tell me more about this?

WS: Actually, the idea of an animal telling a story isn't really Arab. It's Middle Eastern, or better, it comes from the Far East, from India with *Kalila Wa Dimna*, where all the stories are told by animals. I think it's part of trying to reduce the expectation of good versus evil; it's adding to the idea of not trying to say in the film that this character is evil and this character is not. Of course, this also applies to other works, such as *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, where the protagonists are kids, and in the last film in that series, where the entire film was inverted.

MB: In the last *Al Araba Al Madfuna* film, which you are installing at Fondazione Merz, this inversion, through which each color jumps into its opposite, allows you to create images with an almost ghost-like effect.

WS: Yes, it becomes a ghost-like effect. You see a kid, but the image of the kid is inverted, so you can't read any features that would encourage you to build any type of emotional relationship with the character. This is part of the language I use in my works.



MB: Does this mean that you don't want viewers to be conditioned by your own point of view?

WS: Yes. I don't want to present a character in a particular way or include my opinion on good or evil. I'm only using what I've found written about this history.

MB: Now let's look at *The Secrets of Karbala*, the film that rounds off your Crusade trilogy. The story of this film, which opens with a flashback to the Battle of Karbala in 680, covers the Second, Third, and Fourth Crusades and ends when Constantinople is captured by the Crusaders in 1204. The work includes several references to historical events, from which emerges a very dense plot of political and strategic actions on the part of both the invaders and those who were invaded. In this case, even though the film was shot in Düsseldorf, in Germany, you commissioned the marionettes from artisans in Venice, in Italy. The material you chose was glass, and you asked master Venetian glass blowers to make them. This is quite striking, because we know that the invaders of Constantinople were Frankish Crusaders along with Venetians, and some of the treasures we admire today in Venice were taken during the sack of 1204. In *The Secrets of Karbala*, the shapes of the marionettes become highly fantastical. In some cases, they remind me of the prolific medieval imagination, a world made up of gargoyles and other imaginative animals, where human, animal, and vegetal forms are in constant transformation. In his book *The Fantastic Middle Ages. Antiquities and Exoticism in Gothic Art* (1955), the scholar Jurgis Baltrušaitis outlines an enthralling geography of ideas by which a number of ornamental motifs, generally considered to be the exquisite product of an intrinsically European medieval culture, are actually traced back to Arab roots due to the strong attraction that Islam exerted over the medieval Western world. Baltrušaitis reconnects forms and patterns, but also fantastical and monstrous creatures that characterized medieval gothic taste and which appear abundantly in Western Christian churches, to the influence of Islam across the West through the direct trade that both the Crusades and merchants kept alive for centuries. For example, words like "muslin," "baldachin," "damask," still used today to indicate certain types of fabric, relate to the original places of production of these handmade objects, that is, the cities of Mosul, Baghdad, and Damascus, respectively.

WS: This is fascinating. As you know, the premiere of *The Path to Cairo* was at DOCUMENTA(13) in 2012. It was very successful and again this allowed me to manage this third film. *The Secrets of Karbala* was the biggest and the most expensive among my productions. It was the most complex and at the beginning I wasn't even sure where to make it and how to address the historical period that I wanted to cover, spanning from 1146 to 1204. The research took quite a long time. After much thought I decided to make Venice the center, the key to the story, simply because it seemed that the Venetians at that time were the main force behind the Fourth Crusade and I wanted to close the whole series with this. There was also the idea that they were mainly merchants and traders and they weren't really concerned with the Crusades' religious ideology. When I thought of working with glass in Murano, I knew that it was a big challenge. After lots of research, we found a factory willing to make the attempt, just to try, not working on the project yet. Then other ideas came, so I had a better understanding of how to develop several concepts regarding the characters,

the style of the film, and all of that. After many tries, and having looked at different sources, I decided to use something completely different. I took inspiration from the African collection at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The marionettes are based on that, but of course I made some changes.

MB: What was the reason behind this choice? This further complicates and adds another layer to the entire *Cabaret Crusades* project. The museums and institutions that present these works of yours, including us at the Castello, generally introduce them to the audience as "the history of the Crusades seen from an Arab point of view"...

WS: The reason for looking at the MET collection has nothing to do with African history; it's about the way in which these African masks are connected to modern art. At the time, my idea was to base the visual aspects of the film on the sources of the history of modern art. This was the beginning.

MB: So was it about the use of sources rather than modern art per se?

