

Winds of Change

IN 2005 THE SWISS PHOTOGRAPHER DOMINIK HUBER CAME TO EGYPT TO JOIN THE PRO HELVETIA ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAMME SUPPORTED BY THE SWISS ARTS COUNCIL IN CAIRO. LIKE MANY OTHER WESTERN ARTISTS HUBER WAS INTERESTED IN INTERACTING WITH THE RICH CULTURE OF EGYPT AND DOCUMENTING EACH MOMENT OF HIS EXPERIENCE HERE.



Dominik Huber has become particularly keen on observing and documenting traditional Egyptian musical instruments through his camera lenses. His main project now is to record images of three types of 3,000 year-old wind instruments – the *Kawahla*, the *Argoul* and the *Mizmar*, which are on the verge of extinction, and the stringed *Oud* – and to photograph each stage of their production process, as well as the hand of artisans who still make them.

Huber has been photographing musical instruments in several countries for 15 years. He originally came to Egypt to extend his research into the effects of modernisation in the Middle East. However, in Cairo in

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October 2007 he met local musicians and artists who introduced him to a particular aspect of Egyptian music. "When I met Ahmed el Maghrabi, founder and director of Makan at the Egyptian Centre for Culture and Art (ECCA) – who specialises in folklore and colloquial music – I became very much interested in documenting ancient instruments, which are slowly dying out," says Huber.

He realised that one effect of modernisation was apparent in the fact that the *Mizmar*, which was originally made out of apricot wood, is now made out of metal. This has transformed both the sound of the music as well as the lives of the few remaining artisans who use traditional techniques to make these instruments.

Through the help and guidance of Dr. Maghrabi and his crew at ▶

Makan, Huber was given access to the musicians and craftsmen who play and make the traditional wind instruments that are on the verge of disappearing from Egyptian folk music. "With the Makan crew I was able to personally visit the artisan-musicians in the villages of the Delta region who work in natural surroundings and use raw materials found in nature to produce these wind instruments; organic processes that go back 3,000 years," Huber explains.

Huber considers his work on this project to be part of an artist's social responsibility because he has the tools to help spread knowledge and awareness of these historically valuable instruments. He says it is the realisation of how limited the knowledge about these instruments is that drives him to complete his work. It is a project with several phases; including the production of a book with text by Mohamed Omran and illustrated with Huber's photos, and a CD containing recordings of the *Kawahla*, the *Argoul* and the *Mizmar* being played. There will also be concerts performed by folk musicians at Makan, and a conference at which Egyptian and Swiss musicologists will discuss the historical and artistic merits of the three instruments.

"We are aware of the cultural and historical value of these old wind instruments and the art of making them," says Hebba Sherif, head of Pro Helvetia Cairo. "That is why Pro Helvetia is willing to support this project with the objective of spreading knowledge about an art which is about to disappear."

Maghrabi has already done extensive work in the area of folklore and colloquial art, and his team makes continuing efforts to bring about a revival of interest in the old instruments in both the Middle East and around the world. His collaboration with Huber is creating unique documentation that gives a visual aspect to a musical culture in transition.

"While urban Egypt is being transformed through modernisation, the skill of these artisan-musicians in the Delta reminds us that we must acknowledge the efforts involved in working to preserve traditional culture and crafts in the modern Middle East. My footage captures the craftsmen at work and documents step-by-step details of these skills for the first time with the help of photographic media," says Huber.

Huber hopes his project will attract the attention of Egyptian and international scholars and musicologists to these ancient instruments, ensuring that all knowledge of them does not die out with the dwindling number of craftsmen. ▲

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