

OSAMA

ESID

Osama Esid began taking pictures and developing them at home in Damascus, Syria while still in his early teens. Earlier this decade, he moved to Cairo, finding work at the Lehnert & Landrock bookstore. His employers had inherited numerous glass plate negatives, which Esid was charged with printing. Images of the region's ancient treasures and its romanticized people took hold of his imagination. It occurred to him that these reductive stereotypes could be reimagined to counter an emerging stereotype of the Middle East that was no less reductive, and even more pernicious.

This epiphany resulted in two series: *Distorted City* and *Cairo Street Workers*, which found a receptive audience in Cordoba, Spain—an appropriate place to recast depictions of Arabic culture in that Andalusia was the last place in Europe where it had flourished. Esid moved to the United States, settling in Minneapolis in 2007 where at age 40 he is steadily gaining broader recognition. He was a 2008 recipient of the McKnight fellowship in photography, and continues to lecture and exhibit at home and abroad.

Distorted City departs from postcard-typical Egyptian subject matter and depicts Cairo as Esid came to know it—vistas that are culturally as far removed from the pyramids or sphinx as Manhattan is from Las Vegas. He tilt-shifted this bustling metropolis into uncanny toyscapes of congested roads, billboards, and rooftops stretching to infinity with satellite dishes



aimed skyward. Absent are minarets or other signifiers that these are anything other than the colossal cities many believe to be the exclusive province of the West. Whereas for many, such bird's-eye views have become blasé—from county fair Ferris wheels to urban observation decks—Esid's gift is to make the experience novel again.

Looking down from great heights can be interpreted as a privileged view—millions of domestic dramas played out behind millions of windows, yet removed from the reach of the person taking them in—so to balance this potentially alienating perspective, Esid's *Cairo Street Workers* series immersed the photographer in the lives of those at ground level. Esid staked a place in an Egyptian market with a large format view camera and a hand painted backdrop of a palm-studded oasis. Once they accepted him as a fellow tradesman, painters, vendors, and deliverymen willingly became his subjects. These works are simultaneously documentary and theatrical, dignifying people that are seldom seen against a naive, playful back-

ground. Many of his richly toned portraits of common people have the veracity and empathic eye of August Sander. In one such piece, a junk collector stands atop his loot like a monarch of toilets, derelict stereos and broken wicker. In another, a doorman's son struggles to stay still long enough for Esid to capture his inquisitive expression. While a competent photographer of verité, he can also create street photographs with the quality of hallucinations. A recent image from Paris's Gare de l'Est looks up a stairwell in heavy sfumato, while on the periphery the distinctive Nike "swoosh" swings lazily from a rail while anonymous passersby ascend and descend.

This capacity to make the ordinary strange has garnered acclaim, but has also attracted criticism. Esid's aesthetic tack has opened him to charges of Orientalism, the Western depiction of Eastern cultures as an exotic other—too different in their dress, manner, and faith to be regarded as a civilized equal, while simultaneously envied for an existence presumed to be more indolent, more decadent. But Esid's intent is something different; after nine years of nightly news depictions of the Arab world as retrogressive, fanatical, and irreconcilable, his works have a moderating effect and are an elegant counterpoint to current stereotypes. Esid deftly appropriates the genre's visual rhetoric, as in a self-portrait seated in front of a reclining woman in lingerie—recalling Matisse's odalisques—and he does not resist the trope

of beautiful dark-eyed women in ornate gowns posed languorously, but he employs this vernacular towards his own ends. He says: "I played on these fantasies and I recreated (them) again, and show you as a port, as a door, to let you have another look at my culture."

Despite the superficial resemblance to a 19th-century sensibility which fed the Occident what it wanted to see of the Orient, Esid's body of work is no mere anachronism or a colonial enterprise. It is of its time with all the graffiti, present styles, and detritus intact. In one image among a series of nudes shot in Lisbon, a figure leans against a doorway. Blurred but definitively feminine, she holds (she is) the source of illumination for both her body and the rooms surrounding her. A surge protector on the floor is given the most prominent focus, which could be a subtle symbol for a conduit of energy, or a clever pun.

—Tim White

■ PRINT INFORMATION
20x24 silver gelatin black and white toned and hand colored edition of 6—\$1500; 44x36 inkjet prints edition of 5—\$1200

■ CONTACT INFORMATION
www.osamaesid.com
oesid2@gmail.com
—Kashya Hildebrand
Zurich, Switzerland
www.kashyahildebrand.org
—The Empty Quarter Gallery
DIFC Dubai, UAE
www.theemptyquarter.com
—Masasam; Espacios de creacion
Madrid, Spain
www.masasam.com