The Beach: The Politics of Gender in Modern Day Egypt

Yasmine Allam

Egyptian photography artist Nermine Hammam (b. 1967) created her controversial series, *Escaton*, between 2009 and 2013, to document changing social norms in an increasingly conservative Egypt. Photographing holidaymakers on a beach in Egypt, she depicts heavily veiled female bathers enjoying the sea alongside male companions. Hammam sets these images against grainy black and white photographs taken of her grandparents basking in European attire, on a similar beach, in a secular and Westernized Egypt of the 1950s. As these disparate slices of time and place come together, what emerges is a strong and unexpected record of sexual politics in modern day Egypt, emphasized always by the sensuality of the water surrounding the figures as a backdrop. Behind the stark differences in the outward aesthetics of dress, one becomes aware of a powerful repetition of poses across both sets of images. The central space occupied by the woman remains unchanged despite society's growing efforts to veil and conceal her. Confident and self-possessed, the woman as wife and mother sits at the heart of each family unit holding the viewer with her powerful gaze, admitting us into her space. Men occupy the periphery of these images, leaning into the woman's space as footnotes to her central narrative. Unexpectedly, the camera reveals a continuum of female strength across time.

Intended as a documentation of the gender stereotypes that characterize Egyptian contemporary society, *Escaton* has inadvertently unveiled their fundamental weakness. The work stands as a powerful testament to the timelessness of human relations, contrasting the changing 'outward aesthetics' of social discourse, particularly as it relates to women, with a core that remains unchanged. Though the series was begun in 2009, its relevance continues at a time when religious conservatism is gaining ground in Egypt, following the January 2011 revolution. Indeed, the confident demarcation by generations of women of a central space, and the psychological and sexual implications of the space they command, makes *Escaton* an inherently fascinating comment on gender politics in Egypt at a time of unprecedented change.

The End of Times

A self trained photographer, Nermine Hammam's early background was in film. She obtained her BFA in filmmaking from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, going on to work with Simon & Goodman and renowned film director Youssef Chahine. Moving into commercial graphic design, she later ran one of Egypt's most successful design agencies, pursuing her photography concomitantly, until abandoning design in 2011 to focus entirely on fine arts. Today, her work is strongly influenced by, and pays homage to, artists such as Diane Arbus, Swedish filmmaker Ingmar

Bergmann, and the Russian filmmaker Tarkovsky. Indeed, over the past decade, Nermine Hammam has been invited to exhibit in a wide range of international forums such as the Bamako Biennale for Photography in Mali (2011), X Biennale, Cuenca, in Ecuador (2009), and Photo Biennale, Thessaloniki (2009). Her work has featured in more than fifty international exhibitions, both solo and collective.

At its core, Hammam's work probes the constructed nature of reality, subverting the stereotype and tracing the artificial contours of that which we perceive as 'real'. Fascinated by the urban context in which she lives, Hammam is drawn, for her subject matter, to its margins and peripheries. She seeks out individuals in states of abandonment, marginalization, or altered states of consciousness, finding in the peripheral spaces that they occupy the limitations of our society and the clichés with which we articulate our place in the world. Over the past ten years, her subjects have included entranced worshippers at underground Sufi rituals in Egypt, patients in Cairo's derelict Abbasiya mental asylum, and young soldiers in Tahrir Square, making Hammam a controversial figure on the Egyptian arts scene.

"There is no such thing as reality — everything is a construct and nothing is real", says Hammam. "My work is about how we see things in a constructed way. So long as there is manifestation there cannot be reality. It is only the mind that strives to analyze and give shape to the world. Once you realize this, and stop trying to make sense and order out of your context, there is a kind of relief" (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). Her preoccupation with the constructed nature of 'that which we perceive as real' shapes her distinct artistic strategy and techniques. As an artist, she photographs the world and then alters the images she captures. Her works are intricate composites of layered images and symbols created through a painstaking process of digital manipulation and hand painting of the photographs taken to create rich and highly personal narratives. All of Hammam's images exist in series form representing sequential narratives, like the stills of a film, related in time and space.

