

THE FLOATING WORLD OF DUBAI

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Dubai is frequently interpreted in Postmodern terms that monetize the spectacle and sublimate eroticism into extravagance, while simultaneously rendering invisible the labor underlying its vast enterprise. Connie Samaras's photographs of Dubai, in *After The American Century* (all works, 2009), scrutinize the remarkable moment of late capitalism in which not only monetary power but aesthetic sensibility is repositioned from the West back to parts of the world that earlier were colonized to extract their resources. Samaras's photographs depict an East that has appropriated both the Western look of modernity and its Orientalism to fashion a new visual language of the mega-city. The sheen of capital is forged through the fusion of modernism with nostalgic regionalism, and this artificial paradise takes its lessons from the confluence of military and entertainment industries, and borrows its frozen magic from both Disneyland and Bollywood.

The floating world of Dubai shimmers in watery light, simultaneously day and night, alluring and impenetrable. In her scrutiny of the city-state, Connie Samaras's lens traces the echo of *ukiyo-e*, Edo Japanese genre-images that first captured the West's imagination in the nineteenth century and launched an era of Orientalism in Western art. Famously influencing the Impressionists, the *ukiyo-e* unveiled a leisurely urban lifestyle devoted to pleasure, spectacle, and seduction—an evanescent world of fleeting beauty and amusement, divorced from the world of suffering, death, or even ordinary labor. Through their formal use of flattened perspective, negative space, and dynamic asymmetry, the prints played a role in the rise of Modernist aesthetics.

Two audacious buildings frame the backdrop of Samaras's photographs. One is the more recently built Burj Khalifa is named after the emir of Abu Dhabi, who rescued Dubai from the financial collapse of 2008, and it towers over Dubai. The tallest building in the world, its three-lobed, bundled tube design is putatively inspired by a flower, perhaps an effort to shine a bit of humility over its towering ambition.

I was lucky enough to accompany Samaras on one of her two research trips to Dubai, and I recognize many aspects of our visit in the resulting work. One is the incessant construction that characterized what was then the

largest building site in the world: the drilling and hammering, the trucks hauling materials, and the buses ferrying laborers back and forth twenty-four hours a day. Another is the liquid quality of the place, the nearly miraculous flow of air, water, and light that create the phantasm of a hyper-modern city in the desert.

Samaras's two versions of *Workers Checking Fountain Nozzles* encapsulate the floating quality of the Emirati empire, where everything is owned by supra-governmental agencies tied to the ruling oligarchy. These invisible ties are reflected in the urban planning and design, with the basic materials of reflective steel and water. Samaras's photographs tease out the invisible labor behind these ties. In *Workers Checking Fountain Nozzles, 1*, the uniformed laborers float below the Burj Khalifa in a boat that appears to be floating in air as well as on artificial water, the brilliant false color of which camouflages its scarcity as a commodity in this driest of climates.

The laborers are likely Muslims from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh, who make up almost two-thirds of the population and have virtually no legal rights, little healthcare, no social security, and live with the possibility of being expelled from the United Arab Emirates at any time. Trim, uniformed, and almost all male, they are the subalterns of Dubai. We tried every day to talk to them, from cab drivers to repairmen to clerks. Always willing to speak, almost always stressing that life in Dubai was hard and unjust, the majority also admired the city-state's exuberance and opulence. It's the pathos of immigrants everywhere, and their vitality.

After I left, Connie was able to talk to several construction workers with the help of a polyglot taxi driver, whom she credits with helping her enter spaces normally kept off limits to the camera. For example, in the middle of the video *Magic Planet*, two laborers mug for the camera and laugh against the backdrop of the penal-looking labor camp of 250,000 from which they are ferried day and night. Amid this gleaming, dusty city, Samaras's *After the American Century* endeavors to bring labor to the surface again, to render it visible while allowing us to analyze the seamless flow of futuristic buildings and phantasmic landscapes these laborers produce.

