

Wael Shawky

**Wael Shawky: *Al Araba Al Madfuna*
Ernst Schering Foundation Art Award 2011
KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin
26 August – 21 October**

To tell the story of the Crusades in the Middle East against the backdrop of today's current global affairs, one must cross a minefield congested with political and linguistic bombshells – so Wael Shawky uses musical puppet shows. The Egyptian artist has been in great demand since the 2010 unveiling of the first film in his *Cabaret Crusades* trilogy, *The Horror Show File*. He has since undertaken a residency at the Serpentine Gallery in London and won the Ernst Schering Foundation Art Award to make a new film for the KW institute in Berlin, alongside shooting the second film in the *Crusades* series, *The Path to Cairo* (2012), which is also on show in Berlin. This last, a compulsively watchable hourlong adventure staged using handcrafted string maquettes, is undeniably the jewel in the Arabian crown of this exhibition, which unites four of his recent works.

The Path to Cairo (the third part is promised for next year) begins in Baghdad, ends in Damascus and charts the significant – and significantly bloody – episodes that took place in the region between 1099 and 1146. The film is a marked improvement on 2010's warmly received opener, for one primary reason. Last time Shawky used 200-year-old Italian maquettes; this time all 110 of the cast, many based on real historical figures, have been individually designed by the artist and take the expressive forms of camellike hybrids, some more beast than man. Controlled by up to 14 strings (including one for each eyelid), the figurines have the narrative potential of dance; the movement is an acutely emotive and universal language (rather than an intellectual one), based on observation of character and the way bodies hold anger, grief, hunger and other human traits. An exquisitely dressed mob of the puppets has travelled to Berlin for inspection.

Shawky's script is deliberately wooden. "How beautiful is Damascus," we are told (and it is, in the artist's ornate cardboard sets, handpainted and lit to evoke the spicy richness of the medieval Syrian capital), moments before a brutal siege. History tells us that six thousand

Muslims were killed in that battle, but Shawky avoids any such specifics, preferring gestures such as the audible clomp of a falling limb and sad lines from ancient verse sung by Bahraini pearl-fishers and a children's choir, which prompt meditation on the gaps left by worded chronologies.

The newest film in the show, *Al Araba Al Madfuna* (2012), builds on these themes. Children sit around telling old parables with the gravelly voices of wisemen – Shawky gently mocking the superstitious power maintained by the tradition of storytelling in Egyptian villages. Though engaging and well crafted, the message feels slightly laboured, and the accompanying installation of rocks and a sandpit an unnecessary diversion. What is refreshing, though, is that Shawky feels under no obligation to reference Western art history. Rather, he draws on a rich heritage of Arabic chronicles and religious cultures so that most Western audiences can only begin to guess how many layers deep are his symbols. His real talent is to sculpt classroom clarity and elementary simplicity into its reverse effect; in rather the same way that Isaac Newton observed himself as 'a child playing on the beach, while vast oceans of undiscovered truth' lay before him, the picture conjured up here is both humbling and terrifying.

FLORENCE WATERS

Callum Innes

**Callum Innes: *Unforeseen*
Kerlin Gallery, Dublin
7 September – 13 October**

It's an enduring problem: how certain pictorial resources, or the imaging capacities of paint, come up against certain material conditions of painting. The title of Callum Innes's show at the Kerlin, *Unforeseen*, acknowledges the contingencies variously engaged in addressing this issue. And it remains something of a puzzle how these surfaces end up as they are – fluid yet taut, silken or unctuous, full of mineral incident and sparks of contingency – and not otherwise. The paintings only give up so much about the history of their making. In response to a problem, then, less a solution than an intrigue.

Innes is best known for making a pictorial resource of the volatile and corrosive qualities of turpentine. The 'exposure' to turps of measured applications of oil paint results, according to the different series on show here, either in hanging skeins of pigment carried earthward at variable rates of dissolution and sedimentation or in muted transparencies barely distinct from the grounds they stain. *Exposed Painting Lamp Black* (2012) is of the former type. On its exposed right half, a dun spate of pigment has eroded an edge into this most obstinate of blacks. The painting appears resolved. Facing it at the far end of the gallery, *Exposed Painting Dioxazine Violet* (2012) is of the same series but appears irresolute by comparison. An excited violet snags on the tooth of the gessoed linen and separates in lateral, alluvium bands. This leaves a quintuple image of variable luminosities and haptic values, each of its parts edgily correlated to the others.

The problem can be rephrased, then, as how to relate image to object, or internal luminosity to external lighting. Innes talks of the image becoming part of the history of the material. We return to the puzzle: trying to infer that history. Consider the edges encountered in the pair *Untitled No. 5* and *Untitled No. 9* (both 2012). Here colour was applied to an entire surface and then dissolved from most of it to leave a tall block of colour and a rubbed, tinted white. With *Untitled No. 9* the remaining red stops at the canvas edge neatly, necessarily. The frayed edge where red meets white is contingent, the contact initiating an image, differentiating virtual space from surface. Along the other canvas edge, inadvertent remainders of the same material, dissolved pigment, are more object than image. One orients oneself by these edges (like Barnett Newman's zips, but without the rhetoric; verticals arrived at rather than declared), one approaches and turns about them, which explains why Innes calls himself a figurative painter even as he eschews depiction. In some sense, bodies align.

Turpentine is a highly fallible resource. Innes edits and reworks. What works, what fails – these are elusive judgements, but scrutinising the delicate difference between two whites, applied paint and exposed gesso, separated by a splintering black edge in *Untitled No. 18* (2012), I cannot help but think that it does work, in a way that is still somewhat inscrutable, astonishingly economical, and intriguing.

TIM STOTT

Wael Shawky
Al Araba Al Madfuna, 2012
(installation view). Photo:
Uwe Walter. Courtesy KW Institute
for Contemporary Art, Berlin



Callum Innes
Exposed Painting Dioxazine
Violet, 2012, oil on linen,
195 x 195 cm. Courtesy Kerlin
Gallery, Dublin