

Wael Shawky
I Am Hymns of the New Temples
Opening Wednesday 31 May 2023, 6.00 pm
Galleria Lia Rumma | Via Stilicone 19 | MILAN
Gallery opening times: Tues-Sat, 11.00 am - 1.30 pm | 2.30 pm - 7.00 pm

The Lia Rumma Gallery in Milan is delighted to announce that the first solo exhibition by the Egyptian artist Wael Shawky entitled *I Am Hymns of the New Temples* will open on Wednesday 31 May 2023.

The title of Shawky's solo exhibition is taken from his new film which had its international premiere on 12 May 2023 at the Teatro Piccolo "Odeion" of the Archaeological Park of Pompeii.

Wael Shawky's installation, which unfolds over the three floors of the gallery, revolves around the projection on the first floor of the film *I Am Hymns of the New Temples*, which was shot during the summer of 2022 among the ruins of Pompeii. The ancient city, buried beneath the ash of the eruption of Vesuvius and brought back to light many centuries later, is considered by Shawky to be a place that symbolises death and rebirth. He views it as a site of myth and ritual, the age-old custodian of the stratification of various cultures that evoke each other and reveal how the multiple narratives of history have been differently conceived, recorded and disseminated over time, both within and beyond the Mediterranean area.

In the film the archaeological site of Pompeii is portrayed as an outdoor theatre of the past where its temples dedicated to Greco-Roman religion co-exist with those of Egyptian deities. Through the repetition and poetic re-narration of mythological tales and stories about the origin of the universe and the birth of the deities of the Earth, Shawky weaves a narrative that brings together fable, reality and fiction. Various traditions concerning the origin and descent of the gods succeeded each other in antiquity. The artist entrusts a group of performers wearing masks made of ceramic and papier mâché, which draw on those of Greek comedy but also on the popular masks of Campanian farce (*fabulae atellanae*), with the task of reviving them, giving a face to myths that once became beliefs, before reducing them again to fiction and fantasy. Just as a mask transforms the wearer into someone else, the cult and mystery rites are transformed according to the person who appropriates them. In a sort of mystery dance, the figures of gods and goddesses, men and women, together with animals, repeat the slow, conflictual process by which the world has sought to create its own equilibrium amidst wars, conflicts and natural calamities, in a pattern that is repeated ad infinitum, in the past as in the present, in a never-ending cycle of death and rebirth of humanity.

This image-based account moves from the screen, taking on shape and form in the other rooms of the gallery, another ideal theatre of new ruins and finds created by the artist and kept in large glass display cases covered in sand. As well as these mask-cum-sculptures made of glass and ceramic - anthropomorphic amphorae - there are also bas reliefs, paintings and drawings that recreate a mystical, prophetic setting which once again plays with the idea of mixing up the historical, mythological and literary references with which the artist has imagined his new history of the world. Shawky considers the canvas as "a space where fiction turns into reality" and on which he can amplify the realms of the divine and the earthly like a fable, inviting the present-day viewer to navigate in a kind of imaginary epic poem dotted with truth, myth and stereotypes, beyond defined space and time.

The film work was commissioned by the Pompeii Archaeological Park, in the context of Pompeii Commitment. Archaeological Matters. Winner of the public notice PAC 2020 - Piano per l'Arte Contemporanea, promoted by the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity and Ministry of Culture.

Glass works manufactured by Berengo Studio, Venice.

Ceramic works manufactured by Istituto Caselli Real Fabbrica di Capodimonte.

Fabrics provided by Dedar.

Wael Shawky (Alexandria, 1971) studied at Alexandria University before taking a Master's Degree in Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia (USA).

Wael Shawky's work originates in research and journeys undertaken by the artist in his native country and embraces a plethora of techniques and media, ranging from drawing to sculpture, but focusing mainly on film, performance and storytelling.

In the artist's poetic, these techniques are often combined to create a fairy-tale yet real universe in which elements of traditional Arab culture and images of the contemporary world co-exist: with his gaze firmly focused on current events, the artist embarks on a voyage in order to reinterpret the cultural, religious and artistic features of Middle-Eastern history, creating other fantastic realities that thrive and prosper in imaginary places.

Shawky is renowned for his film trilogy *Cabaret Crusades - The Horror Show File* (2010), *The Path to Cairo* (2012) and *The Secrets of Karbala* (2015) - in which ancient marionettes and puppets become the main characters of the medieval crusades, recounted by the artist from the perspective of the Arab world and the playful lightness of a fairy-tale for children.

Major solo exhibitions of the artist's work have been held in international museums and institutions including the AROS Museum, Aarhus, Denmark; Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli, Italy; Kunsthalle Bregenz, Bregenz, Austria; Fondazione Merz, Turin, Italy; Mathaf, Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; MoMA PS1, New York, USA; Tate Modern, London; M Leuven, Leuven, Belgium; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, USA; Louvre Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, UAE; MACBA, Barcelona, Spain; K20, Beirut, Lebanon; Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE; The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA; Kunst-Werke, Berlin, Germany; Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, Italy; Kunsthalle Winterthur, Switzerland. His works are displayed in the permanent collections of museums such as Tate Modern, MoMA, MACRO, Mart, The Met, APT Dubai, and the François Pinault Collection, Venice.