

Discoveries

Osama Esid: Reinventing Home

Tim White

The Middle East and the American Midwest are as remote in physical distance as they are in aesthetic difference. Osama Esid built his reputation as a photographer of the exotic and is known for images of imagined Parisian brothels, the bustling marketplaces of Cairo, men in galabeya, and women from "Arabian Nights" fantasias. And yet, from his current home in Minnesota, Esid manages to make the ordinary spectacular, whether he is exploring local rivers, rural vistas, urban alleys—or his own backyard.

Osama Esid's northeast Minneapolis neighborhood was favored by a diverse group of transplanted Europeans during the early part of the previous century who worked in the nearby mills and railways. In its scrubby parks and now-abandoned yards, Esid frequently depicts his two daughters, ages six and nine, and not infrequently himself, as in a



Osama Esid (photo by Victor Keller)

self-portrait on a derelict sofa. Like dual "Alices" with an amiable cohort, they play in diffusely shaded arbors, abundant bracken and brambles concealing toys, washtubs, empty crates, etc. One wonders about the strange man in a tattered fedora (Osama) dangling a toy rabbit, triggering a shutter, or watching from behind the camera beneath a dark cloth. These works are as much about the unresolved mysteries of childhood as they are documents of parenting—the daughters' self-possessed gazes begging the question of whom, man or little girl, is more childlike.

Part of the surreal effects achieved in this series are due to what Esid refers to as "the ghost lens," a well-worn 325mm Ernst Leitz Wetzlar whose selective focus, unpredictable fogging and distortions are not fully within the photographer's ability to control. It is often Esid's capability to cede perfection and accept the fortunate accident that marks much of his work. With only the slightest pre-visualization, and directing his subjects in a most general way, he allows the process to take precedence, trusting his extensive knowledge of light and gear.

His daughters have received a masters course in photography literally at their father's side, and often accompany him on shoots. They are infinitely patient, and exceptionally precocious; currently filming their own interpretation of "O, Fortuna" from the song-cycle



Untitled, from the series "Wonderland"

It is often Esid's capability to cede perfection and accept the fortunate accident that marks much of his work.

Carmina Burana. During a recent cross-country road trip Esid yielded to the girls' insistence and played the piece repeatedly. Italian being one of the few languages Esid does not know (he speaks French, Russian and numerous parlanges from the Middle East), he spun an elaborate narrative from whole cloth for their amusement regarding Satan's pride causing jealous angels to clip his wings and trip him into the sites they drove through. In his daughters' production Esid will, of course, play the devil, for whom—based on their father's telling—the girls have much sympathy.

Family plays a prominent role in another recent series by Esid, taken with his wife, Tracy. The two travelled to her rural Minnesota hometown, making a group of self-timed portraits in front of silos, feed bins and corn fields. Their static postures and stoic expressions are reminiscent of Grant Wood's "Amer-

ican Gothic," as is Esid's holding a tripod-mounted 8x10 camera in place of a pitchfork. Looking closer, however, you see that the artist is wearing Western dress and a keffiyeh—the traditional headdress of rural Arabs.

Here Esid combines the outward appearance of two of his family members. The head of Esid's Syrian family was Uncle Zaki, a stern man, a farmer, always dressed in traditional garb and keffiyeh. As a young man, Esid, frankly, found him frightening. He identified more strongly with his father's younger brother, Uncle Abdul, a Westernized academic who spoke seven languages. The turbulent present of his family who remain in Syria inspired Esid to try on the garment.

"I donned the keffiyeh and became my uncle Zaki. Amid the grief that surrounds my family now, my identity was somehow magically stabilized. I felt grounded as he had been, and regained an identity which I imagined I had left behind."

Another work from this series reflects the current crisis in Esid's native land, though more obliquely. An unplanned light leak, a slight over-exposure, or a fluke of chemistry resulted in a vortex-like element which dominates much of one particular image. It nearly obliterates the figures from recognition, underscoring the tenuousness and fragility of the oases Esid has created in America. Unanticipated difficulties can impose themselves on the placid realities we create at any time. To persist in spite of such intrusions is a rare quality. Esid's family no doubt inspires his capacity to continue, as does his art, which frequently transposes his past and present.

Esid's domestic images suggest a placid, playful parent and husband, yet he was once a frustrated artist penned in by limitations. Having exhausted the potential of his native city, Damascus, he left to travel the world. While settled now in Minnesota, Esid met a character who reminded him a great deal of the frustrated person that he once was.

