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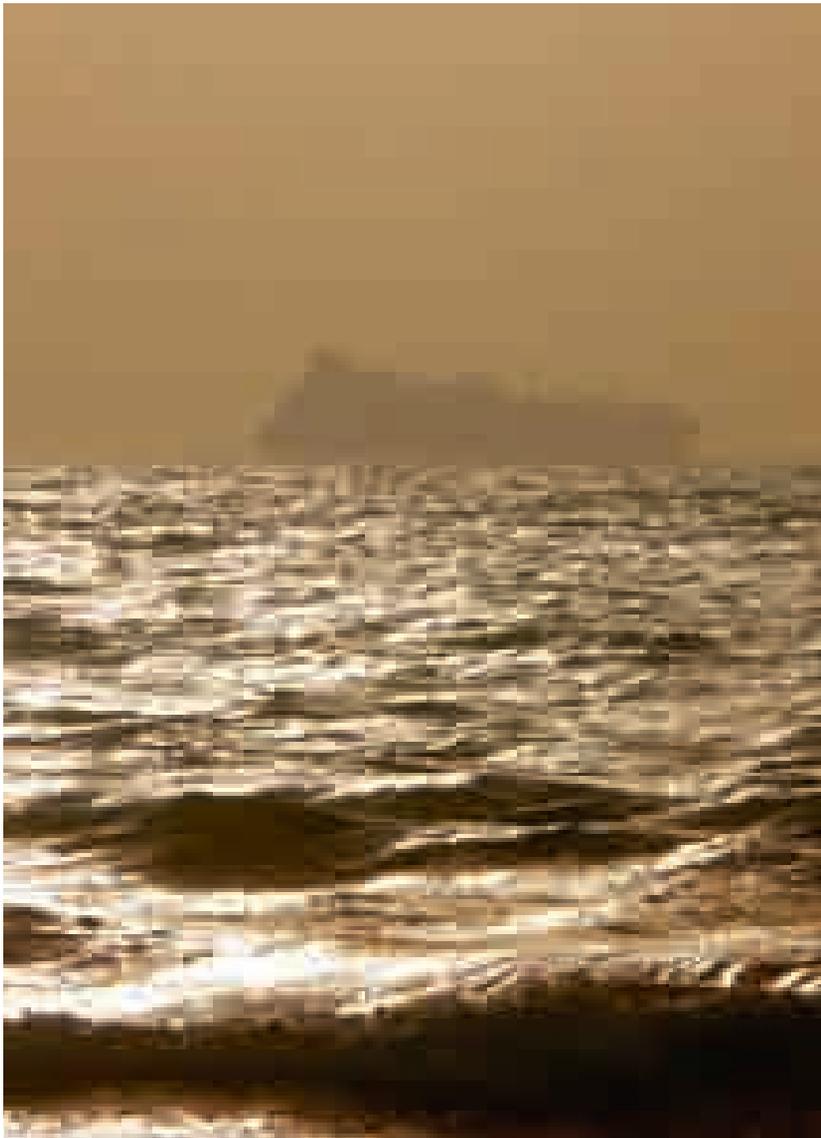


NEW DELHI



SHANGHAI

Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council, maintains a global network of branch offices, which serve cultural exchange with Switzerland and support worldwide cultural contact.



Searching for freighters from the Six-Day War:
from the series *The Bitterlake Chronicles* by Uriel Orlow (detail).

Hallucinating by the Suez Canal



CAIRO

Uriel Orlow, a Swiss artist based in London, is drawn to the places where world history unfolds beyond the limelight. He has found one in Egypt, where he went in search of freighters run aground during the Six-Day War.

By *Lilo Weber*, London – When Israeli fighter jets attacked Egyptian airfields on 5 July 1967, triggering the Six-Day War, 14 cargo ships under the flags of eight nations were headed north on the Suez Canal. Theirs was to be a long journey. The freighters were ordered to halt on the Great Bitter Lake, the salt-water basin between the northern and southern arms of the canal that serves ships as a lay-by. For the 14 freighters it was to become a prison when



The ship's crewmen pass their time lifting weights: from the installation *The Short and the Long of It*.

the Suez Canal was subsequently closed for eight years. The passage between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean was not re-opened until 1975, following a second conflict.

This is the stuff that Uriel Orlow's art is made of. The London-based Swiss artist is fascinated by events that play out, as he says, "in the shadow of world history", in which he sees great potential for artistic and representational purposes. His previous installation, "Remnants of the Future" (2010), drew on his research in a ghost town in northern Armenia. The town had been established under Mikhail Gorbachev, but remained unfinished following the collapse of the Soviet Union. For his latest work, "The Short and the Long of It", Orlow traveled to Egypt and spent time on the Suez Canal. He can no longer recall when he first heard about the ships on the Bitter Lakes. Most probably it was the postage stamps that alerted him to the story.

Ships stranded in space and time

When it became clear that the ships were to remain stranded for an indefinite (read: very long) time, their crews set about organizing themselves. They founded the Great Bitter Lake Association, shared victuals taken from their cargo, and helped each other with maintenance work. And, since they were essentially administering their own territory, they printed postage stamps, which were to become collector's items throughout the world.

