

Omar Sharif and Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler discuss a work by Emma James. *Leading Ladies*. 2010. Oil on canvas. 75 x 60 cm.



CAIRO'S CARAVAN

The second annual *Caravan: Festival of the Arts*, running from 28 January–3 February in Cairo, featured the works of 46 premier Middle Eastern and Western artists in its interfaith exhibition.

Text by Andrew Cornetta

After the Nag Hammadi Christmas shooting's troubling reminder that inter-religious tension is still a living reality in Egypt, a beacon of hope shone forth from a southern suburb of Cairo last January. *Caravan: Festival of the Arts*, opened on 28 January at St John the Baptist Church in Maadi, and brought together 46 artists – 23 Middle Eastern and 23 Western. The rector of St John the Baptist, the Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler, together with Roland Prime, the exhibition's curator, commissioned the 46 artists to interpret this year's theme, *Harmony: East and West*. The result was an assemblage as diverse as the festival's audience; an array of photography, graffiti-inspired prints, traditional paintings, ceramics and sculpture.

The event unfolded over the course of a week, with hundreds gathering outside the building during its opening. The ceremonies were launched with prefatory remarks from Right Reverend Mouneer Hanna Anis, the Anglican Bishop of Egypt; Right Reverend and Right Honourable Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London; Sheikh Ali Gouma, the Grand Mufti of Egypt and renowned Egyptian artist Mohammed Abla (*Canvas 5.1*). Following the introduction, the hybrid crowd of expats and Egyptians, young and old, Christians and Muslims, milled about the church-cum-gallery for several hours, conversing with one another and the attending artists.



Sheikh Ali Gouma, the Grand Mufti of Egypt and the Right Honourable Richard Chartres, Bishop of London, open *Caravan: Festival of the Arts*.

For this, the festival's second year, Paul-Gordon Chandler chose to couple the visual art exhibition with film, literature and music. The week's events featured presentations from best-selling Anglo-Afghan writer Tahir Shah and legendary Egyptian actor Omar Sharif, and concluded on 3 February with an inspiring and emotive *oud* performance by renowned Iraqi master Naseer Shamma. Just before entering to perform, Shamma remarked to eager standers-by with a smile, "This is my first time playing in a church in Egypt." The acknowledgment aptly reflected the festival's aim to bring together East and West, Christian and Muslim, in an innovative and unconventional fashion. And not unlike the sight of the famous Muslim oudist performing beneath a wooden cross, many of the participating artists included supposedly incongruous images in their works, harmonious collisions.

In one such example, the foreground of American artist Thomas Hartwell's photograph shows a Western wife and husband cuddling in the desert sand as their Egyptian guide, oriented to Mecca, prostrates in prayer behind them. The festival made real that which the photograph represents, the 'shared space' in which mutual understanding and respect can take place in all their complexity. Hanging on the opposite wall was Abla's *The Nostalgia of Harmony*



Omar El-Fayoumi. (Detail) *The Face of Harmony*. 2010. Oil on canvas. 70 x 70 cm.

"To experience true harmony between peoples, interaction must be 'face to face'... portrait painting enables the viewer to look into the eyes of the other, which... is needed for harmonious and peaceful living." — Omar El-Fayoumi



Mohammed Abla. *The Nostalgia of Harmony*. 2008. Oil on canvas. 60 x 75 cm.

"This is glimpse into former more harmonious days of Egypt. The flag is the old Egyptian flag... when I was young, we used to love being scouts, and one's religion didn't matter to the other." — Mohammed Abla

which depicts two Egyptian scouts – one Christian and one Muslim – although the observer is unable to distinguish who is who. To preserve this unsullied time and relationship, Abla covered the painting's background with heavy gilt, giving the two boys the look of saints in an Orthodox icon, holy in their friendship. Although the Christian icon seemed to be a frequently used symbol in the exhibition, the festival showed itself to be iconoclastic in intent, aiming to tear down the traditional barriers that separate people from one another. In the words of Chandler, "Art is a universal language that has the ability to dissolve the petty differences that divide us. The artistic endeavor invites us to push beyond established boundaries."

Overall, the second annual *Caravan: Festival of the Arts* triumphed in its effort to render solidarity in the face of apparently daunting differences. In view of the work left unfinished, perhaps the spirit of the exhibition could best be summed up by the words of Abla, who pledged and presaged at the exhibition's opening, "This is but a first step. There is more to come."