

## Lara Baladi: Diary of The Future

To those familiar, the latest work of artist Lara Baladi may come as a surprise. The pieces are large, as her work always is. They are intricate, which is expected. And they are detailed, which is her norm. But for this Egyptian-Lebanese artist who is best known for photographic montages that are striking in the boldness of their colour and the freedom of a mischief and whimsicality that runs through weavings that borrow in iconographic collages from fable and pop culture, her latest work seems to have fallen off the map. For the first time in her artistic repertoire, the colour is gone.

*Diary of The Future* appears to be a departure in many ways for this Beirut-born, Paris-educated, London-trained, Cairo-based artist. Less in terms of technique, but certainly in terms of perspective. Before even taking the time to examine the facts, we can see that in this work an artist perhaps older, certainly more muted, has emerged, her palette having steered away from the fancies of youth, and towards the sepia tones that intimate age and time. An artist perhaps more conscious of mortality, more attuned to time passing, more afflicted by loss.

*Diary of the Future* is indeed that. A diary and record of perhaps one of the most difficult times in this young artist's life. In the summer of 2007, Baladi's parents returned to Cairo from Paris after 50 years of living abroad. Baladi's father, Ramez, had been afflicted with lung cancer, and he had come back home, to Cairo, to die. For six months his daughter was by his side, and in an intimate space where family and friends gathered until that day, in January 2008, when goodbyes were said, a ritual of Turkish coffee cup reading was established in the space.

"We sensed this was the final period of my father's life, and I had an understanding that this needed to be collected and documented in a way that wasn't about the loss of self," Baladi explains. "The drinking and reading of the Turkish coffee cups was already a Sunday ritual

in the house, but I consciously instituted it as a regular, daily, routine. In the months that followed, I would ask every person who visited my father to drink a coffee. They followed my instructions religiously, drank, turned the cup upside down, turned it round 3 times in the saucer and tapped the top twice."

The read cups and their saucers were then photographed, labeled with name and date, and archived. For how long this would go on, nobody knew, but Baladi had found purpose amidst the harrows of the time, and for everyone at these gatherings, the readings and the ritual took on new dimension – offering focus beyond the here and now. "It offered a deviation in many ways," says Baladi. "And it was a way of looking beyond the inevitable, and to the future."

It was, in that moment of focus, a meditative space that transcended the reality of death in the air, and that surmounted the presence of sadness. It was a mechanism in many ways – an artist's tool not of dealing with the imminent coming of grievance, but of examining how to transcend loss in the lives of destinies that were destined themselves with longevity of a different kind.

The result of the six-month period that extended itself from August until January, now two years back, is a work that reflects the equal strength and fragility that allowed a daughter to find focus during a time of great pain, and to find beginnings despite an end. The work, still unfolding, and which currently comprises the ensemble *La Mere Noire*, *Chronologie*, *Rose*, *Relative Destinies*, *The Eye of Adam* and *Fragments*, tells of a layered story of fate that explores time, memory, tradition and language, and the overlapping zephyrs of destinies that form the tapestries of individual lives, meeting and departing, and of meaning sought, lost, and found again.

In *Rose*, *La Mere Noire*, and *The Eye of Adam*, lace-like montages of read cups form an elaborate braiding of lives, strung together with remaining grains of coffee, laced with the shadows of memory of times shared and destinies met. The strands of these lives connected are woven with equal symmetry and complexity to form the outlines of traditional doilies – the very kind on which,

once, those same cups were placed, in the house where her father was, on the table around which everyone gathered. Together the pieces map a narrative of passing moments that, forever, have connected lives to a life now passed. They speak of Baladi and her relationship with those closest to her, in this space in which many other lives came to cross as well. They illuminate on the matrix of life, on the mystifying patterns of existence, and on the reality of order and reason amidst the tides of change.

The doilies stand out not just for the delicacy of their work, but for the very beauty of a complex web that from the distance of perspective offers us that of our very own about the patterns of life. Here, in these works, we are reminded of the power of the forces of life that carry us in ways we would never imagine, and we are given glimpse of an artist who appears to have found reason, through it all, of picking up her broken pieces, and moving forward and on.