Through a careful manipulation of vantage points she experiments with the

Image 1: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

duality of the photograph as a tool for social commentary and as an art form capable of capturing and conveying strong personal sentiment. Speaking of her technique she explains: "Initially, my work borders on photo journalism – the process by which I construct my narrative, layering, painting and so forth, only begins after taking the photograph. There is a strong element of documentation in my art" (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). This is particularly true of *Escaton*, where Hammam conflates photography's traditional use as means of capturing and preserving the past with its importance as a tool of documenting fast-paced social change. "My work is a documentation of my society" (personal communication, 10 April, 2012), she notes. Yet, her juxtaposition of bold, sumptuous colors alongside monochrome tones, sometimes within the very same image, also reminds us that *Escaton* goes beyond a straightforward portrayal of society to encompass a highly personal inner landscape. The work serves, at once, as social documentary and personal elegy to a time gone by: "I see this work as being very emotional. The political dimension is just a by-product – the intention behind the work is highly personal", says Hammam (personal communication, 12 April, 2012).

The title, *Escaton*, of course, refers to eschatology, or the beliefs around the end of the present world, or the end of times. The *Escaton* is the final, heaven-like state of history – an end to our current reality that will bring about a new way of living and believing. At its most immediate level, the title references the conservative attire of the bathers and points to an increasingly conservative discourse in Egypt that posits religion as a preferred alternative to more secular ideologies. But, beyond this, the title also draws attention to the hollowness of any single ideological discourse or belief system that sets itself up as an arbiter of reality.

House of Cards

In keeping with her distrust of 'the real', Hammam uses *Escaton* to explore the limits of gender constructs in Egypt. Hammam's work reveals the artificiality of gender stereotypes, pointing instead to deep-seated power relations at the heart of Egyptian society: "To zoom in on gender in Egypt is to reveal it in all its artificiality", the artist explains "Gender is more than a construct, it is a house of cards. Once you blow on it, it crumbles". She adds: "I went out with the intention to document my society and to track the shifting paradigms that govern sexual politics in

Image 2: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

Egypt. What I found were deep-seated patterns that eroded the rigid stereotypes I had expected to find" (personal communication, 12 April, 2012).

At a time of unprecedented change in Egypt, Hammam posits the body as the front line in the struggle between the public and the private. In *Escaton*, the beach and the body are synonymous: "The beach is about the abandon of the body, it is about water, about the wetness and the sand. It is all very sexual", says Hammam. "Our memories of the beach are like a collective history where our bodies take shape...

Image 3: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

once you go to the beach a new language is devised" (personal communication, 12 April, 2012).

In this state of abandonment, gender stereotypes gradually unravel. In her work, a woman and a young boy frolic in the waves: the feminized movements of the boy stand in perfect symmetry to those of his female companion (image 2). Any outward difference in gender disappears in this spontaneous moment of exhilaration and abandon. A man lies on his beach towel (image 3), legs wide open, as the woman sits fully clothed engrossed in conversation on her mobile phone. Ironically, it is the man who adopts the feminine position of childbirth or sex, a towel slung across his forehead. In an explicit act of voyeurism we are invited to enter this image from between his legs. His body hair, in the foreground of the image, stands in contrast to the floral design of the woman's shirt that obscures her body and echoes the decorative wallpaper imposed across the surface of the image. There is a humorous overtone to this scene where gender signifiers are as fluid as the waves lapping on the shore.

In *Escaton* (image 4), the shape of the modern-day family unit posing for a holiday photograph closely mirrors that of the family fifty years earlier. A cursory glance reveals a fundamental change in outward aesthetics: the woman in 1950s Egypt is dressed in western clothing while, in 2009, the woman is veiled and wears a traditional garb. Yet a closer inspection reveals these differences to be paper-thin: the central position of both women in the photographs remains unchanged across generations. In both images, the woman's gaze is direct, confident and commanding: indeed we enter each image through her gaze and with her permission. Superficial stereotypes of masculine power are undermined by the body language of the men and boys who lean vulnerably into her space. The woman's compositional importance in the photograph

Image 4: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

echoes the central space she occupies in the family unit. This continuum of female power across time renders irrelevant any superficial changes in outward attire. The background of the image evokes a typical Egyptian seaside town. The sepia like quality invites nostalgia and connection with the past suggesting that this is a family unit that has always existed in Egypt and will always continue to be.

