

## **AMINA MANSUR**

### The Map of Love

I first met Amina Mansur in Alexandria in 1997. She was among twenty or so young Egyptian artists who had gathered for a series of meetings to discuss how they could collectively build the art scene in Egypt. Most of these artists had gained the attention of the Ministry of Culture in Cairo and had received prizes, exhibitions, and residencies. Many of the Alexandrian artists, Amina included, had also been given the careful attention and tutelage of an art professor of the older generation, Faruq Wahba. In the afternoons and evenings, Amina joined other young artists at the Alexandria Atelier, where Wahba had set up a workshop and schooled his students in the benefits of wild experimentation. (They learned a lot about Joseph Beuys and other German artists, because Wahba had spent many years in Germany.) While other young women from her background were attending private universities and prepping themselves for society life, Amina was questioning the boundaries of the material and visual culture taste that she had grown up with. At the Atelier, she met artists from many different backgrounds, who spent late nights smoking cigarettes, talking about ideas and criticizing each other's work, and mucking around in art materials. She was not living the kind of life that had been set out for her as the daughter of one of Egypt's most famous business families. But she wasn't "slumming" either. She was participating in a broader art-making community with members of her generation. They were trying to take advantage of all they had learned from their predecessors and really make their mark on Egyptian art.

Amina's comments at those meetings struck me for their incisiveness, commitment, and sensitivity. She had clearly observed the art scene in Egypt

very closely and had developed specific ideas for how she, along with the others, could develop their art in certain ways and find the means to do so. These ideas acknowledged the specificity of the Egyptian experience but did not lock it into a nationalist frame. Given her half-American background (her mother is from Alabama), fluency in English, and general international experience, she could have very easily put down the entire art scene in Egypt, or dismissed everyone else's ideas and asserted her own as the best or most advanced. But unlike many other artists from privileged or mixed backgrounds whom I've met, Amina did not treat the others as lesser artists or intellectuals. She was friends with many of them, and even though she often disagreed with their ideas, she respected their opinions and was sensitive to where they were coming from. It is this seriousness, intelligence, generosity, and modesty that have in large measure enabled Amina, in turn, to gain the respect of artists and critics who might otherwise see people like her as alienated from Egyptian society.

I also think it is these qualities that have enabled her to create some of the most compelling works being done in Egypt today. I admit that they are particularly intriguing to me because they deal with the relationships between Egypt and America, and between Egyptians and Americans. And so, in a way, they teach me new perspectives—some analytical and some sensory—on my own experiences as an American anthropologist working in Egypt.

Her current project, which has been evolving since the mid 1990s, is a series of installations, mixed media objects, and films exploring different aspects of the relationship between the antebellum U.S. South and the cotton-growing Nile Delta. Like my account of my encounters with Egyptians, Amina's is also arranged in chapters. But hers are revealed at different times and in no particular order. They are part of an interlinking series in a tale of wealth, gender, and nostalgia that spans two centuries and two continents. The tale is akin to that told by Ahdaf Soueif in her novel *The Map of Love* (1999). It is both personal and collective—an exploration of the love affair between the American and Egyptian sides of Amina and her background, as well as a recollection (and calling forth) of the troubled links between the two societies. By excavating her two pasts in a nonliteral and nonlinear way, Amina reveals the overlaps and disjunctures that this linking produces on both personal and collective levels. She both reckons with various pasts, and reckons the present and future by visually calculating the relationships between those pasts in a way that denies cultural hierarchies and notions of progress.

The beginning chapters (1–5) of Amina’s project were first exhibited in 1999 in one of the well-lit rooms of a downtown Cairo gallery, which had previously been a colonial era residential apartment. A major theme in these chapters was the restraint and domesticity that came with the cultivation of elite women in both the antebellum American South and the nineteenth-century Nile Delta—women linked through the arts of embroidery, weaving, and flower arranging, as well as through the international cotton trade and development of capitalism. Amina mimicked the manual arts of these elite women by forming cotton into intricate flowers (fig. A.1). She therefore reproduced elite feminine taste through the very material—cotton—that had served as the basis for their wealth (see also Zurbrigg 2001).



**Figure A.1** Amina Mansur, floral detail from *Chapters 1–5*, cotton, 1999. Courtesy of the artist.

Yet even in these seemingly blissful chapters, we see clues to the unbridled future that will unfold later. Some of the seemingly meticulously constructed cotton flowers threaten to spin out of control.

There is an interesting contrast between the fragility of the cotton forms and the solidity of Amina's *Vitrine*, which clearly references the eighteenth-century French "Louis" style of furniture so popular in the salons of the international elite class at a certain time, and still popular among many elites in Egypt today (fig. A.2). The activity in these salons was characterized by polite conversation and china tea services; the furniture itself—as the *Vitrine* shows—was unbelievably extravagant in comparison to the simple furnishings of those who did the labor that made these people so rich. The porcelain plaque on the piece



**Figure A.2** Amina Mansur, *Vitrine: Chapters 1–5*, mixed media, 1999.

Courtesy of the artist.

bears the names of Egyptian and American plantation families. Yet even in this early chapter, Mansur gives us a glimpse of the underbelly of wealth. The legs of the *Vitrine* are modeled on muscular, laboring human legs but end in the fancy nail-polished hands of an elite woman. Caught in both dominant and submissive positions, the elite woman simultaneously directs the servants and holds up the house. The piece of furniture thus embodies the complicated power relationships between social classes and genders—relationships that are often maintained through a system of oppressive restraint but that always threaten to explode beyond their accepted boundaries.

