SHERIN GUIRGUIS

Of Thorns and Love

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My Place is the Placeless [installation view], 2017
Courtesy of the artist / Photo: Panic Studio LA

Map of Azbakeya Gardens in Cairo, 1897

From the book *Le parc public de l'Ezbekieh au Caire (1897)* by Gustave Delchevalerie.

House Arrest

ANDY CAMPBELL

To philosophize one must first live; but only living would be insufficient. It is indispensable to turn inward and consider the living being that one is.

- Doria Shafik[1]

What happens to a public life when it is contained? And how to sum up that life, before the containment and after? Searching, interior, liberated, depressed, and alone. During the nearly twenty years she spent under house arrest in Cairo, the feminist publisher, philosopher, activist, and poet Doria Shafik (1908–1975) attempted to write her life's story twice over. These texts were never published, joining a 1956 attempt written at the request of a U.S. magazine publisher in the dustbin of history. For Shafik, writing an autobiography represented nothing less than the "very conquest of my being," in a life she considered "a series of incessant combats."[2] The remnants of these auto-biographical attempts were gathered (along with letters, poetry, and other personal effects) and placed in a series of suitcases, then transferred into the custody of her daughter before Shafik ceremoniously took her own life by stepping off the balcony of her sixth-floor apartment.

That is a particularly tough sentence to write, and also, I imagine, to read. If Shafik were my mother I would not want this last fact about her life to overshadow her accomplishments. And yet this difficult, troubling fact is important precisely because it is an outcome of the carceral technology known as "house arrest." Shafik was given this sentence in 1957 for her open criticism of the mounting authoritarian regime of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970). He responded, in turn, by disappearing her name from all press, banning her protesting and performative body from public life, and depriving her of her connections to an array of international contacts built up over decades of publishing, speaking, and organizing.

What, then, is left? Poetry.

Lili'uokalani. Bao Tong. Zhao Ziyang. Mehdi Karroubi. Aung San Suu Kyi. Imran Khan. Jiang Yanyong. Andrei Sakharov. Mir Hossein Mousavi. Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu. Iryna Khalip. Liu Xiaobo. Ibn al-Haytham. Galileo Galilei. Jafar Panahi. Qazhyghumar Shabdan.

Sherin Guirguis, an artist living and working in Los Angeles, has picked up the threads and poetry of Shafik's life, transforming her meticulous research into an interlocking installation of paintings (large and small), free-standing sculptures, and an adobe structure in the center of the gallery. At first it may be hard to tell whether there is even a person at the center of Guirguis's artistic inquiry, as many of the objects she produces appear to be merely ornamental or decorative. Cut paper, gold leaf, and thinning branches of colored inks are mainstays in this work, and

often evoke *mashrabiyas* (lattice-work privacy screens) or gates, both architectural features that demarcate public and private realms.

Guirguis's research into the life and experiences of Shafik is an expansion upon previous bodies of work, which address other innovative and politicized historical personalities. This includes a look at the political legacy of another, older Egyptian feminist, Huda Shaarawi (1879–1947), who was a heroine of Shafik's as well as her earliest benefactor and supporter. Other works, especially the site-specific adobe sculpture *One I Call* (2017), are informed by the architectural innovations and populist futurism of Iranian-born architect Nader Khalili (1936–2008).[3]

It is not merely coincidental or cultural that Shaarawi, Khalili, and Shafik shared an interest in poetry. Shaarawi and Shafik wrote poetry, and Khalili spent years translating the work of Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207–1273), better known as Rumi. Art and poetry have long been likened to one another, or at least put into dynamic relation. Each is a conjuring of the world, a refashioning of the world's component parts into new and profound eruptions of meaning.

