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Gazibiyya Sirry and Visual Impact of Egyptian Socialism

Cairo, Egypt

Women, Religion, and Globalization Summer Grant: Final Project Report

This summer, I traveled to Cairo, Egypt, to research the artwork of Gazibiyya Sirry, produced during the period of the Free Officers Revolution and Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency, from about 1952 until 1967. My main objectives were to locate texts written about Sirry as well as view as many of her artworks as possible from this period. I succeeded in viewing and photographing many works never before reproduced, and I also acquired numerous texts not available in the United States. In addition to these two material gains, I also spoke with many individuals in the Cairo art world and learned much about Sirry's reputation and career from these conversations.



Through the WRG grant, I aimed to address the claim of the anthropologist Jessica Winegar that “Gazibiyya seems to have provided a visual counterpart to the emphasis that Nasser and feminists of the time were placing on the productive role of women in the new nation – as workers and ‘makers’ of Egypt’s new citizens.”¹ Indeed, Sirry’s work in the early 1950s portrays many women of all classes forcefully confronting the viewer with strong bodies and steady, melancholy gazes. Sirry imbues them with quiet strength, and their sometimes dualistic roles (as mother and as citizen) are reinforced by the shadows that divide many of their faces in half. Even though religion does not play a prominent role in Sirry’s work, the prevalent rise and subsequent repression of the Muslim Brotherhood during this period surely had an impact on her practice. I will need to learn more details about the Egyptian feminist movement and the particular policies of Nasserist Egypt in order to fully respond to Winegar’s claim, but from the images I saw this summer, it is clear that there is a political purpose to Sirry’s images of women. Unlike Winegar, I believe that Sirry’s work is not just a visual counterpart but rather an active player in the construction of the new image of the Egyptian woman. This “new woman” contradicts the sexualized or idealized women portrayed in the work of Sirry’s predecessors, Mahmoud Said and Mahmoud Mukhtar. In further study, I hope to

¹ Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press) 2006: 219.

investigate how Sirry transforms the Egyptian woman from desired object to desiring subject.

Through my research on Sirry this summer, I became interested in two other female artists who were active in the 1950s and 1960s alongside her: Inji Aflatoon and Tahia Halim. These women were also reacting to the new social order instituted by revolution and the post-colonial atmosphere, and Aflatoon in particular was politically-active and subsequently jailed and tortured because of her communist activities. I now intend to pursue a study of these three female artists – Sirry, Aflatoon and Halim – as a dissertation topic. Later this fall I will use my research to give a lecture on women artists of the Middle East for the Islamic Art and Visual Culture survey course taught by Professor Kishwar Rizvi. The chance to see their work in person in Cairo this summer solidified the importance of the artists as well as the value of the artworks themselves. The context of the production – politics, religion, sexuality, gender – is rich and unstudied. The WRG grant provided me with a framework of gender to direct my interest, and I am truly grateful for this opportunity for I believe I have found an intriguing and important set of questions to pursue through my dissertation.

