

## Glory to the Unknown

Ania Szremski

A slightly absurd theatricality, verging-on-kitsch iconography, and mischievous playfulness all coalesce in the German-Danish artist duo J&K's latest work, **المجد للمجهولين** (*Glory to the Unknown*). In this wall-length collage-cum-panel painting, the artists themselves enact a wealth of characters mined from ancient Egyptian mythology, internet-based images of the Egyptian revolution, their own imaginations—and, perhaps most significantly, a cache of photographs taken as they conducted research in post-2011 Cairo. Playing with the cliché-driven imagery that tends to color the Western imagination of Egypt, the artists fully assume their default identities as neocolonizers even as they try to combat the regime of neocolonial image production. The work self-consciously wears the mantle of Edward Said's "living tableau of queerness" even as it enacts a campy battle to queer its own Orientalizing gaze.

J&K's work on Egypt can be funny, but it can also be unnerving—what side of the joke are we on? Do these stereotyped, almost cartoonish images of ancient Egypt brought into the present-day make us complicit in something that's not quite politically correct? But the fact that such work might not sit quite right with the viewer is part of its intrigue, and ultimately its force. While the work will certainly read differently to its multiple audiences, who may register discomfort for different reasons, it encourages the Western viewer in particular to critically examine her own privileged status as consumer of such images, and perhaps her own latent tendency to objectify and exoticize. This potentially discomfiting dynamic is particularly interesting when viewed in the context of the Goethe Institut.

In addition to doing the hard work (albeit in a lighthearted way) of reckoning with the Othering gaze, J&K's *Glory to the Unknown* tackles something that is both, in some ways, ponderously over-represented and simultaneously un-representable: the Egyptian revolution. While the photographs in J&K's earlier *Egyptomaniacs* series heralded an apocalyptic future of humorous god-like figures trapped in sterile, seemingly abandoned tourist resorts and sites, *Glory to the Unknown* is very much located in a fraught present, in which dystopian shards of a grim post-revolutionary reality are interspersed with glimmers of hope for peace and healing.

Instead of relying on overdetermined and saturated images—a teeming Tahrir Square, tear gas, military tanks—J&K tell the story of the present by drawing from their lexicon of ancient symbols, infused with contemporary references taken from the artists' photographs in post-revolution Cairo. The artists intend the work to be read almost like a text, imbuing each image with iconographic significance. From the hunched over God of Death Anubis at the base of the work, to a triumphant Cleopatra-like figure powerfully extending her arm above, the photographic collage tells a story of pain and a dreamed-of victory that feels impossible, but is important to try to imagine. The title of the piece is taken from the Arabic writing on the silver bottle in the upper quadrant of the collage, which translated into English means "Glory to the Unknown"—a text derived from graffiti photographed near Tahrir Square in 2013, referring to the unknown or unnamed people who fell during the 2011 revolution and its aftermath. *Glory to the Unknown* thus deals in death and triumph, fear and optimism, the potential for violence and the potential for peace, ultimately reaching a hope-filled climax in the victorious figures that reign atop the work.

### About the artists

Based in Berlin and Copenhagen, J&K (Janne Schäfer and Kristine Agergaard) have been collaborating since 1999. Their artistic practice is fundamentally performative, and engages various ways of relating performance to other media such as photography, installation, collage, sculpture, found objects, and text. Using a double-bind of playfulness and sincerity, J&K's work investigates the cultural production of civilization and identity, ultimately exploring the condition and boundaries of human existence.

### About the work

#### **المجد للمجهولين / *Glory to the Unknown***

by J&K / Janne Schäfer and Kristine Agergaard,  
from the body of work *Egyptomaniacs*, digital photo collage, wall relief in 9 parts, c-print diasec, 310 x 840 x 9 cm, commissioned by the The German Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning (BBR), permanently installed at the new building of the Goethe Institute and DAAD, Cairo, Egypt, 2016