

From supermarkets to state funerals: How Wael Shawky reframes history, religion

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A scene from Wael Shawky's "The Cave (Amsterdam)" (2005) / Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary

By Park Han-sol

In his 2005 video series "The Cave," Egyptian artist Wael Shawky strides through bustling supermarkets in Istanbul, Amsterdam and Hamburg, vigorously reciting a chapter from the Quran from memory — his voice echoing through the aisles as puzzled locals look on.

Set against what could be seen as the pinnacle of capitalist modernity, his one-take performance creates an unsettling sense of foreignness, exposing the friction between two systems: religious tradition and history versus the sweeping tide of globalized development. Yet rather than bashing consumerism, he simply invites us to confront this very state of rupture — a coexistence of forces that can't even be directly compared with each other yet occupy the same space.

The idea for the piece was born during Shawky's 2004 residency in Istanbul, at a time when Turkey was experiencing heightened tension between proponents of secularism and Islam.

"During this time, I was also reflecting on my position as an artist traveling to different international cities," he said during his recent visit to Seoul. "I have this memory and heritage of the Quran, and [I was thinking about] how this interacts with the new capitalism we live in, including the art world."

In this sense, “The Cave” became not only a reflection of the broader dialogue between tradition and development but also a self-portrait of himself as an artist navigating these intersections.



Installation view of Wael Shawky's "Al Aqsa Park" (2006) at the artist's solo exhibition, "Telematch and Other Stories," at Barakat Contemporary in central Seoul / Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary

Such an exploration of the interplay between old belief systems, history and modern development — whether through capitalism, mass media or the lingering effects of colonialism — has remained central to the Egyptian artist's multidisciplinary practice.

It has fueled his decades-long oeuvre, from the 2007 “Telematch Sadat” to his most recent, critically acclaimed “Drama 1882,” which transfixed the audience at the Egyptian Pavilion at last year's Venice Biennale.

And at his latest solo exhibition, “Telematch and Other Stories,” at Barakat Contemporary in central Seoul, his key early video works from the 2000s are once again in the spotlight, including “Telematch” series, “The Cave (Amsterdam)” and “Al Aqsa Park.”



A scene from Wael Shawky's "Telematch Sadat" (2007) / Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary

Born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1971, Shawky emigrated with his family to Saudi Arabia's Mecca at an early age, during the influx of foreign professionals following the oil boom. He has often recounted this experience as pivotal to his creative vision, having witnessed the striking coexistence of deep-rooted local traditions — those of the Bedouin and other nomadic tribes — alongside the dizzying hyper speed of urbanization.

"It's this type of [societal] shift, this transition that appears a lot in my work," he said at the gallery.

"Telematch Sadat" brings to light the 1981 military parade, assassination and funeral of Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat — an event broadcast live on television and one that became deeply embedded in Egyptian collective memory.

Rather than a conventional reenactment, the artist introduced an unexpected twist. He directed a cast of Bedouin children, who had no prior knowledge of Sadat or his assassination, to perform the event. Donkeys and camel caravans replaced armored vehicles, while the vast desertscape stood in for downtown Cairo.

Shawky has frequently worked with children, as well as marionettes and masks in later pieces, to strip away biases tied to an actor's performative interpretation, social status or gender. In doing so, he invites viewers to reexamine history from a detached yet fantastical perspective.

"I work with history, but I deal with it as a human creation, always having doubts in it," he noted. "Most of the stories that we work with have this element of our ignorance; we're never a hundred percent sure if it happened this way or that way."



Installation view of Wael Shawky's "Drama 1882" at the Egyptian Pavilion at the 2024 Venice Biennale / Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary, Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Lisson Gallery and Lia Rumma

It wasn't until "Drama 1882," unveiled last year in Venice, that he worked for the first time with unmasked adult actors. Yet by presenting the film as a musical and directing performers to move in a marionette-like, slow-motion choreography, he preserved the same fantastical quality that defines his approach to history.

The piece recounts the Urabi Revolt in late 19th-century Egypt, which began with the murder of a donkey owner by a Maltese man on the street. The incident soon escalated into a full-scale conflict between Alexandrians and British military forces, leaving nearly 300 dead.

"That became an excuse for the British to bombard and attack Alexandria. A month later, they occupied Egypt, which lasted for 73 years," he said. "And we still have a version of this story where many people believe this was staged to give the reason for the British [to invade.]"

He decided to turn this moment into a theatrical musical, to emphasize the idea of history itself being a performance, a staged narrative.

And fret not, art lovers in Korea who missed last year's Venice Biennale — another chance to experience Shawky's "Drama 1882" is coming this May. The piece will be showcased at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art's Gwacheon branch in Gyeonggi Province as part of the museum's newly acquired new media collection.