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Dear Mr. President

Posted By *Ati Metwaly* On August 10, 2012 @ 3:00 pm In Cultural Connection | [1 Comment](#)



[1]

(credit: Marchina) Boys stand in front of one of the concrete barricades in Mohammed Mahmoud street

Swiss artist Jean-Luc Marchina, who recently completed a six-month artistic residency in Cairo, wrote a letter addressed to the new president of Egypt. It reads:

"Today is a great day. Egypt has finally achieved the first free and fair elections for the presidency. Invited by The Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia as artist-in-residence in Cairo this year, it's a privilege to congratulate you for being the new democratic president of Egypt. As you will be leading your country to democracy, I wish you full success in restoring stability, confidence, and to lead your country to prosperity. To succeed in those honourable goals, you will face a lot of challenges; the biggest one is youth, who represents around half the population."

The artistic fruit of Marchina's residency is on display at the Cairo Atelier, a small downtown exhibition space. The exhibition, entitled *Dear Mr. President*, is executed with very simple means: a few photographs showcasing the youth from the lower and lower middle classes, and a video installation presenting youth addressing the president with their hopes for the future. It is possibly this striking simplicity that shocks the viewer, reminding us that Egypt that is still heading in new and unpredictable directions. Marchina's letter, which accompanies the project, is his artistic quintessence that aims to draw the president's attention to many issues troublesome to the Egyptian nation—and especially its youth.



[2]

Jean Luc Marchina in front of his work

Over the months before his residency, followed the events in Egypt through the international media. "Understandably, when I arrive to Egypt, everybody was speaking about the politics and especially the upcoming elections," Marchina tells *The Majalla*. "I looked at the youth that is always hopeful and enthusiastic, fighting for their future. I think it is youth that needs to be addressed first and chose them as protagonists of my artistic work."

In his photography, Marchina tries to escape clichéd images. He looks at the lower middle class in known Cairo hotspots, giving them a different angle. He creates an interesting thematic juxtaposition by approaching children and teenagers who are surprisingly innocent despite the revolutionary backdrop. We find boys who apparently come from the impoverished social strata, playing on the street in front of the National Democratic Party building (the ruling party under Mubarak) that was burnt during the initial 18 days of protest. Another work presents boys eating Koshari, an Egyptian street food made of pasta and beans, beside the concrete wall erected by the army around Mohamed Mahmoud Street. That neighbourhood faced the most violent encounters between the police and the protesters in November and December 2011 and February 2012. We also see a family seated at the doorstep of their house; despite their striking poverty, there are smiles and hope on their faces.

Today, many Egyptians believe that the revolution that toppled Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 did not manage to disassemble the regime and did not realize many revolutionary goals. But the voices that are asking for change can no longer be silenced, and they reverberate on the streets on daily basis. In his short video, Marchina collected views of young people addressing the future president in the weeks and months prior to the elections.

Marchina addressed mainly students, the upcoming generation of young intellectuals, and found in them a lot of faith and optimism. So many concerns are tackled by the youth in his interviews: piling social, religious, and political pressures, corruption, injustice, lack of jobs, failing education, women's rights that are not met, and the revolution's unattained goals . . .

"I wish that the coming president would do his job," states one young man in the video,

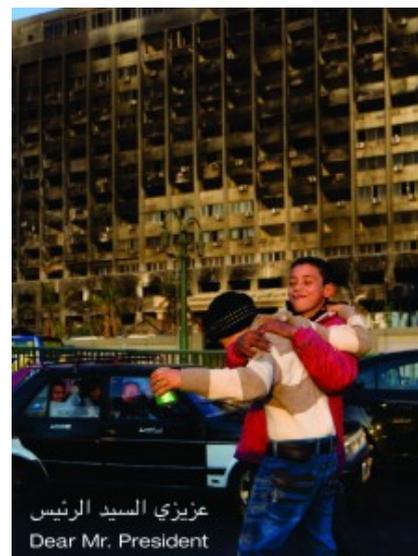
possibly not realizing that this seemingly simple statement encompasses an endless list of demands that his generation enumerates. "He should respect the dignity of human being," says the same man reflecting on many young people's call for core rights such as dignity, respect and basic human rights.

Another protagonist, a young woman, underlines need for education, pointing to ignorance that is apparent in many parts of the country, extending from lack of scientific knowledge to political ignorance. Women's rights are among the topics brought up by two women, opposing the discrimination that they experience in social and academic circles.

One of the recurring demands is freedom of expression. The video has numerous statements asking for the "freedom of thought, freedom of opinion, freedom of education," and asks the president to accept all forms of criticism.

Marchina believes that despite many daily worries, and they Egyptian youth remains optimistic. Sadly, one woman in the video thinks that her expectations are dreams beyond reach. She mentions the fight against corruption and social injustice, and stresses that her revolutionary dreams are shattered. She is waiting for someone who will lift Egypt, who will lead it towards the future and would not drown it in the past.

Even though today we know that Mohamed Morsi is the new president of Egypt, Jean-Luc Marchina's exhibition does not look into a specific presidential figure. Dear Mr. President is rather an exhibition that looks into the major concerns of the Egyptian youth. Those concerns need to be addressed to the leader who claims or hopes to respond to—if not all, then at least a majority of—the demands expressed by Egyptians.



[3]

(Credit: Marchina) Boys play in front of the burnt out National Democratic Party building



Ati Metwaly [4]

Ati Metwaly is a Polish/Egyptian journalist currently living in Egypt. She was co-founder and Editor in Chief of the first English language magazine on arts published in Egypt, The Art Review (2004-2009) and is now the Arts and Culture Editor of Ahram Online. Metwaly also writes a weekly critique for the printed newspaper, Al Ahram Weekly.

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