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Michael von Graffenried holds up a mirror to Cairenes



The rooftop was turned into a makeshift gallery.

By Aida Nassar
The Daily Star Egypt staff

Michael von Graffenried overcame the obstacles of fear — not his — and Egyptians' automatic temptation to self-censor when he was finally able to exhibit his photographic tableaux in the most unconventional gallery: the rooftop of his building.

Dodging the bare clotheslines atop the building some 70 cultural enthusiasts braved last weekend's blistering sandstorm to view von Graffenried's exhibition "Inside Cairo" on the worn walls of the rooftop's small cement huts.

An acclaimed Swiss photographer with a portfolio of photographs from hotspots around the world, von Graffenried is never one to shy away from a challenge.

He is self-taught, and began working as a photographer in 1978. He has been published in many major international magazines and newspapers and has exhibited widely.

But he considers his first Cairo exhibit a success. The venue may have fallen short of his initial expectations, but it was a testimonial to his sheer determination.

After landing in Cairo, von Graffenried spent some time trying to get to know the city.

"[I'm] hungry to know more about human beings all over. I'm like a plant—I plant myself somewhere and allow myself to grow."

Von Graffenried's method is simple. He immerses himself in the city, and tries to capture images of daily life. His camera is unobtrusive, an archaic looking Widelux that uses normal film.

He eased into Cairo, and started by capturing the camel market in Birkash on the outskirts of the city. This made the cut into his final installation with a dynamic image of a Nubian man herding his camels.

He then spent two weeks at the American University in Cairo's campus, or as von Graffen-

ried calls it "compound" alluding to its seclusion from the rest of the city, and photographed the graduation ceremony.

Having gained confidence, von Graffenried ventured further into the city. As he did so, he began to face some resistance.

"I learned how it is in Egypt," von Graffenried told The Daily Star Egypt.

"I learned fear. I learned the hypocrisy."

Accompanied by a friend, von Graffenried jumped over the fence of Al Azhar University, and took two photos before he was apprehended by security.

He was informed that he needed authorization to photograph in the area, and was pointed in the direction of the Television and Radio Building in Maspero.

There he was introduced to the infamous Egyptian bureaucracy. He explained that he wanted to capture more than the tourist sites, and wanted access to the inner sanctum of Al Azhar University. It took one month for the authorization to come through.

Von Graffenried was also surprised by the reaction he got from Egyptians, particularly those who have viewed his large photographs. When he shared an image of a local bearded butcher, he was asked why he wanted to take a photograph of a terrorist.

"The picture says more about the person looking at it than the photographer," von Graffenried argued. An aver-

age butcher was perceived as a terrorist. Would he have gotten the same reaction had the butcher been clean-shaven? Probably not.

Von Graffenried's images are evocative. Their large format draws the viewer in. But not everybody agrees with his perspective.

Hamdy Reda, founder of the Artellewa gallery, and a previous participant of the Prohelvetia cultural exchange, had initially considered displaying Von Graffenried's installations, but later declined.

"I didn't like the photographs he took of Cairo," Reda told The Daily Star Egypt. He felt that von Graffenried had come to Egypt with preconceptions, and had searched for photos that matched his presumptions.

"He didn't make an effort to really get to know Egypt."

"His photographs might have upset the people," Reda explains. "[Our] mission is to bring people closer to art, not to make them afraid."

Von Graffenried understands Artellewa's decision, and even agrees that his work might not be the most suitable for the small gallery in the slum area of Ard El Lewa. But he doesn't understand the reaction to his photos.

Von Graffenried tested a printer for his large format images with the photo of the camel souq. Satisfied with the quality, he returned with the rest of his photographs. The supplier refused to print them. They felt that his photos were considered press material, and therefore were subject to censorship.

"Don't you recognize your city?" von Graffenried admonished. "You see what you like to see, and eradicate what you don't like to see."

True, Cairenes might have become blasé about the grime and grit of the city. But it's not simply a matter of turning a blind eye; it's also a matter of feeling that we're constantly being misunderstood.

There's more to Cairo than the mounting piles of garbage, riot police, and religious "extremism." The images that von Graffenried feels depict the character of the city, might be viewed by some as a form of criticism.

"I show the reality of today. We live in a century where reality is not popular anymore." He feels his photos help people to begin to accept the reality that surrounds them.

So why did the bawab and his family agree to exhibit his photos on their rooftop? "We always have artists coming and going here, he [von Graffenried] was the first to visit the rooftop," explains Hisham Gomaa. "We were comfortable with him."

His elderly father seated on the straw mat on the floor is quick to point out that his favorite photo was of the camel souq, and, Gomaa adds, the one of the men prying at the gas stations. The others, they felt, were ordinary.

Gomaa relates this story as von Graffenried signs the large portrait he took of their family. The photograph is larger than their room, so it's no surprise that they plan to send it back

home to their family in Aswan. But even the modest rooftop-cum-gallery had its share of problems. The strong sandstorm blew in a man who became the self-appointed censor.

A cameraman from Swiss television — here to film von Graffenried's exhibit — captured the man removing all the flyers and invitations from the building's entrance on film.

The elevator to the roof suddenly (and according to von Graffenried, suspiciously) stopped working. Finally a LE 100 tip ensured that there were no more snags.

After viewing von Graffenried's photos, author of the best-selling novel, "The Yacoubian Building," Alaa Al Aswany said "The artist is gifted

with an eye that picks up all that is significant and dramatic in our daily life; and his photos reflect a life that is similar to our life but more vivid, profound and beautiful. His vision is his, you don't have to agree with it, but you definitely will appreciate it."

Despite the resistance he has faced, von Graffenried plans to come back. "Many people say I like to go back to the scene of the crime," he joked.

Von Graffenried had held exhibitions on Sudan and Algeria. His photographs are held in several permanent museum collections. He published many books, among them: "Sudan. The Forgotten War" (1995), "Naked in Paradise" (1997) and "Inside Algeria" (1998).



The people of Aswan living on rooftop of Downtown building.



Friday prayer at a gas station in Downtown Cairo.



A bearded man sells meat on the market.



Riot police is closing access to Al Azhar Mosque on Friday, Feb. 9



Camel market.



Girl imitating the photographer in Zebellin area, where Christians recycle the collected garbage.