Escaton examines the changing place of the body in public and private narratives in Egypt. It investigates the body's symbolic evolution, both as a physical (and forbidden) site of sensual pleasure and pain and as an object of voyeurism and imagination. It reflects on the vulnerability, even embarrassment of human physicality. Hammam uses the themes of veiling and unveiling to reference the body's literal absence from public narrative where it is referred to only through euphemism. She contrasts this with the basic human instinct for physicality as evidenced in the bathers on the beach. "I don't think we realize, in Egypt, how engrossed we are in the body, both in its presence and its absence", says Hammam (personal communication, 12 April, 2012).

A woman in full *niqab* dominates the foreground of image 5. Only her piercing eyes are visible through narrow slits in her veil, at once challenging the viewer and drawing us into the image. She commands the power and the vantage point in this picture. Her male
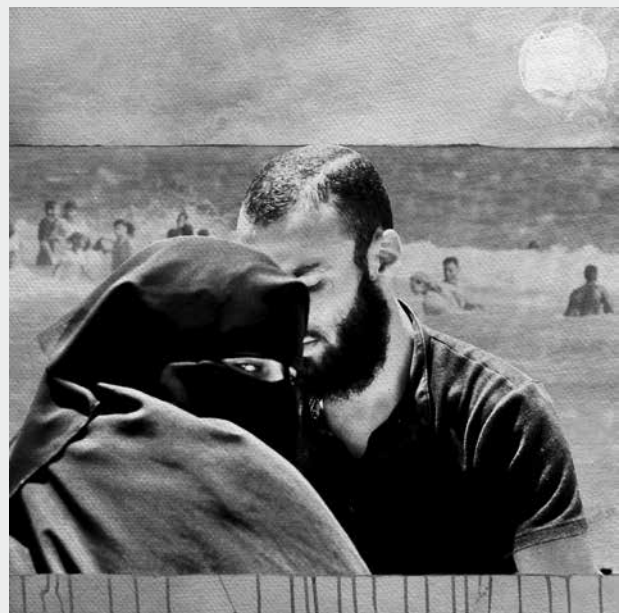

Image 5: *Escaton*, 2009 - 2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

companion sits next to her, defenseless: his head is bowed and his eyes are averted; his ears and neckline are exposed and almost sensual in contrast to her commanding presence. A couple emerges wet from the sea (image 6). Paradoxically, the woman is at once absent and present in this image; her features are eclipsed by the black folds of fabric while the contours of her body are clearly defined. In comparison to his elusive female companion, the man is incongruously corporeal, his fleshy torso exposed by the wet vest.

Image 6: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

Hammam's work defies Orientalist readings of the subjugated female who is oppressed and obliterated by the veil. "In *Escaton*, the veil is a source of power — the power to conceal and to hide from view. It stands in contrast [to] the vulnerability of exposure", she says (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). In her work, our reading of the veil becomes ambiguous, transcending any immediate social or religious connotations to become a universal metaphor for the process by which we hide our true selves from public view. The emphasis on the veil as a source of power in turn relates to Hammam's view of photography as a necessary act of unveiling: "Photography is an unveiling of something that is already there — photography is unveiling in an unguarded moment", explains the artist (personal communication, 10 April, 2012).

The dissolving of rigid gender categories in the sensual and watery environment of the beach is illustrated, again, in
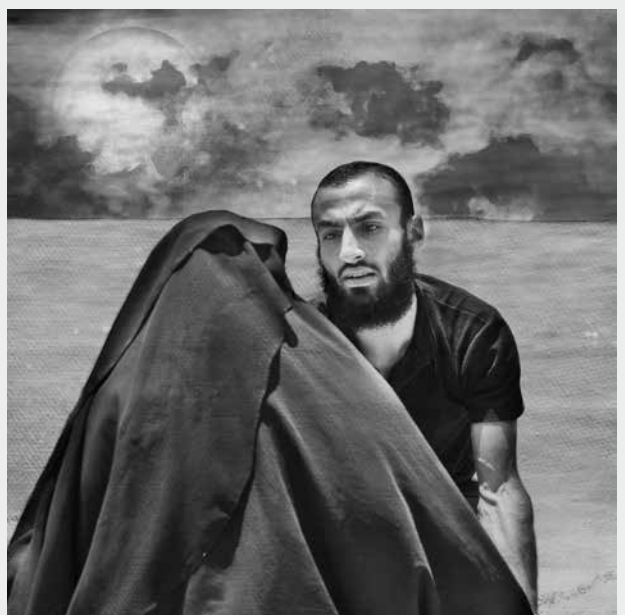

Image 7: *Escaton*, 2009 - 2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