"Poetry is not a luxury," Audre Lorde concisely argued. It "is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives."[4] In her work for the exhibition *Of Thorns and Love*, Guirguis provides the inverse of this axiom, pointing out how architecture can be the skeleton of a life of poetry. Each of Guirguis's works in this exhibition references an aspect of the Cairene architectural milieu that supported and defined Shafik's life—from the gates of the Egyptian Parliament building that Shafik stormed with hundreds of women in 1951 to demand women's suffrage, to the landscape architecture surrounding the Azbakeya Theatre, where she gave one of her first public addresses. In the case of the latter, only the fence *(soor el-Azbakeya)* of the elaborate garden designed in the 1870s by Jean-Pierre Barillet-Deschamps (at the behest of the viceroy of Egypt) still remains.[5] Today, it is a used book market; and one can still find there, sometimes, worn copies of the magazines Shafik used to edit. The Azbakeya fence's design bespeaks a particular colonial confluence and chain of translation. Its abstracted papyri and lotus finial designs are the products of the desires, on the one hand, of colonial Egyptian government officials to mimic the garden designs popular in the metropole, and, on the other hand, France's fascination—appropriately dubbed *égyptomanie* (Egyptomania)—with the monuments, landscape, and, above all, the picturesque, exoticized projections of Egypt's peoples, since the first Napoleonic survey campaign was conducted at the turn of the nineteenth century. Essentially, the Azbakeya fence is a French translation of ancient Egyptian visual motifs, which are then sited back in Egypt.

Guirguis's citation of the Azbakeya fence in her large cut paper works is both an acknowledgement of the power of site as well as an exploration of the enduring legacy of this historical and asymmetrical colonial relationship. The Azbakeya fence and the gates of Parliament are containment structures ornamented with fantasies of an Orientalized East. Such fences keep out and they keep in, and in this respect Guirguis sees the gates and fences of Cairo as a metaphor for Shafik, whose "work was just as important in its outward-facing mission and trajectory as its inward-facing

Bint al-Nil magazine, published May 1953

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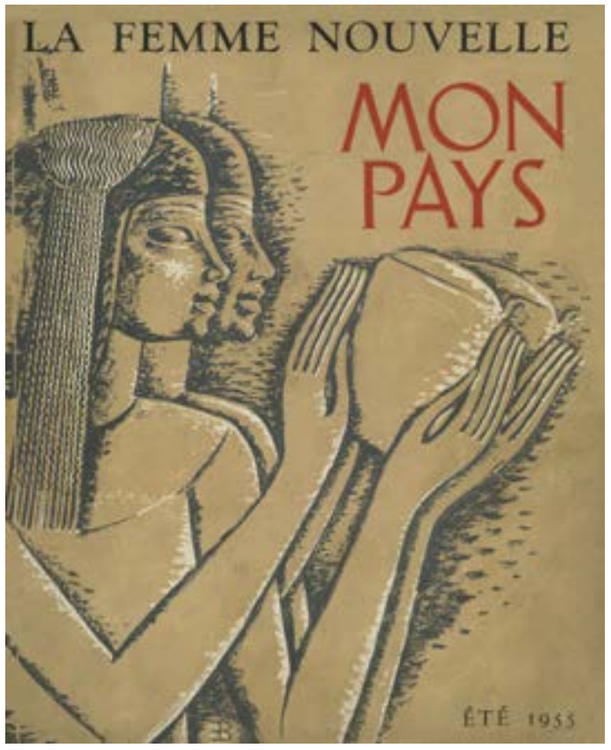

La Femme Nouvelle, published Summer 1955

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mission."[6] For this dichotomy Shafik was both loved and reviled. While she was lauded as a young woman for representing her country *vis-à-vis* her matriculation to Paris's Sorbonne (where she earned her baccalaureate and doctorate degrees), she was later criticized for similar reasons, as she travelled the world giving lectures on the state of women's rights and Egyptian politics.

This split is nowhere more apparent than the two magazines she edited—*La Femme Nouvelle*, a magazine published in French and English bearing the royal seal of Princess Chevikar and, eventually, Princess Faiza, and *Bint al-Nil*, Shafik's own magazine published in Arabic. *Bint al-Nil* translates to "Daughter of the Nile," and Shafik also used the evocative phrase as the name for the political party she later founded, dedicated to women's suffrage. As German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has argued regarding eighteenth century Europe, newspapers and magazines were key institutions in solidifying a growing bourgeois public's sense of itself—providing a potentially important opportunity to counterbalance monarchical power.[7] But *La Femme Nouvelle* was, in many respects, an extension of monarchical power; it was filled with advertisements and articles extolling the architecture, urban planning, and the cultural scene in Egypt. The publication rarely carried content that was expressly political, and was never critical of the regime. Upon first glance, *Bint al-Nil* (founded some years after Shafik left her post at *La Femme Nouvelle*) would seem to be no different, with its covers full of smiling and fashionable young women. Yet inside its covers Shafik wrote articles and editorials that called upon her readership to demand equal rights for women—to demand access to education and resources. It was this confluence of fashion and politics that most angered her critics, and won her many supporters.

