

# LISSON GALLERY

## Press Release

## Wael Shawky

November 10 – December 17, 2022  
508 West 24th Street, New York

Wael Shawky's sixth solo exhibition with Lisson Gallery, and second in New York, continues the artist's ongoing investigation into how multiple accounts of history have been conceived, recorded and disseminated. Featuring a recent single-channel film along with a number of new paintings, the presentation explores how myths often become belief. A natural storyteller, Shawky takes historiographical and literary references as starting points for his concentrated narratives, in which he interweaves fable, fact and fiction.

At the heart of the exhibition is *Isles of the Blessed (Oops!...I forgot Europe)*, 2022, presented in the United States for the first time after debuting at Bozar – Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels earlier this year. Featuring a new clay variation of Shawky's archetypal marionette, the film is a recitation of a pivotal lore in the founding of Europe. The figurine narrates the classical Greek mythological story of Isles of the Blessed in Arabic, Shawky's first language. The apologue follows Cadmus and Harmonia to the island, sent at the request of Zeus who seduces Europa, Cadmus' sister, and brings her to Crete where legend explains she offered her name to the continent.

Previous works by Wael Shawky have re-interpreted the complex history of the artist's native region of Alexandria, Egypt, inviting analysis into collective belief systems, from faith to the recording of history. Having previously explored the stories and traditions of the Middle East, Shawky turns here to the European fantasy. Through *Isles of the Blessed (Oops!...I forgot Europe)* he draws parallels between Greek mythology and Islamic and Judeo-Christian theology. Bearing in mind a shared tradition of oral storytelling, the Arabic narration indicates the historical alignment. Beyond themes of flood, clay, sacrifice, deity, the work alludes to the enduring tension between fiction and history and the perseverance of myths across eras and origins. Religiously and geographically antagonistic, the work interrogates the prevalence of Alexandria in Eurocentric parables and adds an alternative perspective on the traditionally Western historiography.

Presented alongside the film are new paintings that offer an apparatus for storytelling. Originally trained as a painter, Shawky employs the canvas as a space "where fictions become realities". The paintings delve further into the realms of the magical, layering mythological scenes onto historical narratives. Shawky points to history as a construct and the paintings explore the fantastical facets of the stories echoed in the film.

The works in the exhibition point to myths that once became beliefs, only to eventually dwindle once more as fantastical fiction. Weaving predominant western denominations into the mythological drama, Shawky invites the viewer to navigate today's truths, myths and stereotypes.

### About the artist

Based on extensive periods of research and enquiry, Wael Shawky's work tackles notions of national, religious and artistic identity through film, performance and storytelling. Whether instructing Bedouin children to act out the construction of an airport runway in the desert or organizing a heavy metal concert in a remote Egyptian village, Shawky frames contemporary culture through the lens of historical tradition and vice versa. Mixing truth and fiction, childlike wonder and spiritual doctrine, Shawky

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has staged epic recreations of the medieval clashes between Muslims and Christians in his trilogy of puppets and marionettes – titled *Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show Files* (2010), *The Path to Cairo* (2012) and *The Secrets of Karbala* (2015) – while his three-part film, *Al Araba Al Madfunah*, uses child actors to recount poetic myths, paying homage, rather than mere lip-service, to the important narratives of yesteryear.

Wael Shawky was born in Alexandria in 1971 where he lives and works. Recent solo exhibitions have been held at M Leuven Museum, Brussels, Belgium (2022); The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, TX, USA (2021), The Louvre Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, UAE (2020); The Polygon, Vancouver, Canada (2020); ARoS, Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Aarhus, Denmark (2018); Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Yinchuan, China (2017); Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy (2016); Fondazione Merz, Turin, Italy (2016); Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria (2016); Fondazione Merz, Zurich, Switzerland (2016); MATHAF, Doha, Qatar (2015) and MoMA P.S.1, New York, NY, USA (2015); K20 Düsseldorf, Germany (2014-15); Serpentine Galleries, London, UK (2013-14); KW Contemporary Art Institute, Berlin, Germany (2012); Nottingham Contemporary, UK (2011); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA (2011); Delfina Foundation, London, UK (2011) and Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, Italy (2010). He has participated in Lahore Biennale, Lahore, Pakistan (2020); Desert X, Al Ula, Saudi Arabia (2020); 14th Istanbul Biennial, Turkey (2015); the 11th Sharjah Biennial, UAE (2013); Documenta 13, Kassel, Germany (2012); the 9th Gwangju Biennial, South Korea (2012); SITE Santa Fe Biennial, NM, USA (2008); the 9th Istanbul Biennial, Turkey (2005); and the 50th Venice Biennale, Italy (2003). Recent awards include the inaugural Mario Merz Prize (2015); the Award for Filmic Oeuvre created by Louis Vuitton and Kino der Kunst (2013); the Abraaj Capital Art Prize (2012); the Schering Foundation Art Award (2011), as well as The International Commissioning Grant and an award from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, in 2005. In 2010, Shawky founded the educational space MASS Alexandria.

## About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, three in New York, and one in Shanghai, as well as forthcoming galleries in Beijing and Los Angeles. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estate of Leon Polk Smith.

In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Van Hanos, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky and Cheyney Thompson.

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