Hammam's images of young men photographed on their own without women: "When we look at the postures taken by the men, especially on the beach, we see that gender roles mix. Gender reveals itself to be, in effect, a mere construct of the mind". The young men are effeminate in their beauty, striking the sensual poses of a 1940s starlet. They look strangely innocent and seductive in their revealing wet vests, as compared with the fully covered female bathers emerging from the sea behind them. Surprisingly, one young man's coquettish pose, with head cocked and one knee bent, directly mirrors the pose adopted by Hammam's grandmother in the 1950s. That their poses are reminiscent of Hollywood stars is a connection that intrigues Hammam: "These men see themselves through constructs given to us by Hollywood. We have taken the roles given to us by the dominant discourse". She adds: "When you open up the discourse on gender, you see that it is not just constructs of the East that are paper thin, but also those of the West... Through my work I want to say that the divides between East and West, and between genders, are not as great as we make them out to be – we are not as far apart as you might think" (personal communication, 12 April, 2012).

The Woman as Idea

In her representations of women in *Escaton*, Hammam does not dwell on the characteristics of any one particular woman. Instead, she moves between allegory and type, suggesting how all societies engulf women in a web of signifiers and associations through which the female identity and purpose is rigidly defined. Image 8 illustrates Hammam's investigation of the narratives that surround women in Egyptian society. There are no men in this photograph. Instead, the composition centers on the large, wet forms of the women, fully clothed in long traditional *gallabeyas,* emerging from the water like mythical sea creatures, abundant and voluptuous in their physicality. The young girl, whose thin, protruding legs strike a contrast to the larger, covered body of her older companions, is fading out of color and into black and white, hinting that the relative physical freedom she currently enjoys was once the remit of women of all ages in Egypt, as evidenced by the black and white family photographs that accompany this series. In the present moment, however, her command over her body is only temporary. It will be rapidly curtailed with the onset of puberty. This contradiction between the physical freedom of a pre-sexual youth and the restrictions of maturity are accentuated by the repetition of plaited hair on the younger girl and the older

Image 8: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

woman positioned at either side of the image.

In the foreground, a woman bends forward. Her abundant wet body, voluptuously contoured by the black clinging fabric of her dress defies society's efforts to obscure and conceal her. Through her sheer physical presence she reasserts her sexuality, becoming at once the subject and object of our gaze. Her protruding buttocks that dominate the foreground and eclipse her head and torso remind us of the role of humor in Hammam's work. Hammam seems to imply that her countrymen will continue to embrace life's pleasures even as they welcome growing public calls for restraint.

Image 9: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

While other images in *Escaton* use humor to deliver their punch, image 9 is more contemplative, resonating with allegorical appeal. It portrays two women, in the foreground, standing in the water looking in at the beach where men embrace and play with children running in and out of the sea. Posed as a snap shot, an image chanced upon unexpectedly, this picture nevertheless has a timeless quality and a richness of color and composition that hints at figurative painting. The physicality of the running, playing figures stands in stark contrast to the motionless isolation of the two women watching and waiting in the sea. Their bright red swim suits reveal only a flash of neck line, a wisp of curl and a small expanse of knee. The women's hair is concealed under swimming caps, depriving them of a gender signifier and reducing them to fairytale creatures rising from the depths and watching humanity frolicking on the shore. The figures resonate with traditions of woman as a two-dimensional goddess, an incarnation of motherhood and of family, denied any sexuality of her own. The round curve of their heads echoes the rounded curves of the inflatable "Tweety bird" floater, a mundane, modern-day Phoenix with its inflatable plastic grin dominating the foreground of the image. The two women stand apart physically divided by the digitally manipulated line running across the center of the image: like modern day sirens or mermaids they are engulfed in a seamless void of water and blue.