For conservatives in Egypt, Shafik was a firebrand and a Western colonial sympathizer because her demands for women's rights supposedly ran counter to Islamic diktat (never mind that her claims were based on a careful and studious reading of the Quran and Sharia law). For leftist groups, Shafik was not radical *enough*, and her enframing of women's issues within a cosmopolitan lifestyle betrayed a sincere class politics that might liberate all of Egypt.

Gender also mattered a great deal in how political opponents perceived and represented Shafik. An unsurprisingly familiar refrain: Shafik's efforts were dismissed, by both male and female commentators, as exercises in self-service, a paean to her carefully plucked eyebrows and European fashion sense. One newspaper column pronounced that Shafik was "motivated purely by the desire to gain personal publicity rather than to redress any serious social problems"; she was mocked as the "Leader of Candied Chestnuts," a "lady of the salon," and as insincere about the liberation of women.[8] Upon getting her doctorate from the Sorbonne, a critic questioned whether "the award was due more to her feminine charm than to any scholarly merit."[9] Her association with her husband, who was a lawyer connected to the Wafdist government, and her early ties to the palace did not help, giving her the appearance of being "too bourgeois to be taken seriously" for some left-leaning critics.[10]

Yet Shafik was more complex than any of these critiques allow—for while she was no doubt inspired by the demands for women's suffrage central to Western feminist movements, she patterned her politics after Huda Shaarawi, an *Egyptian* feminist. And while it is true her fashion tended towards the *haute* bourgeois, she spearheaded several political efforts, including an inter-class literacy campaign, designed to address poverty and gendered oppression. In short, Shafik simultaneously bore the many burdens of Egypt's colonial and postcolonial realities alongside the politics of being a woman in politics.

Guirguis's work, then, brings together these parts of Shafik's life, representing the political forces that shaped Shafik and that she shaped in return, through design and pattern. In using the Azbakeya fence as a mnemonic for such tensions, Guirguis insists on the exigency of metaphor to capaciously relate all the complexity that Shafik's critics closed off. Shafik was a public figure, until she wasn't. And this split—a rift between the known and the unknowable—is hinted at in the cut paper works on display in *Of Thorns and Love*. Guirguis paints the backsides of these works vibrant fluorescent yellows—so that they appear to glow from within.

Bernie Madoff. Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Raj Rajaratnam. Diana Brooks. Martha Stewart. John G. Rowland. Boaz Yona.

Opening *Of Thorns and Love* is a large blue-and-gold wall mural, with arching catenary forms and stick-like staccato rays.

Bint al-Nil [detail], 2018

Courtesy of the artist / Photo: Panic Studio LA

The artist has based this design on the visual iconography of Nut, ancient Egyptian goddess of the sky, who spreads her starry body over the heavens to block the rays of Ra, the sun god. Egyptian art history was an enduring interest for Shafik; when she was studying for her doctorate in France she wrote two theses: one about Islam and women, and the other concerning ancient Egyptian art. Her idiosyncratic understanding of her own visual cultural heritage can perhaps best be summed up in her thesis title, "*L'Art pour l'art dans l'Égypte antique*" ("art for art's sake in ancient Egypt").[11] Of course, Egyptian art was not simply autotelic (complete within itself), but was a complex system of signification. What Shafik's enframing of Egyptian art as "art for art's sake" reveals is her desire to apply modernist French notions of art's autonomy to her own cultural milieu, bringing the two into much closer contact than either French or Egyptian art history might necessarily allow. One supposes this might be to give Egyptian art a kind of credibility within modernist European artistic discourse that otherwise slots ancient art from Africa under the disciplines of anthropology or archaeology. And this is not the only example where Shafik's love of French culture and modernist ideas melds with long-held symbols of Egyptian art and cultural heritage.

Shafik was always searching for answers, and her poetry professes to this fact; in her poems, which are almost exclusively written in French, she consistently invokes Romantic and modernist notions of the Absolute, Beauty, the Heart, and her favorite geographical feature-cum-metaphor for the life that courses through bodies, cities, and souls . . . the Nile. In using the Nile as a geographical and spiritual center, Shafik reorients some of the hallmarks of modernist poetry. A poem, posthumously published, succinctly draws these concerns together:

CAPTER L'INFINI	(CAPTURE THE INFINITE
O Nil!	O Nile!
Incarnation d'ABSOLU	Incarnation of the ABSOLUTE
ta vue	your view
m'illumine le coeur! . . .	illuminates my heart! . . .)