WS: I mean, it wasn't about modern art in the sense of Picasso, but about the idea of sources, the way they change our understanding of the visual arts. Using African masks has been a turning point for me, it's about how this can influence you... it's difficult to describe it in words, but in the end it's very convincing when you see the film. I did not mean to make the marionettes more surreal, but to free them from cliché. So it's not only the marionette that's speaking, but also the fact that their faces are based on a different culture. The basis of my inspiration were the African masks, but when you turn the African masks into Murano glass they become something completely different—they become new creatures, to the point where you'd never ever imagine where they're coming from. This is also part of my concern with erasing drama, clichés, and so on. When you look at the face of the Salah ad-Din marionette, you'd never say that he's a good man or a bad man, beautiful or ugly; it's just something unique and bizarre. It took a very long time and endless research to reach the understanding that visually this would be the right thing. There are of course some marionettes in which the African mask original elements are more evident, but in other cases it's not that obvious at all. I applied similar concepts when I started to think about the scenography for this third film. After several attempts with the use of glass and the masks, I found that the best visual scenography in this case would be the type of architecture that we see in Giotto's paintings. I was interested in the fact that it has "mistakes" in the perspective, and I see it as something that creates an important link between the second and the third film. Then there were the ideas about the stage, the moving platform.

MB: Right, I wanted to ask you about that concept. This amazing rotating stage, which makes its appearance at the very beginning of the film, is really at the core of *The Secrets of Karbala* and gives it a totally different quality with respect to the technology that the use of film would have allowed you.

WS: In the other films the scenography is very static, to the point where it becomes like a background for the story. This time I thought it would be

really great if we could make the scenography more dynamic. The platform we built moves with the film and the characters, and with these movements I found a way to show that the geographical element in this whole story isn't secondary, but something essential. So the stage is like the geographical element.

MB: To complete the discussion about the glass marionettes in the third film, what about the fragility embedded in the use of this material?

WS: A long time ago, way before even thinking about Venice, the idea of glass and fragility came to me when I was reading José Saramago, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. In the book Saramago imagines Jesus speaking to God and asking God “Why are we so fragile, and why are we not build out of light?” It was the idea that our souls are hosted in a very fragile body, which can be destroyed through an accident; if we were made from different material, we wouldn't break. It was all about this fragility that's connected to Christianity; that was the link.

MB: Let's continue with our walk across the exhibition. At the center of the itinerary we find the glass marionettes from *The Secrets of Karbala*. Unlike previous exhibitions, here you wanted to install them in a small marching crowd free from display cases. You created a special garden, with evergreen flowers and bonsai plants similar to the ones in your film. In your design, this garden is located within turreted walls and the inside is based on a highly geometric form. You chose white Carrara marble with a shiny surface. Can one see references to the idea of the Islamic garden, as a lush place with young evergreen trees symbolizing eternal youth, and whose order reflects the human mind and the universe? Or is this just my point of view?

WS: I don't know if it's correct to connect it to the full concept of the Islamic garden... I see it as just a garden. As for the architectural buildings that we made for the exhibition, I agree that there are some Islamic elements, like the minaret. However, parts of the structures also resemble a fort, maybe a Crusader fort or a European castle. But it could also be an Islamic one. To me, it's not defined whether it's Islamic or Christian or European. I think that the definition of Islamic garden is quite wide, as there were gardens from Iraq to Syria we could talk about. If we mean Islamic as referred to the Quran, the word *hadiqa*, which means heaven or paradise, also means garden. In the Quran, the garden is something that God gave to man, and in that beautiful garden there were many palm trees and a river, but man didn't behave well so God took everything from him.

MB: Isn't the garden also the promise of a prize?

WS: Yes, absolutely, the garden is indeed a prize. In the case of the garden here in the Manica Lunga, as you remember we started with the concept of a hanging garden and then we moved on, arriving at a better solution, I think. I like it better this way: the idea of creating an architectural element, a situation that allows people to go through a sort of piazza. The garden as we've done it here is better connected with the memory of Pope Urban II's speech, when he says that Christians are fighting and killing each other here because they don't have enough land, and encourages people to embark on the Crusades to find new lands.



MB: Right. In the versions we know, the Pope's promise concerned the idea of reaching fertile lands.

WS: Yes, fertile lands, and to me the garden here is associated with the very concept of the wealth of the land. I wanted to use marble to underline this concept of preciousness, and for the same reason, I also added some golden leaves. Now that I talk about it, I am a bit worried, as the garden it is not finished yet... we are saying it's amazing and precious but we still don't know what it will look like!