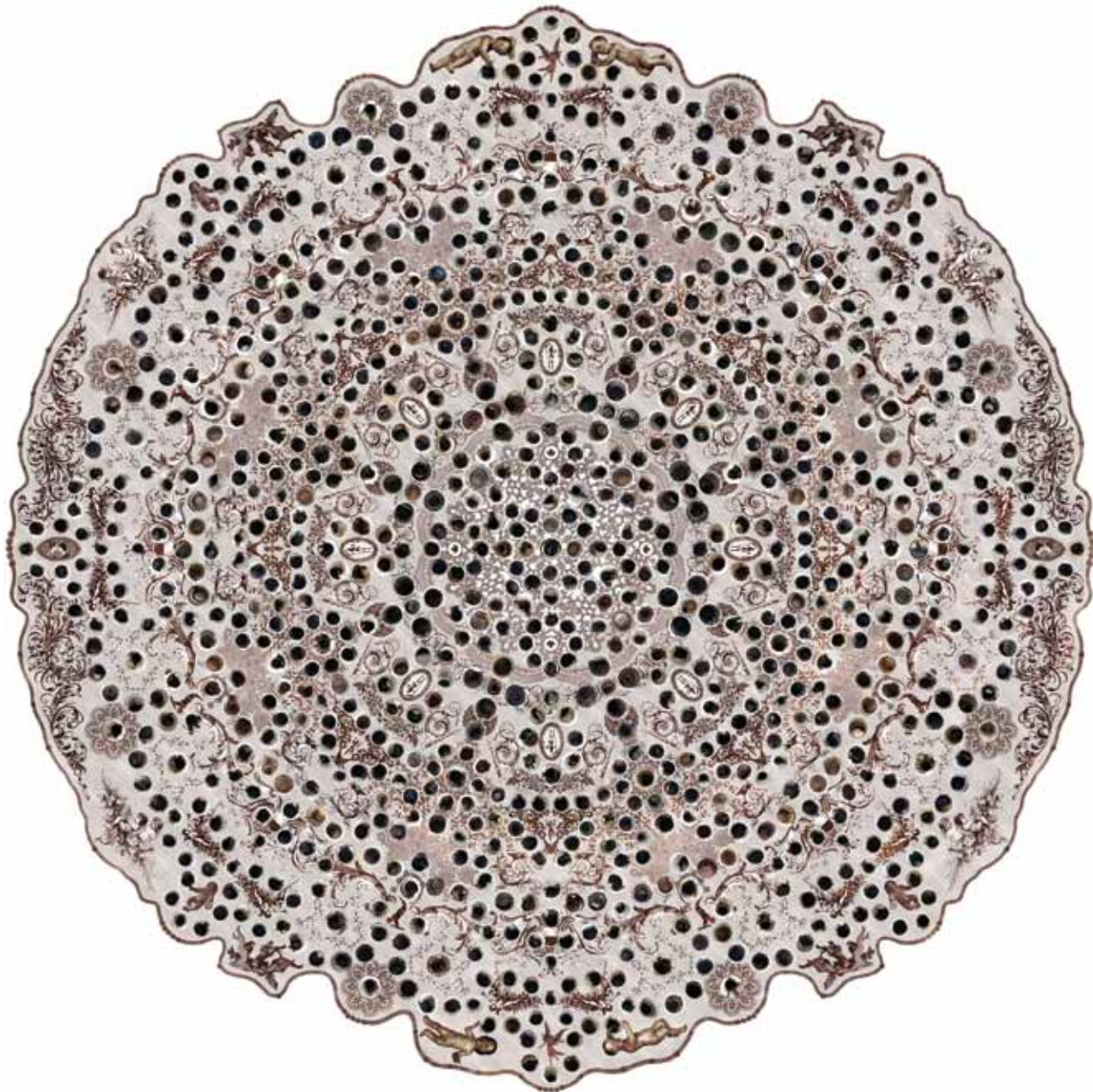
In many ways *Chronologie* and *Relative Destinies* offer us a backdrop. Through the nearly ten-by-two and four-by-two metre walls of photographs of the hundreds of read and archived coffee cups themselves, we are given a sense

in some overpowering sliver of a way of the sensation of being consumed – by a room, by a time, by a vacuum of existence with no seeming marks or measure of time or end. The scale of the coffee cups, the depth of their patterns, the darkness of their grains, the sensation of an infiniteness to their repetition, gives *Chronologie* and *Relative Destinies* different dimension, speaking as much to the very chronology of the unknown as it does to the fragmented narrative of individual destinies in transformation. Reminding us of the solitary stories that form the lattices of life, Baladi offers through this piece a prospect that in many ways frames, supports, and acts as a powerful vista to this body of work. And then doing as she does with all her montages, she fills the gaps by infusing the space, with *Fragments*. This, *Fragments*, is a 5-track sound piece written by Baladi, composed by Nathaniel Robin Mann, and edited from fortuneteller Nina's interpretation of the cups, which were themselves re-read through the photographs four months after the six months had met their end. Over thirteen minutes, the story behind the abstract image surfaces are explained, revealing with narrative progression how the family and friends were relating to the approaching death, and to fluxes of loss and hope, faith and despair.



*The Eye of Adam*  
Digital collage. Permanent pigment print on somerset paper or gesso, 120 x 65 cm. 2010.





*Rose*  
Digital collage. Permanent pigment print on somerset paper or gesso, 410 x 410 cm. 2010.

As a whole, this work forms a labyrinth of ideas and issues and tangible realities that have somehow come together in *Diary of the Future* to form an art work that is as hopeful as it is wrenching. Baladi has once again skillfully woven the fragmented moments of day-to-day into a fluid artistic continuum that illuminates on the fleeting moments in the passage of time, and on those same moments that remain, engraved, engrained, documented, beyond the scope of our possible imaginations into paradigms infinite and divine. Like her previous works, *Diary of the Future* resonates in its use of visual references and spiritual leanings, as well as in the technical and conceptual knitting of elements accumulated, interpreted, and then re-interpreted

again. Together these mediate Baladi's ideas, merging imagination and reality to speak of matters as pertinent personally as they are on a level of discourse that extends beyond the bounds of the creative industries and into spheres of humanity in the broader public domain. In *Diary of the Future* we are brought closer to an artist who has in the past seemed far away. We are given glimpse of a shielded paradigm of her life, and offered entrée into the very core of the being who has played with such free-spirit in the past. We are offered through this work the wisdom of an artist broken by life who has found a way of persevering on, and we are reminded that there is in fact a way for life after every loss. Through Baladi, we are reminded of the beginning to every end.



*Chronology*  
Detail. 14 permanent pigment prints on somerset or gesso, 980 x 220 cm. 2008.



*Relative Destinies*  
Detail. 12 permanent pigment prints on somerset paper or gesso, 440 x 420 cm.  
2008.



View from *The Good Old Days*, curated by Clare Butcher, Aarhus Museum, Denmark. Photo by Jens. 2010.