While the poem begins with an invocation to the Nile, it ends, not with a word, but with an ellipsis. Such punctuation signals a trailing off . . . a pause . . . or a stunned silence. Perhaps, for Shafik, the Nile engendered all three. The sculptures in *Of Thorns and Love* are similar in this regard, their bombastic shapes evocative of explosions and cartoonish geometry. Yet their forms are derived from the negative spaces found in Guirguis's previous *mashrabiya* cut paper works dedicated to Huda Shaarawi. Appearing as totems, Guirguis's sculptures point to negative space as an integral part of pattern and design, similar to the way that the application of bright color to the reverse side of her cut paper works suggests an interior world. Sited within the larger exhibition, these sculptural elements interrupt the sensuous ornamentation of the paper works, suggesting to a viewer how space structures feeling, and feeling structures space.

Lindsay Lohan. Lauryn Hill. Paris Hilton. Dr. Dre. Meek Mill. T.I. Michael Vick. Robert Downey, Jr. Bobby Brown. Roman Polanski. Lil' Kim. Andy Dick.

To date, only one biography has been written about Shafik's life, by the American anthropologist Cynthia Nelson. Having accepted a teaching position at The American University in Cairo (AUC) in 1963, Nelson's time in Egypt overlapped with Shafik's final years, yet Nelson doesn't give any indication in her book that she ever met Shafik in person. This makes sense, as Shafik's isolation was so entrenched by the early 1960s that it wasn't until her death that Egyptian and international newspapers broke their silence and remarked on her incredible life. For Nelson, researching and writing about Shafik served as a logical extension of her subject's political aspirations. Speaking to the senior librarian and archivist at AUC, Nelson mused about her biography of Shafik, "It turned out to be [. . .] that young students at AUC, upon reading it, said we never realized we had such women [. . .] In a sense it's kind of an interesting process of being able to, I guess be an intellectual midwife."[12]

