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Moataz Nasr's The Mountain. Courtesy Moataz Nasr

2017 Venice Biennale: Artist Moataz Nasr's The Mountain is a window to Egypt

David D'Arcy

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In the public gardens or Giardini where the 2017 Venice Biennale is showing its latest edition of contemporary art, the door of the modernist Pavilion of Egypt has been reshaped into a Middle Eastern portal. It leads to a dirt floor covered with straw.

"I want people to feel as if they are entering Egypt. They smell it. They touch it. They feel the humidity of the houses. They feel the air and the dust," said artist Moataz Nasr of Cairo, who added that his goal was "to isolate them as well from whatever is happening outside".

"They see the façade and they enter, and then they are in my country," he said.

Inside, Nasr's 12-minute film, *The Mountain*, is shown on five large adjoining screens. Nasr's film is the story of Zein, a girl who leaves her rural village at the foot of a mountain in Upper Egypt. When Zein returns as a young woman after her studies, she confronts a local sheikh and defies his authority.

The clash between the youth and established power is a perennial theme that artists explore literally and obliquely. It could not be more topical in Egypt today.

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"I created the village and I made a door, and I took you inside, and I made you live the whole experience for twelve minutes. All of a sudden, you're out of Italy, and you're in the south of Egypt. I give you the message, and I let you go," said Nasr.

The 55-year-old artist sat on the lawn in front of the pavilion and watched visitors line up to see his film. Admirers who spotted him there, mostly Egyptians, came by to shake his hand. "I'm an artist from Egypt. I'm concerned about what is happening in Egypt all the time, and it shows in my work," he said.

"At the end, the mountain is fear – fear in general, fear of everything, fear of the unknown, fear of authority, fear of talking to somebody you don't know – all these different kinds of fears that grow up in our life. I decided that this time we should face that mountain and we should conquer it," he explained.

On the most literal level, *The Mountain* deals with village life and not with Cairo, where Nasr lives. His debut film is also a stylistic departure from Nasr's recent works. In 2012, he made an installation called *The People (El Shaab)*, a series of 25 ceramic figures that were intended to represent the range of Egyptians who protested over a period of 18 days in Tahrir Square in central Cairo in 2011.

Nasr has also made elaborate arabesques and maps using clusters of hundreds of wooden matches, suggesting volatile places that might explode or burn at the slightest disturbance.

In a 2015 show at the Leila Heller Gallery in New York, Nasr showed those match constructions. He also exhibited a map of North Africa and the Middle East, which was a digital rendering of shattered glass that spread like blue veins through those regions.

"Much of Nasr's work is a beautiful manifestation of the quotidian, reflecting the ways that large political events are shaped by and press upon the lives of ordinary people," the art historian Shiva Balaghi wrote when that exhibition opened. Nasr wouldn't dispute that description. "There are social, economic, political matters that I always target in my work," he noted.

The artist was prepared for critics who might fault *The Mountain* for telling a traditional story, a fable, in a traditional form – a short narrative film.

"They can say what they like, they are critics, and that's their job," he said. "The medium is not new, but painting is not new, sculpture is not new. It depends on how you use it and what you are saying with it. It's the message behind it. It fits with what I want to say. I'm fine with it." Only one performer in *The Mountain*, Thersa Goubail, who plays the adult Zein, is a professional actress. Nasr said the rest were chosen from among people whom he knew. "I'd been imagining what each character would look like since I started writing it," he said, "and most of them are artists and friends".

The father, he explained, is played by Mohamed Saleh, "one of the best-known pianists in Egypt", who is also a first-time actor.

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Creating an Egyptian feel for the pavilion was a logistical challenge – the straw was shipped from Egypt.

"I was insisting on bringing a piece of Egypt here, and I wanted to be very honest about it," said Nasr.

"I wasn't going to do it with straw from Italy. I did it exactly the way the farmers from Upper Egypt used to do it, so I got it from there."

The Pavilion of Egypt is the only showcase of an Arab country in the Giardini. Egypt has been there since the 1950s, when Switzerland vacated the structure to build a new building at a site nearby.

Nasr credits Egypt's cultural minister at the time, Tharwat Okasha, with acquiring a permanent cultural venue in the city.

The 12-minute short film could be just the beginning of a new chapter in Nasr's career. "I'll tell you a secret. It was always one of my dreams that one day I would do a feature film," he said, offering no more details.

Nasr dedicated *The Mountain* to his three daughters – "the strongest and most inspiring women in my life".

"I believe that men are the ones who made this problem, and women should be the ones to solve it," he said. "I trust my daughters, and I trust that they are strong enough, and that they've grown up independently."

"Love and hope is what keeps us alive – there's always more to come," he said.

- The Venice Biennale runs until November 26