

# HYPERALLERGIC



## A Window Into the Lives of Women Living in Cairo

THOUGH AT TIMES SEEMING INCOMPLETE, JUDITH BARRY'S EXHIBITION LENDS SPACE TO THE OTHERWISE UNTOLD STORIES OF WOMEN IN CAIRO.

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The roles of women in Egypt have been in tumult in recent years, varying across cities and social classes and moving to the forefront of conversations at the start of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. Historically shut out of political life, women in Egypt have had to navigate circuitous routes to acquire the rights, privileges, and protections not typically afforded to them. However, during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 women were at the forefront of the protests, demanding their voices be heard.

At the Fifth Avenue location of Mary Boone Gallery, an exhibition titled Judith Barry: Cairo Stories attempts to chronicle the lives of women in Cairo during this period of social and political change.

Artist and writer Judith Barry interviewed a diverse array of women in Cairo from the start of the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003 through the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. Cairo Stories compiles those interviews into 11 diptychs — photography and accompanied text — and four plasma-screen videos.

The photos and text are the first pieces encountered when entering the gallery space — each piece measures 10 ½ by 16 inches, forcing the viewer to stand close in order to clearly see and read the text. Each woman's story is different. For instance, one woman, Nadine, recalls her memories of Tahrir Square at the start of the revolution:



*When night comes in the square, suddenly everything feels very calm ... As I walk around, I see men sleeping by the fires, trying to keep warm. They are sleeping under the tanks, on plastic, on blankets ... But few women sleep. Most of them are keeping a wary eye out of the tents, being aware of their surroundings. Some are in the KFC taking care of the injured people.*

Nadine provides a powerful description of the protests, the revolution. Though women are part of the movement, they cannot rest as the men do. The women remain vigilant. The women take care of those in need. Nadine also remains optimistic, adding, “when the morning comes, we will breathe freedom.” Another woman, Nawal, describes Tahrir with a sense of hope:

*A new Egypt was being born. Everyone was supportive. Everyone wanted a role. If one person fell down, a million hands would reach to pick them back up. There was no sexual harassment of any sort. Only optimism! So much happiness in the street! Ecstasy even! Our hope had united us.*

Nadine and Nawal describe an Egypt filled with hope and positivity for the future — a version of Egypt, perhaps, where women were safe and held some measure of social power. To a certain extent, the Square at this time was still a safe space for women — a stark contrast to just one year later, when sexual assault in Tahrir Square became rampant.

Barry’s installation is an important one, but in some respects it feels unfinished. As we know now, not much has changed for the people of Egypt — particularly the women — and the story of Tahrir Square grew ominous, as people were killed and assaulted in the years following the revolution. As a result, there seemed to be a missing link to these stories, one that it is necessary to tie everything together. I couldn’t help but wonder where these women were now and what they feel post-revolution. Did they feel safe? Optimistic? Or has that faded?

Other stories in the exhibition were less political, the women instead sharing personal woes and hardships. Layla, for instance, says, “I’ve been married three times! I married at eighteen, but I wish I waited till thirty.” Suliya talks about her job sewing and how that was the only career option open to her, since her family didn’t have the money to send her to school.

The diptychs provide snippets of these women’s lives that open a brief window. The words are powerful but less so in the moment and more when I went back and read them later, off the images I took with my phone. Walking from one diptych to the other, I felt as though I couldn’t fully absorb the stories and wondered if I wouldn’t have just preferred a book of images and text.

In another room, though, Barry had installed four plasma screens with videos playing on a loop. As detailed in the press release, the videos all feature Egyptian actresses



representing the true stories of the women Barry interviewed, since none of the interviewees wanted to be photographed or filmed. Listening to and hearing the women tell their stories in this format proved much more powerful than walking through the gallery to view the photographs and text. I spent a good amount of time moving from one screen to the next, enthralled by each woman's tale, noting their faces, movements, mannerisms, and even dress.

One video that really captured my attention featured a woman — Fathiya — speaking directly to the viewer. Her laugh, her tone, her desperation, and the way she opened and closed her mouth, lapping her tongue to make a sort of clicking sound at the end of each sentence, has a way of making the viewer feel a perhaps necessary discomfort. She repeats the words “I’m old” and begs the viewer for money to afford to go to Hajj, doubling down on her unwavering faith in God, despite her years of hardship. At one point, she offers the viewer some chocolate as a gift and then demands money, asking for 20 Egyptian pounds in exchange. I couldn't help but feel as though she were speaking to me directly, and in not giving in to her pleas, I became complicit in her hardship.

The videos included women from all walks of life, discussing a number of issues, personal and political, across the city of Cairo. One woman talks about street harassment and how years ago, her mother had hired a group of three women to yell at the men who harassed her. Now, though, she says things are different. Now, they have HarassMap, an app that tells women throughout Egypt which streets to avoid, but the

woman in front of the camera laments that this isn't enough. She doesn't want to have to actively avoid certain streets, and she wishes the government would use the data in the app to make efforts to stop harassment altogether.

Unlike the diptychs, the stories in the video installations felt complete. Something about seeing the women and hearing them speak created a stronger, more well-rounded, concise picture of their lives and the lives of Cairo women. Through the video installations, Barry thrusts the viewers into these women's lives. Listening to them speak gives one the sense of actually being in the room with them and pulls us into their deeply personal stories in order to build empathy and understanding.

