

Express

Artist Lara Baladi helps unravel the mysteries of her 29-foot-long tapestry 'Oum el Dounia,' on view at Sackler

By **Elena Goukassian** August 27

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Egypt? The Sphinx? The pyramids? Riding camels through the desert? "Walk Like an Egyptian"? Egyptian-Lebanese artist Lara Baladi tries to playfully subvert these cliches with her work "Oum el Dounia." In 2007, Baladi enlarged one of her old photo collages and, using a digital loom, created the 29-foot-long tapestry, on view at the Sackler starting this weekend. According to Baladi, "Oum el Dounia" ("mother of the world" in Arabic and locals' nickname for Egypt) takes Western Orientalism and "turns it on its head." As with many collages, there's a lot going on. Baladi helpfully pointed out a few key themes, which are literally woven throughout.

- 1.** The narrative starts with a vintage postcard featuring three Bedouins and a camel looking out on the vast desert landscape. Taken by photographer Rudolf Franz Lehnert — who became hugely successful in the late 1800s producing postcards for tourists with his business partner, Ernst Heinrich Landrock — this example of Orientalism is the only postcard Baladi used in her collage. All of the remaining photos — most of the images in the piece — are her work.
- 2.** If you think the Sphinx looks a little wonky, that's because it was cut out from a souvenir papyrus, among the most popular Egyptian souvenirs. The Sphinx is flanked by multiple images of the same woman doing stereotypical Egyptian poses. Hieroglyphs are drawn in the sands below.
- 3.** What's the hookah-smoking caterpillar from "Alice in Wonderland" doing in the Egyptian desert? "The caterpillar is the philosopher, wandering about both time and space," Baladi says, noting that those are concepts the desert embodies. Baladi's collage includes many other characters from "Alice in Wonderland." To the left, you'll find the mad tea party, while the White Rabbit and Alice pop up in miniature all over the piece. Alice, a representation of innocence, is the one in the white dress.
- 4.** The counterpart to Alice, the mermaid symbolizes the "human quest for mystic love," Baladi says. "Throughout mythologies, the mermaid is the temptress." The fish tail is an emblem of Christianity and she compares the role of the mermaid to that of Mary Magdalene: "Both are symbols of the possibility for

transformation,” Baladi says. Taken together, Alice and the mermaid represent “the private and the public, the virgin and the prostitute, the dual reality we constantly struggle and dance with.”

5. The so-called “chicken and mushroom” is a natural rock formation in Egypt’s White Desert. The inspiration for Baladi’s tale, the unusual landmark creates what Baladi calls a “surreal, cartoon-like landscape” in the middle of a chalk desert that was once completely under water. The once-submerged chicken and mushroom formation links “Alice in Wonderland” (it has the shape of a mushroom, after all) with the mermaid, and it protrudes into the collage’s blue sky, which Baladi composed using (mostly) underwater photographs.

6. The couple in the middle represents Adam and Eve, bringing Baladi’s work full circle and back to its title. “Egypt has a caricatural image as the place where civilization is born,” Baladi says. “Today this seems ironic, considering the country’s very high level of illiteracy” and its troubled economic and political state, she says. Baladi has been vocal about the need for change in Egypt and has many works devoted to the successes and failures of the 2011 revolution there. “This piece is a tribute to Egypt’s land being as old as the history of humanity,” she says.

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1050 Independence Ave. SW; Sat. through June 5, 2016, free.

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