

## **Magdi Mostafa: The Sound Element**

**Interview with the Egyptian artist about his sound projects created during a residency in Dubai.**

April, 2012, by ALEXANDRA MACGILP

Cairo-based artist Magdi Mostafa has just spent three months living in Dubai as one of AIR Dubai's resident artists, with partners Delfina Foundation, Art Dubai, Dubai Culture and Tashkeel, an experience that resulted in projects in Bastakiya and Art Dubai.

Mostafa creates site-specific, research-based sound projects, manifesting as multimedia installations or live performances. Highly sensitive to his surroundings, he makes field-recordings of the sounds, both prosaic and poetic, which to most of us are background noise. By mixing them into his work, he forces them into the foreground of our attention and vibrates them through our very core, creating oblique physical, aural and emotional responses with his intense, low frequencies.



Sound Cells series: [Element of the unexpected], 2012

Sound sculpture and mixed media

© Photo: Magdi Mostafa

## GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

Fascinated by how sounds can trigger memories, both personal and cultural, at an elemental level, Mostafa seeks out-moded technologies to preserve and reanimate their acoustic qualities. These may be antiquated washing machines or industrial bread-mixers, existing unremarked beneath the skin of the city, waiting to be discovered by the artist. In his multi-layered practice Mostafa charts both the rapid changes and the eternal characteristics of the urban spaces that he experiences.

Alexandra MacGilp: In *The Sound Element* at Bastakiya, how did the installation and the performance manifest themselves differently from the same source material?

Magdi Mostafa: I believe that here we have two different languages coming from the same root. For example, when I work with installation, I give the priority to the space and the context, and focus on how this space will intersect with the acoustics. But in live performances, my focus is more on the audience, and how they might receive the sequence of sounds in a primary, visceral way. So I think that these two considerations shape the work in completely different ways, even if the materials that I use are almost the same.



Sound Cells series: [Element of the unexpected], 2012

Sound sculpture and mixed media

© Photo: Magdi Mostafa

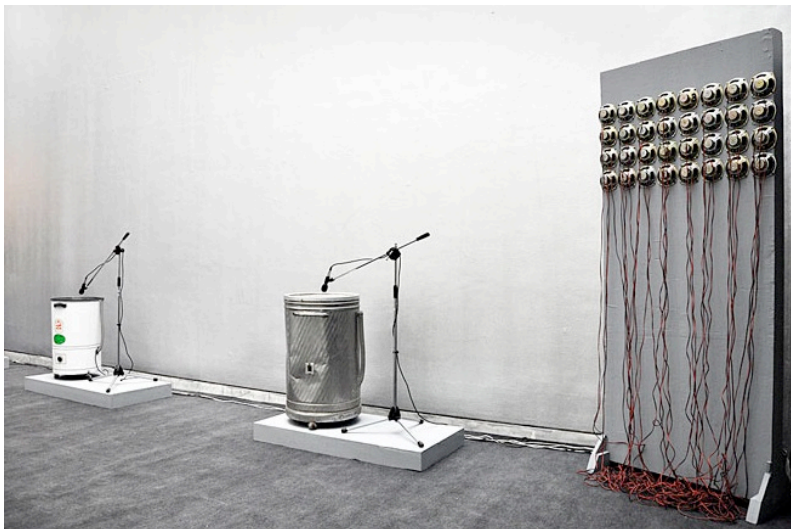
AM: How did you select the handsome machines in *Elements of the Unexpected* which you found in Sharjah, was it on how they looked aesthetically? Why did you decide to fill them with date syrup?

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MM: Well, it wasn't just because of how they looked. I chose these machines based on several reasons, despite the fact that it wasn't at all easy to obtain them. One of the major reasons was the sonic value that these machines generate; but I was also intrigued by the history and the identity of this machine, its economic dimensions, and finally its scale. The locally produced date syrup was also an element that reflects some of the economic and historical values of Arabian Gulf, as a representative commercial product of the region. It plays an organic role in the installation, generating a strong visual and olfactory presence within the work.

AM: Your work *Sound Cells (Fridays)* was more autobiographical – with references to childhood memories of the sounds of women doing their laundry on Friday mornings while the men were at the mosque. Do you prefer to make work as an insider on your home turf or as an outsider looking in, observing but not belonging?

MM: In general, in my work I rely very much on my own experiences and memories. I try to form them into a contemporary artwork through my own understanding of some sort of artistic language; so I prefer to be part of the story that I'm translating into sound, as opposed to an outside observer.



Sound Cells series: [Friday's symphony], 2010 - 2011

Sound sculpture and mixed media

© Photo: Magdi Mostafa

AM: Could you tell me about how you came to work with sound? Did you study this medium, or did you educate yourself?

## **GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK**

MM: No, I didn't study music or sound at all. I majored in Art Education at Helwan University in Cairo, where I worked across mediums and learned several different techniques, including drawing, sculpture, and even textile production and embroidery. This coursework gave me a very broad understanding of the arts; and one aspect of the curriculum that I found especially positive was that it didn't form any distinction between so-called 'fine art', and crafts or 'applied arts'.

However, there wasn't much room for new media in that curriculum, so working with sound was completely improvisational. I taught myself different editing techniques and so forth through Internet research. Starting in 2001, I began making animation and videos, and I had to create soundtracks for these projects. I had some positive feedback from artists and friends about the sounds that I composed, and from there I just started to work with sound as a discrete entity. These experiments gradually turned into multimedia installations with a dominant sound component.



Sound Cells series: [Analog Frequencies], 2009

Sound sculpture and mixed media

© Photo: Graham Waite

AM: I understand your early experiences of producing sound exhibitions in Cairo were difficult?

MM: Well, for example, the first sound installation I did for the Youth Salon at the Cairo Opera House in 2003 created an argument between the jury members for that event. Although the work was finally accepted for the exhibition, it was taken down two days after the opening. I found myself strongly criticized for working in a medium that was considered 'imported'. But despite these early obstacles, I still insisted on sound production; and the scene changed very quickly, in terms of critical reception. In fact, by 2007, I was awarded the Grand Prize at



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the Youth Salon along with the artist Ahmed Basiony for our multimedia sound installation, *Medina*.



Transparent Existence, 2010

Multichannel sound and light site-specific installation

© Photo: Hossam Elsayah



Medina, 2007

Multimedia sound installation, together with Ahmed Basiony, for which both were awarded the Grand Prize at the Youth Salon Cairo.

© Photo: Ahmed Basiony's family

## **GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK**

AM: Is there anywhere you would particularly like to create a new work?

MM: I'm currently very interested in Derinkuyu Underground City in Turkey. I would like to make something that engages with this type of very particular space; a type of space that in fact has always very much attracted me (one of my favorite projects, *Transparent Existence* from 2010, a site-specific sound and light installation created underneath the Mawlwian Museum in Cairo, which houses Sufi artefacts, was made in a similar context.)

— I think I'd also like to make a continued ultrasonic investigation into the pyramids of Egypt for an extended period, perhaps over a full year; but an investigation in terms of artistic research, not in terms of scientific or historical methodologies. Ultimately I'd like to create and present an entire archive of acoustic research, including a selection of field recordings. —

Alexandra MacGilp

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