

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Basim Magdy: The Stars Were Aligned for a Century of New Beginnings

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CHICAGO

DECEMBER 10, 2016–MARCH 19, 2017

What pervades Basim Magdy's artistic practice and his first United States survey exhibition on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (MCA) is an exploration of time, space, and the universe that addresses humanity's collective failures and arguably imprudent aspirations. Magdy engages each of these broad themes through a nuanced use of language and a carefully constructed approach to layering and manipulating materials. As a result, his works allow for seemingly infinite possibilities of interpretation, much like the conceptions of utopia and science fiction that piqued his interest as a child. Magdy's use of bright colors and pop art sensibility are realized through his representation of images of mass media popular culture including cars, structures, spaceships, and other technologies. These images, when paired with their pessimistic titles, demonstrate one of the ways in which Magdy critiques humanity's simultaneous obsession with progress and avoidance in resolving or making sense of its own history. Titles such as *Time Laughs Back at You Like a Sunken Ship* and *Every Decade Memory Poses as a Container Heavier than its Carrier* exemplify Magdy's poetic and humorous approach to complicating narratives for viewers.

Basim Magdy: The Stars Were Aligned for a Century of New Beginnings was curated by MCA Manilow Senior Curator Omar Kholeif. The exhibition features Magdy's work in several media, including paper with gouache, acrylic, spray paint, and collage, as well as photographs, installations, videos, and slides captured from Kodak carousel projectors.

Unlike a traditional chronological survey, this exhibition features a significant display of twenty-three of Magdy's works on paper set salon-style in the center of a small portion of a bright pink wall, the titles of which can be read from a corresponding wall label that is placed at the lower left. Next to this arrangement is an installation entitled *The Future of Your Head* (2008), comprised of a standing two-way mirror sign with an illuminated text displayed in capital let-

ters that reads: YOUR HEAD IS A SPARE PART IN OUR FACTORY OF PERFECTION. At the center of this first central gallery space is a low pedestal with copies of two different posters accumulated in piles; a small written text on the floor prompts viewers to leave the exhibition with one poster of their choice. While at first glance the two poster images appear nearly identical, the text is what separates the work and provides a choice for the participant. In each poster a man stands on top of a car, his arm outstretched holding a pole, at the top of which appears a mannequin hand continuing the diagonal extension of the body. Both posters read "KNOWING HE COULD DIE THE NEXT DAY, A MAN DESPERATELY TRIES TO TICKLE HEAVEN" but one adds "BUT HEAVEN DOESN'T LAUGH. INSTEAD, FROGS START FALLING FROM THE SKY." This work, much like the exhibition as a whole, encourages viewers to look carefully and consider Magdy's constructed fictions in part as social commentary.

Components of the exhibition space in particular enhance many of the themes found in Magdy's work. In addition to the main gallery, which includes other brightly colored walls, the inclusion of several smaller viewing spaces for videos complements the feeling of temporal dislocation evident in the dream-like, utopian, and apocalyptic two-dimensional and installation pieces in the main space. As visitors move from the open and brightly colored gallery into the smaller spaces to view the videos (which range from nine to twenty minutes in length), they may feel as though they are entering the spaceships or machine-like structures evident in Magdy's works on paper. In this way, viewers may feel transported to another place or time, simultaneously aware of their physical disconnect.

In conjunction with the opening on December 10, the MCA held an artist talk with Magdy and Kholeif. This informal talk allowed Magdy to discuss his early career, articulate his influences, and describe his processes, among which include what he terms "film pickling"—a process that involves a great deal of experimentation and that utilizes chemicals including vinegars, soda, and dishwasher liquid to alter the final image. This artistic choice demonstrates Magdy's desire to consider the boundaries between reality and imagination, as well as past and present. By pickling the film, the documentation of the past is not only altered but bears traces of its trauma. By utilizing these chemicals with various kinds of film including Super 8 and 16mm, and at times processing them through a dishwasher, Magdy creates colorful altered photographic stills and unexpected visual outcomes that allude to an otherworldly, even apocalyptic realm.

Magdy's diverse interests—ranging from fine art, scientific drawings, and nature documentaries, to science fiction and humor—become apparent throughout the exhibition, as does his interest in communicating fictions and unreliable narratives. Informed also by an interest in poetry, the text included in many of Magdy's works, their corresponding titles, and the faintly audible dialogue in his videos provide another significant lens within which to view and interpret his oeuvre. As Kholeif mentioned in the artist talk, the titles of Magdy's pieces are in and of themselves works of art. Magdy weaves together multiple motifs, texts, and media in order to provoke viewers' self-reflexivity, allowing them to contemplate both personal and collective conceptions of the past, present, and the future.

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Installation view of *The Future of Your Head* (2008) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2016–17) by Basim Magdy; © MCA Chicago; photograph by Nathan Keay

