



On a Caravan

By Julie Oxenforth

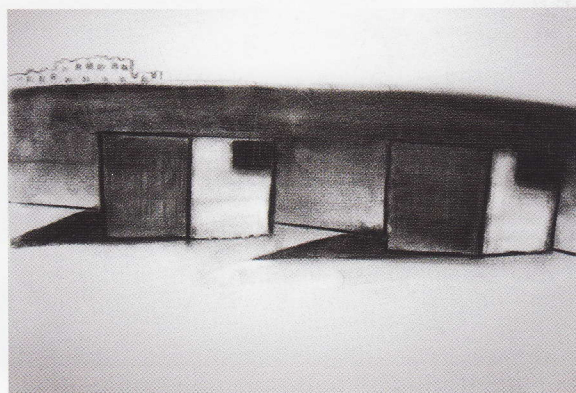
On January 29th, St John the Baptist Church in old Maadi will be converted to a gallery for a week, to host an art exhibition that I am delighted to be participating in. According to the press release, the exhibition 'brings together Egyptian and Western artists under the banner of On a Caravan: East and West Journeying Together through the Arts, with a theme of the relationship between East and West, Muslims and Christians; and the goal of building bridges of understanding and respect between them.

The driving force at the seat of this venture is the American priest of St. John's, Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler along with renowned artist Mohamed Abla and British artist Roland Prime, who has been living and working in Cairo for five years. This is not the first time the paths of these three have crossed. Two years ago, Roland Prime attended Abla's Winter Academy in the Fayoum Art Center; and Rev. Chandler, a keen

supporter of the arts who grew up in West Africa to the soundtrack of world music star Youssou N'Dour, organized the commission of a sculpture by Roland Prime for the churchyard. This modern sculpture, which is constructed using the organ pipes from the old church organ, gives us a clue to the progressive thinking of Rev. Chandler who, speaking about the value of art, says, "In this increasing chasm of misunderstanding and discord between the Middle East and the West, our day calls for a whole new kind of movement: one that builds on what the two hold in common. And art, a wellspring of the spiritual journey, serves to build this much-needed bridge."

The venue itself is very special and in harmony with the goals of the On a Caravan initiative,

because, over the last 77 years since it was founded, the church has gained the respect of the Islamic authorities, especially since the post 9/11 Dialogue Agreement between the Anglican Communion and Al Azhar. The church was designed by the architect Sir Herbert Baker and is worthy of a visit to experience its simple and serene interior of multiple white domes with wide curving arches,



contemporary stained glass windows and the overall harmonious symmetry.

The On a Caravan collective includes Mohamed Abla, Dr. Reda Abdel Rahman from the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, Mashrabiya artists Hisham el Zeiny and Hany Rashed, alongside Western artists living in Cairo from Britain, Australia, France, Germany, Switzerland and the USA. This initiative is more than an exhibition and has become a journey itself. In early December we assembled for a symposium in an historic Maadi villa, for dinner and the opportunity to introduce ourselves and our work to the group. Paul-Gordon brought his border-bashing ideologies into everyday life by asking us to sit at a table with people we didn't know for dinner. Then we all said a few words, some more than others, about ourselves and our work, and as we were leaving we were given an envelope each with a generous materials allowance to make new work for the exhibition which, after being fed with delicious food and drink, rounded the evening off nicely. The archetypal artist is always fretting about money.

Next on the agenda were studio visits by facilitator/lead artist Roland Prime and curator Paul-Gordon. They visited us all to see how our ideas and work were progressing and for a general chit-chat about our lives in Cairo.

On a Caravan participants Mohamed Abla and Hany Rashed have a high profile downtown right now, with Hany's solo show currently running at the Mashrabiya on Champollion St. and, as part of the Cairo Biennale, Mohamed Abla's Interactive event held this week in a collection of dilapidated, defunct rooms in the same block as the Bedouin Home Hotel and the Nubian Hotel on the café boulevard of Elwy St. Sunday 21st December was a lively night to be downtown, with the above-mentioned shows opening on the same night, plus both these artists also featuring in a group show at the Cairo Atelier. And there were plenty of people around, smoking shisha on the pavement cafés, probably because the Cairo Biennale had just opened at the weekend.

It was here at Abla's Interactive, while I was gazing out onto the ceaseless movement below that I felt a rush of hope and excitement and a sense of what the On a Caravan initiative is all about. While visiting the sleek, smart Mashrabiya, Abla's disused factory space and the old school Cairo Atelier, in this condensed area of urbanity, I felt the possibility of unity in diversity. The last time I felt it was during a 10-day retreat in the Sinai Mountains, staring at rock formations for unregistered durations. We're all meeting again mid-January



for an interactive art day led by Mohamed Abla, so this week at Abla's venue on Elwy Street I got a preview of what we will be doing. Large sheets of clear polythene are stretched across the width of the room in rows. One person stands behind the polythene; the other participant traces the figure of the person in paint onto the polythene. This life-size image is then printed onto large sheets of paper.

For the final exhibition, we are to produce two pieces of work, one to be shown in the marquee area at the side of the church. This work will focus on the commonalities between the Middle East and West, Muslim and Christian, with the themes of peace, harmony, compassion, goodwill, forgiveness, love and understanding to draw on for inspiration. For the second piece, on display inside the church, the artwork will be a response to or representation of the physical building of the historic St. Johns' Church.

Since I got involved in On a Caravan, I've been bathing in the warm light of inclusivity. And I can't help feeling it filters down from the goodwill and positive intentions of the organizer of

this event. In these times when individualism is encouraged in the West and, as globalization continues, is in danger of pulling the East over into this way of living, it feels good to be part of a group that has the intention of meeting the other, and not denying or destroying it.

Mohamed Abla at the launch said: "I am living this bridge. As a Muslim, I married a Christian, and I profoundly believe in this idea of using art to build an alliance of understanding and friendship."

Roland Prime added: "We hope that, through this initiative, we can learn and pass on these skills to others, so that all can live without division, and respect and love the 'other.'"

On a Caravan opening hours:
January 29th Opening Night and Reception
January 30th & 31st Open All Day
Open February 2nd - 5th from 10am - 5pm. All works are for sale from January 29th.
www.oncaravan.org