Mason is an underemployed welder, and an artist who grafted a movie projector, audio equipment and a popcorn machine to a tandem bicycle that no one else would ever ride. With this ungainly instrument, Mason traverses a city that he derides as pedestrian and sedentary. Esid saw in Mason the person that he once was; angered by his place on the periphery and constrained by his marginal status. Esid's growing competence took him to



"Eagle"



Untitled, from the series "Mason's Alley"



Untitled, from the series "Mason's Alley"

While settled now in Minnesota, Esid met a character who reminded him a great deal of the frustrated person that he once was.



Untitled, from the series "Mississippi"

Cairo, to the capitals of Europe, and to salons of like-minded creative individuals.

With his ad hoc calliope, and constrained by a barely concealed misanthropy, Mason has had no such breakthrough. His funereal attire and intrusive instrument attempt to displace people from what he disparages as their passivity. Through Mason, Esid came to see that enforced conformity was not a condition exclusive to living under a dictatorship. Cleaving to convention promises security. Given income, and all manner of material goods to distract ourselves, we are often easily pacified. When the merits of playing along outweigh being seen as a freak or a deviant we will toe the line, and will enforce convention.

Mason's bicycles are a surly reply to his society's tacit—though just as binding—edicts to comply. One image depicts Mason with hand over heart in a sort of "pledge of allegiance" gesture that is highly ironic. While wheeling his contraptions into others' normative existences, he reinforces the isolation that the effort attempts to redress. Mason has created a conveyance, but not an escape.

Esid depicts Mason in an alley adjacent to the garage where his vehicles are stowed.

Here, pinioned by converging lines and vanishing points, his subject's predicament is made poignantly apparent. The alleys Esid knew in Damascus have a bustling quality altogether different from their functions in the United States. Alleys here are the backsides of our pleasant facades, which adds another appropriately dark psychological dimension to the figure, Mason, who haunts them. Esid, having left an ancient city of Byzantine streets and labyrinthine passages, sees in his adopted home a place in its infancy by historical comparison, yet full of vibrancy, growth and expansive possibilities. And here, he has managed to create exotic images in places we may regard as ordinary.

The Mississippi River is seldom regarded as ordinary, and fortuitously runs right through Esid's adopted hometown. It has a strong hold on America's collective consciousness—from legends of the First People, to Mark Twain's opus *Life on the Mississippi*, and continuing through Alec Soth's monograph *Sleeping by the Mississippi*—the river is a metaphorical divide where America's East Coast ends and the once-frontier began. It has been character-



Untitled, from the series "Mississippi"



Untitled, from the series "Watertown, Minnesota"

Esid came to see that enforced conformity was not a condition exclusive to living under a dictatorship.

ized as a conduit for escape, a place for commerce and licentiousness, as a delicate ecosystem, and as a brackish backwater.

Rivers play no small part in the mythology of many cultures, and Esid in working along this Twin Cities waterway has inflected it with mythic significances which could as easily attain to the River Jordan, or Nile. He is a great fan of Delta blues, spirituals and American roots music, and is fascinated by the redemptive sagas and ballads of mayhem in these traditions; his images reflect this enthusiasm.

Braving bottom feeders and mosquitoes, he has waded with all of his large-format gear into the river's fens and muck, returning with pictures that are heavily freighted with both religious references and secular sins.

In one image, a barefoot model in a sundress lies draped on the water's bank. It

remains ambiguous whether the image represents an indolent summer tableau or the scene of a crime. In another, a woman wades downriver, her arms extended in a penitential gesture. She could be a fallen Magdalene, a similar figure now saved, a baptizer or a siren. In yet another work a young girl stands on a rock in Edenic surroundings, the river serpentine away behind her into the distance. Modestly cloaked, she could be Eve, recently rendered self-conscious, a contemporary Hiawatha, or merely a city kid beating the heat.

Independent of explicit didactics, Esid allows numerous interpretive possibilities to exist simultaneously and to remain unresolved, conflating legends older than Moses into the same metaphorical space as his adopted prairie home.

It is this capacity to combine the rich cultural history Esid comes from with the prospects for self-invention promised here that distinguish his homebound body of work. The banality of the elements he chooses to photograph does nothing to diminish his pictures' effects. What could be a more engaging, challenging image of liberty than a Muslim-American man standing atop his motorcycle, flaunting a headless eagle? In this portrait with its seemingly simplistic pieces, he conveys abundant signifiers—mindless freedom and issues of self-representation while precariously perched on a perilous vehicle. Would that we all could see that the things that make the most potent meanings are often as close at hand as home.

Fact File

You can see more of Esid's work at www.asamaesid.com.



Untitled, from the series "Watertown, Minnesota"



Untitled, from the series "Wonderland"



Untitled, from the series "Mississippi"



Untitled, from the series "Mississippi"