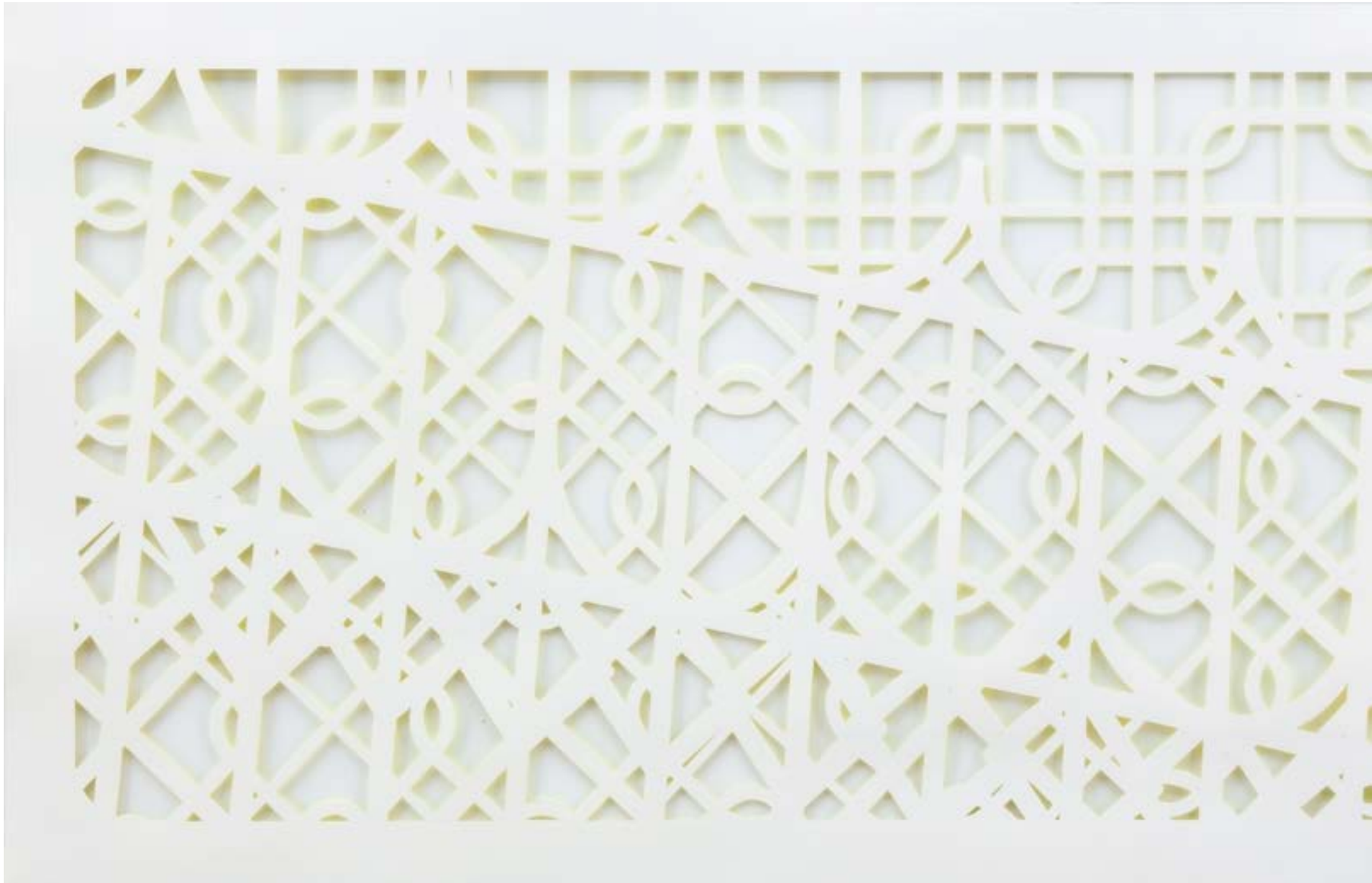
Education, literacy, the vote, parliamentary representation—these were the motivating forces of Shafik's feminism, and anyone who continues to write and agitate about these things falls under her penumbra, whether they care to admit it or not. Just as Nelson

served as an "intellectual midwife" for Doria Shafik, the political efforts of Shafik were an extension of those of her mentor Huda Shaarawi. Born into a harem, Shaarawi is perhaps most famous for removing her face veil in the Cairo train station in 1923. In this and other political gestures, Shaarawi's activist work was, in many ways, a prototype for Shafik. For example, in 1910 Shaarawi founded a girls' school that taught academic subjects, countering the status quo of women's education, which was the privileging of the domestic above all else. Shaarawi also founded multiple feminist groups, including the Egyptian Feminist Union, and later, the Arab Feminist Union, both of which published magazines. Shafik's political activities encompassed literacy campaigns and founding a feminist group/ political party of her own. Suffrage was the central concern for Shafik, and gaining women's participation in the political sphere was a structuring force in her life.

When Shafik went on hunger strike in 1957, her second such public act, Nasser's regime had already taken political control of Egypt. Nasser's political opponents were being disappeared, and although Shafik tried to warn her fellow Egyptians about the potential danger of Nasser's rule, her protest actions and writings ultimately fell upon deaf ears. Shortly after her failed hunger strike, Shafik was put under house arrest.

Pol Pot. Augusto Pinochet. Robert Mugabe. Miguel Etchecolatz. Efraín Ríos Montt. Kamuzu Banda. Reynaldo Bignone. William Calley. Oscar Pistorius. Adriano Sofri.

House arrest, as a punishment, exists on the carceral spectrum between prison and exile. Its power resides in its transformative capacities to fashion home into a cage. People all over the world are put under house



Azbakeya (with a little more love) [detail], 2018
Courtesy of the artist / Photo: Panic Studio LA

arrest for myriad reasons. Sometimes, as in the case of Doria Shafik, house arrest is a political strategy meant to deprive a political agitator of the necessary oxygen of publicity. The punishment is also common with white-collar crime, such as bank fraud, where the infraction is so nebulously understood that the economic and symbolic violence enacted by perpetrators is not seen as coeval to physical harm or violence, and thus undeserving of confinement in a prison. Sometimes the convicted person is just too famous, and seemingly above anything as base as jail time. In other instances a person's crimes are so great in magnitude, such as genocide or massacre, that a punishment is equally incomprehensible. Throughout this essay I have listed those who fall into these categorical distinctions.