The Woman as Beach Photographer

In *Escaton*, Hammam's work is shaped by her choices of particular moments in time and in space – she makes observations framing a moment in an unfolding series of events in which she herself plays a part. Her exploration of gender dynamics in Egypt extends to her own interactions with her subjects. Here she consciously

Image 10: *Escaton*, 2009 - 2013. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

inverts the traditionally male-dominated role of the beach photographer in Egypt. Hammam describes the process by which she enters the public domain of the beach in the language of quasi-ritual: "I arrive on the beach, pick a parasol and dump my stuff under it. Then I go and scout for a possible subject to photograph. As I wander along the beach, camera in hand, people come up to me and challenge me. After thirty minutes of back and forth – the right word here, a well-received joke there - I'm invited for tea or lunch on the sand". With her strange mixture of Western looks and strong vernacular command of Arabic, Hammam elicits a paradoxical, confused response in her subjects who are caught off guard by her mixed cultural signifiers. They regard her with skepticism, even anger, "but through humor and banter, I erode the perceived cultural barrier that separates us; once their confidence is won they pose freely for the camera", says Hammam (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). It is significant that she does not seek to capture her images in unguarded moments but grants control of self-representation to her subjects, inviting them to choose their preferred pose and infusing her work with their joint collaboration.

Indeed, there is, in Hammam's artistic strategy, a coupling of a conscious sense of what she wants to capture with a willingness to put aside her plan to photograph what spontaneously unfolds before her: "I know that I am going down one particular route, but on that route there is chance; I relish that interplay of chance circumstances with my original plan" (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). According to the artist, the more traditional beach photographers frequently approach her and argue with her for usurping their territory. But this inversion of conventional roles is an integral element in *Escaton*, where Hammam's own gender influences the final outcome of the work: "The fact that I am a woman definitely affects the work I do: men would not allow me to take photographs of their female companions if I were a man. Also, they might perhaps feel challenged to give up the central space in the image, to women, if they were being photographed by a man" (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). The resulting photographs document the subjects' reactions to the artist herself – their resistance, amusement, even ambivalence to this sudden interruption of their leisure time. These incidental elements become part of the 'facts' documented in the photographs. As a result, *Escaton* is a testament not only to a specific moment in Egypt's social history but also to Hammam's specific artistic encounter

with her subjects: "There is no doubt that these images would have looked very different had they been photographed by someone else", she acknowledges (personal communication, 10 April, 2012).

The Importance of Setting

In *Escaton*, the interplay between female bathers and their male companions is examined in a space that is resonant with narratives of the human body and sexuality at its most tangible. The importance of water, both in the aesthetic and narrative appeal of this work, is accentuated by the use of water color sensually applied to the finished surface of the photograph — there is a lightness of touch, as the brush strokes embellish and caress the surface of the image, evoking at once the sexual and spiritual dimensions of water. In *Escaton*, the beach becomes the locus for a gradual unraveling of our constructed public identities, bringing down our guard and revealing glimpses of our innermost selves. A public place that is (relatively) free from the more prescribed behavior of city life, the beach is also a primal space marking the outer limits of human society. Ours is an almost involuntary, primal response to the wetness of the sea, to bodies moving in and out of water and to sand and sun.

Hammam expresses the "artificiality of human perception" through an interplay between the two and three-dimensional space in her work. In sharp contrast to the horizons that define the outer limits of her works, Hammam uses flat decorative designs embedded into the layers of the images, disorientating our sense of distance while giving her work a bright, sumptuous quality. Some photographs are even digitally reworked and divided into parts emphasizing the inherently constructed nature of both the image and the stereotype it portrays. Speaking of her use of texture

Image 11: *Escaton*, 2009 -2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

in the form of fragments of wallpaper, fabric, and carpet, Hammam explains: "These touches of fabric and carpet reflect the types of furnishings my protagonists would use in their own home. It is a nod to Egyptian preferences for bold colors and decorative motifs. It is also a parody of Orientalist representations of women from our part of the world who are often depicted lounging on rich, sensual carpets and spreads" (personal communication, 10 April, 2012).

The Burden of Representation

Nermine Hammam's exploration of gender relations in Egypt has resulted in a series of socially and culturally pertinent images that embrace the duality of the contemporary photograph as both a tool for documenting reality and a work of art in its own right. Hammam traces the changing social landscape of her home country, intuitively mapping her new world. By juxtaposing color photographs of modern-day bathers with the nostalgic black and white images from her family album, she carefully balances that which is radically altered against that which remains unchanged.