The ships had come from Germany, England, France, the USA, Sweden, Bulgaria, Poland and Czechoslovakia – in other words, from both sides of the Iron Curtain. "The conflict in the Middle East was actually war by proxy," says Uriel Orlow, "an extension of the Cold War. The USA was on the side of the Israelis, while the Soviet Union was allied with Nasser. And the people from both sides, who were caught in the middle of the conflict, came together to form a community. Life-long friendships were established." Orlow names the "Yellow Fleet" – so-called because the desert sand eventually drifted across the ships' decks – an "island of peace". He interprets it as a heterotopia in Foucault's sense of the term: a site existent in reality and yet excluded from society, in which that very society's ideals and utopias come to life.



Uriel Orlow is fascinated by events that play out in the shadow of history.

As we know, the conflict in the Middle East continued, time passed, the crews were regularly relieved – and the ships remained in their moorings. Those doing their service there had to find a way to pass the time. In the film that Orlow shows as part of his installation "The Short and the Long of It" in the exhibition *Hydrarchy: Power & Resistance at Sea* at London's Gasworks Gallery, the men can be seen engaging in sack races and weightlifting. They organized a range of competitions and, during the Mexican Olympiad, held their own parallel Olympic Games.

Evoking the past with images

Today these images have begun to merge together. In Orlow's work we see men drinking aboard a ship, a boy fishing bottles out of the water, then the artist gazing out to sea, where a ship materializes out of the haze as a *fata morgana* from the past. Orlow spoke to seamen in Hamburg who had been stationed during those years on the Great Bitter Lake. And realized immediately that he had to go there himself. He wanted to see the place and speak to people who remembered those days. He applied for a Pro Helvetia residency in Cairo and embarked on an intensive course in Arabic. "It was obvious to me that I would get nowhere without a knowledge of the language" – or local assistance. From January to April of 2010 he was in residence in Cairo, then again in April of this year, and had already begun to show the results of his research in Berlin and London as early as November of 2010.

He was aided by an Egyptian filmmaker, who negotiated for him. "That was crucial, since so much depended on having the right connections." The two men took up residence in the fishing village of Fayid on the shore of the Great Bitter Lake, but filming and taking photographs turned out to be difficult, since the area is still a military zone.

Collecting material, talking to eyewitnesses, listening to their memories, getting his own impressions of the site: to this extent Orlow's work resembles that of a historian or reporter. He himself, however, does not see what he does as historiography,

but rather as art. He does not want to give an account, whether in the narrative or historical sense; instead, he aims to conjure up the past in images. “The evocation is intended to make palpable once more something that is no longer there. It’s a sort of hallucination.” He speaks of the “politics of the image” and its use in a critique of traditional historiography. “How do we deal with history? What is handed down? And why are certain events hushed up, or treated at best in a footnote?”

His work onsite was essential. He went in search of traces and memories, spoke to villagers, and spent many days observing the ships from the shores of the canal, which he calls “hallucinating *in situ*”. Then he set about organizing the images. He has laid out some of them on a table at London’s Gasworks, and hung others on the wall: photographs, postage stamps and drawings of fish. A video marries the old and the new, yesterday and today, footage shot by the seamen and by the artist. It isn’t always clear what goes where – which is part of the installation’s hallucinatory effect. Accompanying the film is a slide-show with intertitles, recalling events, films and songs from the eight years in which the ships were stranded: *Jaws*, student unrest in Paris, “Give Peace a Chance”. A chronology of events, however, is nowhere to be found. Nor do text and image ever accord more than coincidentally. The meaning of the installation is a function of the whole, of this landscape of images, reports, phrases and associations.

The exhibition *The Short and the Long of It* can be seen in August at La Rada, Locarno, and from October to November at the FRAC Aquitaine in Bordeaux. www.urielorlow.net and www.prohelvetia.org.eg

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Translated from the German by Rafaël Newman

Objects That Testify to Human Creativity



ROME

The 51 objects currently on display at the Istituto Svizzero in Rome reveal far more than the history of design. The encounter with simple, black, square objects of everyday use explained by Munich designer Konstantin Grcic becomes a voyage of discovery of human creativity.



The exhibition examines the use of the black square in objects of contemporary design. Shown here: cast-iron Tetsubin teapot.

By *Eva Clausen*, Rome – Design is the creation of form, conscious shaping. The square is the quintessence of that which is shaped by the human mind and hand, because there is nothing comparable in nature. Other forms have correspondences and parallels in the natural world – but not the square. It is a milestone, if not the cornerstone of humankind, of civilization per se. According to designer Konstantin Grcic, it is the embodiment of the artificial, in the positive sense of the term. It signifies the

rational, creative emancipation of human beings from their fate, a Promethean act of geometrical precision. Design is the youngest of the arts, and there is some hesitation about admitting it to full artistic status – but there can be no doubt about the primacy of artifice in design. So Grcic’s scrutiny of design objects is not only a professional response. The specific fascination of the exhibition is that he allows these objects their role as design, primarily their functionality, while at the same time pre-