Once Doria Shafik was put under house arrest, her world became very small . . . physically, socially, and psychologically. Nasser made it illegal to mention her name in the papers, and this enforced public amnesia had its intended punitive effect. In the yawning gap between her former life and her new reality, Shafik took up the study of foreign languages, continued to write poetry, played bridge, and visited with close family. But these activities are not comparable to organizing, publishing, and agitating—activities that connect the self directly, temporally, to the performance of politics and nation. Doria might have survived house arrest, sure, supposing she would have been released . . . eventually. But would she have *lived*?

What retreat is left when isolation is an enforced reality?

In ancient Egyptian culture, a person dies more than once. There is the first death, which happens soon after you draw your last breath—an expiration of the body. And then, years later, centuries if you are particularly lucky, talented, or terrible, there is another death, a moment when your name and memory are finally forgotten. This notion can be traced back to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (c. 2400 BCE–50 CE), personalized compendiums of spells and mortuary texts whose purpose was to facilitate the passage of the deceased's soul through the afterlife. One text, written on behalf of a New Kingdom scribe named Ani (c. 1250 BCE), contains a spell that speaks directly of this possibility of a second death in the underworld of Khert-Neter.[13] "I am not a man of no account (or ignorance)," he exclaims, in defiance of the bleak prospect of being forgotten.[14] This second death, or even the barest mention of its possibility, serves as a fulcrum upon which the diverse enterprises of archiving, interpreting, and storytelling are founded. Doria Shafik, speaking of Huda Shaarawi, implored her supporters to, "remember her until you understand something of what you owe her."[15] In this lightly chiding way (perhaps Shafik was reminding herself as much as anyone else), public memory could not only keep the feminist elder alive, but might also activate and resurrect her politics afresh. Ultimately, and happily, as Guirguis's exhibition proves, Shafik's adversaries did not succeed in their efforts to disappear her name. Because of this we can make an invocation of Shafik's name—for a person who lived, and for whom only living was insufficient.

Andy Campbell is an Assistant Professor of Critical Studies at The USC Gayle Garner Roski School of Art and Design. His writings have been published in *Artforum*, *Art Papers*, and *Semigloss*, and his first book, *Bound Together: Leather, Sex, Archives, and Contemporary Art*, is forthcoming from Manchester University Press.

1 Doria Shafik quoted in Cynthia Nelson, *Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist: A Woman Apart* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), 42.
2 Ibid., xvii–xviii.
3 For more on the use of Khalili's SuperAdobe construction system and the durability of colonial forms of violence and resistence in Guirguis's sculptural practice see: Andy Campbell, "One I Know: Sherin Guirguis's *One I Call* and the Durability of Form," X-TRA 20, no. 2 (Winter 2018). http://x-traonline.org/article/one-i-know-sherin-guirguiss-one-i-call-and-the-durability-of-form.
4 Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 36–9.
5 Nourhan H. Abdel-Rahman, "Egyptian Historical Parks, Authenticity vs. Change in Cairo's Cultural Landscape," Procedia 225 (July 14, 2016), 391–409.
6 Sherin Guirguis, conversation with author, June 4, 2018.
7 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Berger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) [originally published in German in 1962].
8 "Actualité, July 22," *Le Journal d'Egypte*, July 25, 1950, as quoted in Nelson, 164. The "candied chestnut" insult is particularly stinging for it collapses two things—the gendered dismissal of Shafik's earnestness (as candied chestnuts are almost cloyingly sweet and delicate), and of her allegedly colonialist leanings/sympathies (as candied chestnuts are a francophone dessert—*marrons glacés*)
9 Quoted in Nelson, 94.
10 Ibid., 124.
11 Ibid., 74.
12 "Remembering Cynthia Nelson: Friend, Colleague, and Mentor President…", American University in Cairo: A Newsletter for Faculty and Staff 8, no. 7 (March 2006), web. http://www.global-sisterhood-network.org/content/view/1018/59.
13 Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Great Awakening, The Egyptian Book of the Dead* [reprint of 1895 edition] (Brooklyn, NY: A&B Publishers Group, 1999), 315.
14 Ibid.
15 Quoted in Nelson, 141.

Sherin Guirguis studio, 2018
Research images for the exhibition
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