

IN CONVERSATION WITH ADHAM FARAMAWY

Interviewed by his sister, the winner of the Frieze London Artist Award 2023 talks grief and colonial heritage



CULTURE

ABOVE AND RIGHT *Welcome the newcomers* (i), Adham Faramawy, 2023



“It’s a uniquely strange feeling when you look at a person that you thought you knew through a new lens, only to discover aspects of their character that draw you even closer to them. Despite the three-and-a-half-year age gap, my brother Adham and I were always close, navigating our youth side by side. But with age comes wisdom and I came to realize that my sibling was so much more than just my brother. Adham is an award-winning artist, lecturing at some of the world’s most prestigious universities. This year, he is the recipient of the Frieze London Artist Award 2023 presenting the winning commission *And these deceitful waters*. This edition marks the 20th anniversary of Frieze London, one of the world’s most influential contemporary art fairs.

Adham’s piece is a video and sculptural assemblage examining the history of the Thames, as a colonial artery transporting pillaged treasures, and a site of migration and ecological collapse. Employing a three-person dance performance with music and spoken word, the work explores the roles that both the Thames and the Nile have played and the ways in which they have both reinforced and dissolved borders.

With Adham in London and myself in Cairo, we settle in front of our laptop screens to speak, as we so often do. There’s a fresh candor to our conversation and a newfound openness. “You’ve been a significant part of my work process, so it’s important to me that we’re having this conversation,” says Adham. He spent much of the pandemic alone in East London and during the first lockdown our father passed away. Neither Adham nor I were able to attend his burial due to international Covid restrictions. His close friends held a virtual wake that was streamed online. Adham and I sat watching, in our separate homes, as external observers. In that moment, the sadness ran deep. “In a way I was grateful that I was shielded by

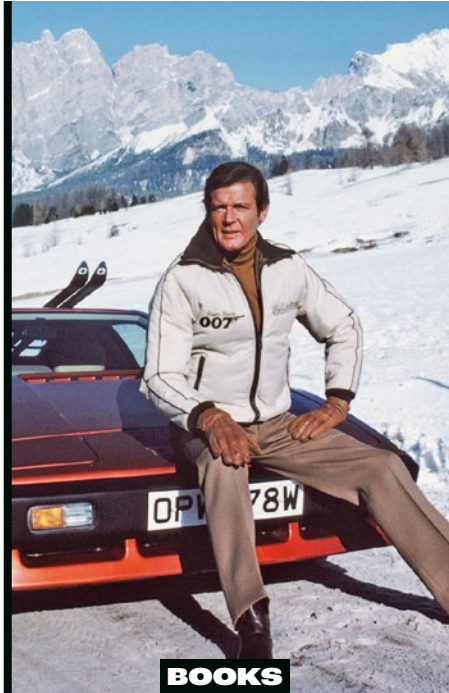
the distance; but conversely, there was no one here to grieve or process with.”

In 2020, Adham made *The air is subtle, various, and sweet*. It featured a segment of a television show our father presented called *My Relationship with a Place*, where he tours his neighborhood. Our father, Saeed Faramawy was from Tvoukh, a small town 36km north of Cairo, and was an artist, satirical cartoonist, writer, poet, musician, and performer. The final artwork was nominated for awards and shown around the world. On what would have been our father’s birthday in 2022, it was screened at the Tate Modern in London, and a few weeks later, showed at the Guggenheim in New York.

Daughters of the River followed. A performance that touched upon the story of Old Father Thames marrying the goddess Isis. The Nile flooded with her tears of grief for the loss of her husband and brother Osiris. It was the starting point for the Frieze commission. Towards the end of the video, Adham recounts the Tripartite Aggression on Egypt in 1956. “When I learned about it at school in England, I was taught that the Egyptians invaded the canal. I remember going home and telling Mama about it and she got really frustrated. She asked me, “Where is the Suez Canal?” and I said, “Egypt.” She continued, “So, how can the Egyptians invade Egyptian land?” At that moment I understood that the culture I live in isn’t designed for me. The way that they recount history isn’t the way that my family experienced it. Growing up in England, counting migrants and refugees as our closest family friends; it’s important to refuse and resist the negative public discourses around seeking asylum.” As part of the commission, Adham has made a pair of prints available for purchase on the Frieze website, the proceeds of which will benefit the Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers. “As cultural practitioners, artists, and writers we align ourselves theoretically with people in need. But for me, it’s important to extend that materially and economically, giving people what they need and sharing the story beyond.”

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BOOKS

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