

# Art in America

## Of Failures and Withdrawals: An Interview with Basim Magdy

by Murtaza Vali

Basim Magdy, *Our Spies Saw an Early Pollination Season on the Horizon*, 2013, spray paint, gouache, acrylic, colored pencil and collage on paper, 18 1/2 by 25 1/3 inches. Courtesy the artist and Hunt Kastner, Prague.



Basim Magdy is not afraid of color. A DayGlo palette enlivens his otherwise saturnine paintings, surreal compositions that lament bygone visions of the future. Jewel-like color effects—achieved through low-tech manipulations of film stock—add an air of fairy-tale whimsy to his films and photographs, which narrate, through deadpan but allusive text fragments, Kafkaesque parables about aspiration and failure.

The Cairo- and Basel-based artist is presenting two distinct bodies of work at La Biennale de Montréal (through Jan. 5, 2014). A selection of his paintings is on display at the Musée d'art contemporain (MAC), the Biennale's main venue; screening at Arsenal, a converted shipyard southwest of the city center, is *The Dent* (2014), a 19-minute film produced for this year's Abraaj Group Art Prize.

Viewers can get an eyeful of Magdy now and in the coming months at various venues internationally. He has newly commissioned work on view at New York's Art in General (through Jan. 10) and solo shows at Cairo's Gypsum Gallery (through Jan. 30) and London's Cecilia Brunson Projects (through Feb. 27, 2015).

Born in Assiut, Egypt in 1977, Magdy was recently awarded the New:Vision award by the 2014 Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival and will be included in "Surround Audience," the third New Museum Triennial (Feb. 25-May 24, 2015).

Magdy talked with *A.i.A.* at a café in Montreal about his work in the Biennial, his interests in futurism and in film as medium, and the results of his latest commission.

**MURTAZA VALI** What are the sources for your paintings?

**BASIM MAGDY** I prefer to call them works on paper because they stand somewhere between paintings, drawings and collages. They often start from images of objects that were part of a 1960s vision of a future that was utterly distanced from the present of the time and as a result never arrived. The works at the MAC bring together images

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of early satellites, once promising but now obsolete architectural structures, absurd monuments of giant sea creatures and examples of polar architecture in highly fictional settings. The protagonists in these works appear stranded and lonesome; they pose and seem to act out confusing roles. And titles like *Every Decade Memory Poses as a Container Heavier Than its Carrier* or *They Endorsed Collective Failure as the Dawn of a New Renaissance* are essential layers of the work.

**VALI** And the film? It has the feel of found footage.

**MAGDY** I rarely use found footage. I shot *The Dent* (2014) entirely on Super 16mm film. With the recent dominance of the digital image, anything shot on 16mm or Super 8 can feel like found footage or trigger a nostalgic reaction. I'm not particularly interested in this response. For me, it's more about the materiality of film, which can be altered in various ways to influence the image. I'm fascinated by film because it creates representations of reality and doesn't try to imitate it. This quality is particularly fitting for my work, where ambiguity, absurdity and confusion all play a role.

**VALI** How do you achieve the color effects?

**MAGDY** Through intentional light leaks, and through a process I call film pickling. I expose film to various household chemicals for specific periods of time before developing it and each stock responds to different chemicals in distinct ways. One color will often dominate, giving the film a unique tint. *The Dent* was my first time applying this process to 16mm. The result is something like a double exposure with a flickering abstract animation of dots, drips and scratches layered on top of the image.

**VALI** Do you work with sound similarly?

**MAGDY** Sound is essential to my films. Sometimes there can be as many as 14 layers of sound. I am always making field recordings, so I have to be constantly aware of my surroundings. I also use samples found online when I cannot record specific sounds myself. I compose the soundtracks of my films in a similar way to layering images and footage; in the end it all has to flow together.

**VALI** What is the relationship between image and sound/text in your work?

**MAGDY** In recent years I have developed an interest in creating a language where image, text and sound don't respond to or illustrate one another too literally, where they float together in one container, sometimes meeting and other times drifting apart. In most cases there is a conclusion that doesn't offer an obvious resolution. This leaves gaps for the imagination, offering a different understanding of these elements while maintaining the work as one coherent entity.

**VALI** What are you showing at Art in General?

**MAGDY** A new film, a series of photographs and a text-based wall piece. In a departure from my recent films, *The Everyday Ritual of Solitude Hatching Monkeys* (2014) focuses on an individual as opposed to collective action. A man moves far away from the sea to avoid death by water. He finds himself alone when all his co-workers go to the beach and never come back. He calls a random number and has a conversation about loneliness and the absurdity of reality. This is also the first time I've worked with someone else's text; the script is an adaptation of a short story by my father, Magdy El-Gohary. Though a separate work, the series of photographs, *The Hollow Desire to Populate Imaginary Cities* (2014), presents a possible setting, an anonymous city with the sea lurking as its shadow. And *Clowns* (2014), the text piece, comments on the structure of modern societies. The show is titled «An Absent Population Laughs at its Haunting Withdrawal.»