The explosion is on the verge of happening some ten chapters later in *Chapter 15: A Failed Contemporary Attempt at Being a Modern Day Ophelia* (2003). Or perhaps it has just happened. We don't know yet. But the tensions that were suggested in the earlier chapters become major, almost belligerent, contrasts here. *Chapter 15* is like a drama, taking place in a massive, less contained gallery space that once housed factory workers—the urban equivalent of the rural laborers who make a fleeting appearance in the earlier work.<sup>1</sup> The artist darkened the space for the installation—a common method used in the theater during the major dramatic climax of a play, or at its ending.

Spotlights highlight some parts of the work, while others are left in the dark. Here the furniture is a heavy, black, lacquered table. It does not have the quaint porcelain plaque or delicate gold leaf that the *Vitrine* does. Rather, it is covered with a thick and imperious piece of bronze. The expensive material is no longer ornate and delicate. It forms a hardened seascape that serves as Ophelia's sacrificial bed. The elite woman's hands have reappeared on the walls. This time, they are the artist's manicured hands digitally manipulated into forms that are dichotomously both delicate and submissive and grotesque and aggressive (plate 1).

The lyrical romanticism of the earlier chapters has been transformed into something verging on melodrama. The title of the work is even announced in a domineering and assertive way on one of the walls. The restrained speech of the earlier works has become "unshaped," as the Gentleman in *Hamlet* says of Ophelia. Ophelia's madness as referenced in this work can be seen as a metaphor for transgression out of the restrained female, elite spheres. But whereas literary critics have often read Ophelia's transgression as primarily sexual (thereby linking female sexuality to insanity), in this work, the transgression operates on multiple levels. The sexual is certainly one of them. There is also material and class transgression. But most important, Ophelia's

madness results from the inevitable unraveling of the attempt to weave together two histories and cultures. To an extent, this weaving works in the realm of restraint (Chapters 1–5), where it is all about elite correspondences and appearances. But it becomes explosive in other contexts—presumably those just prior to or after Chapter 15. The subject’s (or work’s) aggressive refusal to speak in the languages of patriarchy, of elitism, and of cultural boundedness breeds madness on both personal and collective levels. The attempt to be a modern-day Ophelia is, from the beginning, doomed to failure. Perhaps that is what Amina is saying about U.S.-Egyptian relations in general. After reading Chapter 6 of this book, you may agree.

For me, the value of Mansur’s work lies in her sophisticated examination of the interwoven themes of wealth, taste, gender, and nostalgia in this long-standing traffic across cultural boundaries. Mansur refuses to reduce cross-cultural issues to identity politics, declarations of radical alterity, or simplistic critiques of tradition. Rather, she reveals a story filled with complicated, and often contradictory, alliances and dissonances. I try to do exactly this in my own chapters here, but the written form has limitations that Amina’s visual language does not. Through Amina’s work, I (and I hope you) can access other ways of knowing and experiencing the story I am trying to tell.

What I also like about Amina’s work is that it addresses her privileged background directly. It recognizes and explores the oppressions and potential of this history—not through didactic critique or embarrassment, but through careful exploration of its personal effects and how these are linked with the social. Other younger artists from similar backgrounds, doing art that is quite different from that produced by the majority of artists in the country, have emerged in recent years. Their work is different in that it does not fit easily into nation-oriented themes and narratives, which to many viewers (myself included) is often like a breath of fresh air.

But Amina still stands out among them. Rather than elide privilege, she takes it as her subject. In fact, I see her as one of very few artists in the whole history of modern and contemporary art in Egypt who has been able to break the objectifying gaze. She does not paint peasants, sculpt veiled women, or photograph difference. She does not create installations or videos with an easy-to-deconstruct narrative about Egypt or Cairenes, and her visual language does not fit easily into Western avant-garde desires and expectations. Nonetheless, some aspects of her work do not translate well to her friends—those artists who attended the meetings back in 1997. I think this is because

it references (often in English) histories with which they are unfamiliar. Furthermore, the reasons why I and other Euro-Americans like the work are often specific to our own notions of what “interesting” art is, and they may not be shared by the kind of “vast middle” of Egyptian artists I discuss in this book. It remains the case that Amina has opportunities that most Egyptian artists do not have—to travel, read and communicate in English, study abroad, and produce expensive art. This will inevitably continue to shape her concerns and her work in ways that diverge from the concerns and work of other Egyptians. I imagine that in the future, her art will increasingly have an international presence, which will be well deserved. And I hope it will counter what I find to be the new objectifications and self-orientalisms of contemporary Middle Eastern art favored by Westerners abroad. However, it may not. There are local specificities to Amina’s work that foreign audiences ignore or do not recognize. The problem of translation goes the other way too. I worry that these specificities will be lost and that her work will be warped into a framework that limits it.

At the same time, I wonder what trajectory the other young artists will take, including those from the 1997 roundtables less well versed in Western internationalism and more deeply rooted in Arab and Egyptian intellectual histories and trends. I ruminate on that in the next interlude.