MB: I am sure it will be finished! We walked through the exhibition, discussing some of the key elements so far, but we did not cover the works that visitors will encounter at the very beginning of their itinerary, or by converse, at the end of their visit. At this stage of the installation process (we are few days away from the opening date) there are indeed some things that still need to be done. We just hanged the wooden sculptures in high-relief, the brand new works that you finished here in these days. Once again, you decided to work in Italy and employed craftsmen from the Veneto region specialized in woodworking. Before discussing the content of these new works, I would like to say that by seeing you here every day, working with the installation team and finishing these new works, it's become clear to me how important the hand-made component is for you, the amazing amount of manual labor that each one of your works requires. Every detail— from the initial drawings you make of everything, the crafting of the marionettes, the filming process, and the huge amount of construction you made here—is the outcome of a slow process, in which time is a major component. Together with the amount of time that the manual carving of each relief has required, these works also bring some important new elements to your research on the Crusades. It seems to me that the very use of this technique is a Western medieval reference, since we know that during the Middle Ages, the relief carving took over from full sculpture in the round. For each one you've used specific sources from the history of European painting. Moreover, each of your sources is a history painting, a genre that has traditionally been considered the most important that painters could tackle. *Cabaret Crusades: Relief of the Entry of the Crusaders into Constantinople, April 12, 1204* is installed right at the beginning of the exhibition. It will be the work that visitors will see first and last in the show. The painting by Eugène Delacroix *Entry of the Crusaders into Constantinople, April 12, 1204* (1840) is the source for this work. Commissioned by King Louis Philippe for the Versailles galleries, Delacroix's painting depicts the 1204 sack of Constantinople putting at the center of the scene the two main characters of the event: the Venetian Doge Enrico Dandolo and Baldwin Count of Flanders, who led the troops. Critics have noted on various occasions how, instead of lingering upon the tragic violence of this event, Delacroix preferred to imagine a scene following the battle, depicting the Crusaders, and even Dandolo's horse, as if they were overcome by doubt and perhaps by the horror of the acts they had just committed.

WS: The sack of Constantinople is the last scene of *The Secrets of Karbala*, and that's why I wanted the work to be installed in this position. To answer your question about my intervention into the iconography of each one of the original paintings, I can tell you that everything comes from my personal imagery. It's my way of intervening in this Crusades history. As I said



Wael Shawky
Cabaret Crusades: Relief of the Entry of the Crusaders into Constantinople, April 12, 1204, 2016
 Hand-carved burned wood
 280 x 328 x 12 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery
 Photo: Renato Ghiazza
 detail

before, since the scripts of the films are mainly based on the Arab point of view, even visually, I thought that in this exhibition it would be interesting to work with paintings. I wanted to use these European accounts of the events: they are actually another format to document history, based on visual language. I decided to use these European documents but instead of completely changing the visual elements, as I did in the last film especially with its almost surreal characters, here I thought I could add maybe one character, or same details to the story, without changing anything else. My direction is the same as in the rest of the Crusades series: it's about questioning and analyzing the way history is written, because this is history, and these paintings are history too.

MB: In the case of the painting by Delacroix, your intervention has consisted above all in burning the relief surface. In your work, the memory of the fire caused by the city siege, which in Delacroix's version is portrayed as something distant in the background, becomes a scorched surface. Delacroix called his painting's innovative chromatic quality *flochetage*, a color deconstruction technique that in some ways could be considered the forerunner to Impressionism. Charles Baudelaire wrote about this painting, especially commenting on the peculiar chromatic choices and its atmospheric character. In your intervention, you removed the original color and thus eliminated the exotic romanticism imagined by Delacroix, and instead obtained a result that underlines the violence of the events described, almost as if displaying the still-smoking remains of an horribly disfigured skin. The other two reliefs you premiere in this exhibition are *Relief of the Adoption of Godfrey of Bouillon by Alexios Komnenos*, which comes out of a 1842 painting by Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Hesse, and *Relief of the Capture of Damietta*, which is based on a marine painting by Cornelis Claesz van Wieringen from around 1625.

WS: In these two works I added only two elements: one is the really old animal-human being on the top right; the other one is a big creature, something like a mythical dragon coming out of the sea. I just added these elements that don't radically change the aesthetics of the original paintings.

MB: So far, these reliefs are the last chapter in your research about the history of the Crusades.

WS: The part that's finished is the film series. However, even if it might be done, and I am already tackling other projects, I feel I'm still at the beginning...

This conversation took place on October 30 and 31, 2016 at the Castello di Rivoli, before the opening of the exhibition, and was transcribed by Federica Lamedica and Mattia Solari. The snapshots published in these pages were taken by Chiara Bertola during the installation days.



Wael Shawky
Cabaret Crusades: Relief of the Adoption of Godfrey of Bouillon by Alexios Komnenos, 2016
 Hand-carved wood, paint, and gold leaf
 246.5 x 372 x 12.5 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery
 detail of the work in progress

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