In *Escaton*, Hammam employs "[T]he idea, in documentary photography, of the realities of societies being shown to contradict generally held pre-conceptions..." (Cotton, 2009, p. 186). In both sets of photographs, the mirrored poses of her subjects invites a comparative, linear reading in terms of 'then and now'. However, *Escaton*'s power derives from the unexpected conclusions that such a comparison yields: We are treated to frank representations of Egyptian society's increasing efforts to 'cover up' the woman. Yet, we are surprised to discover that the woman remains powerful, and central, despite these efforts to obscure her. We are encouraged to reflect on the changes in outward aesthetics. All the while we are reminded that the joy and abandon of the bathers is real and that our response, as human beings, to the primal conditions of the beach (and to each other) are instinctive and unaffected by changing social norms. Hammam explores the medium of the family album as a tool for preserving the past. She balances this against the photograph's capacity to reveal unexpected power relationships beneath the surface of the cohesive family unit. Hammam parodies the way in which the ubiquitous family holiday snap arbitrarily lends value to particular moments and places. She also imbues the family photograph with nostalgia, paying homage to a time gone by and to her own grandparents who now exist only in these images.
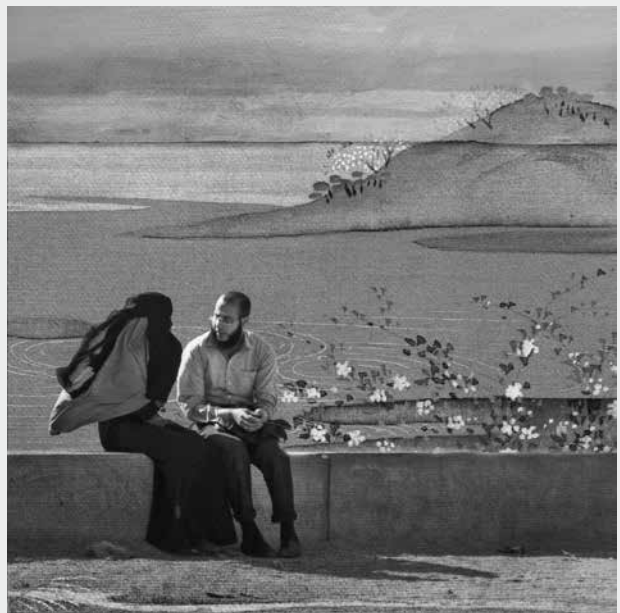

Image 12: *Escaton*, 2009 - 2013, 70 x 70 cm; printed on hahnemühle archival paper. Courtesy of Nermine Hammam.

Meanwhile, *Escaton* plays on the paradoxical capacity of the photograph to portray subjects as they can never see themselves; it also explores the power of photography to alter and obscure reality by excluding as much as it includes, making photographs inherently fictitious and unreliable records of the world: "the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses…" (Sontag, 1977, p. 23).

This circularity or 'back and forth' in the representation of her themes is a trademark of Nermine Hammam's work: "I present you with a stereotype, then I unmask it, only to present you with a second stereotype which I in turn unmask" (personal communication, 10 April, 2012). This is emphasized by the presentation of her work always as a series. In *Escaton*, the details of what she observes are reinforced by the similarities and differences between the images that make up this single series. Hammam believes the existence of her work in series form is integral to our reading of it. Influenced by her background in film, Hammam believes that meaning is derived when several frames come together. After all, you can see one single frame as a film: "My work lends itself more to an intellectual discourse, rather than a single wall painting". She adds: "I always look for a perfect shot that will fall into a given series rather than a perfect shot that will stand onto itself… Perhaps the meaning of my work emerges from the message being said from many different angles: this work has to do with the absence of reality, and the fakeness, or limits, of individual vantage points. You can't have a single picture that encapsulates everything. You have to see them together to see it makes sense" (personal communication, 12 April, 2012).

As a result, Hammam masterfully delivers a rich and textured message about gender politics in Egypt, revealing the limits of ideological discourses and demonstrating that all stereotypes – including those of gender – are constructed and clichéd. Indeed, her technique of merging black and white analogue photographs with digital color images serves to objectify the photograph itself. It helps us to abstract, momentarily, from the content of Hammam's images to view them, not as windows on the world, but as objects: material and disposable. In this way, she draws attention to the role of the photograph in shaping gender discourses over time – a tool that lends both credence and incontrovertible proof to our constructed notions of the other.

Yasmine Allam is a Writer and a cultural activist living and working in Egypt. She is the founder of the Cairo Arts Blog, an independent, non-profit portal dedicated to showcasing the work of emerging visual artists in Egypt. Allam holds both a B.A. and an M.A. from Oxford University and an M.Sc. from the London School of Economics in England.
Email: yasmine.allam@yahoo.com

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