

Renata Critton-Papp

Pedro Barbáchano

So you understand me, my friend (2019)

Queer Continuance: Breaking the Binary of Public and Private

Men are captured standing, framed by expansive evening skies and lounging on dark couches in front of blank walls. They look directly into the lens of the camera with intimately withdrawn expressions and relaxed limbs. The spaces surrounding them become containers for mundane comfort, holding delicate moments of resistance in their shadowy corners. We see their confined and controlled inhabitancy of Egypt's landscape, as photos of empty, barren streets reflect their mental isolation. In these periods of dusk and dawn, the violet and orange glows, the viewer is offered a prolonged temporality. They are given the room to contemplate the fragility and immediacy of each instant captured. The face of a young queer man, illuminated in a dark room by the light of his phone, becomes soft and cherished as if the camera does not even exist in the space with him and is instead a fellow iris.

Pedro Barbáchano's photo-video series *So you understand me, my friend (2019)* documents the lived experience of queer people in Egypt's capital, Cairo.

Barbáchano positions his work in the complicated history of British colonialism that has resulted in policies and laws which continue to endanger queer lives. The British occupation of Egypt began in 1830, and the population was subjected to strict and heavily surveyed governance to ensure an obedient and militarized state. Through these methods of control, the British forced Western ideals into the public sphere, placing intentional paranoid behaviours of mistrust and anxiety in the private lives of Egyptians who did not comply with Britain's Eurocentric heteronormativity. The pervasive use of undisclosed police and mass incarceration¹ during the late 19th and

¹Timothy J. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*. (University of California Press. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 97.

early 20th century have continued to effectively uphold “institutionalized homophobia”² in Egypt.

Timothy Mitchell, author of “Colonising Egypt” describes colonialism as “capturing the bodies of a population.”³ He encapsulates the effects of violent Westernization on queer Egyptians, where a cycle of desensitization towards the prosecution and imprisonment of dissident sexual and gender identities⁴ occurs. Barbáchano uses these historically embedded colonial systems as a starting point to explore the divisions between public and private space in contemporary Egypt for gay men.

So you understand me, my friend focuses on the contrasts and conflicts between exterior and interior space for the queer community in Cairo. Barbáchano uses his work as a confrontation to the silence and absence of the voices and bodies of gay men in the landscape of Egypt. Alternating between cityscapes devoid of people and intimate portraits, the viewer begins to grasp the conflicting realities for queer men within Cairo’s colonial framework. His portraits are clear and honest in their intention, avoiding an objectifying gaze and instead focussing on his subjects in the comfort of their everyday lives. The men appear relaxed and neutral, often looking directly into the camera as they lay in their living rooms or stand alone on a rocky bluff. Barbáchano positions his portraits as a normalization of survival in an effort to emphasize the systemic “sexual repression and violence”⁵ which pervades the urban environment of Egypt. Revealing the safety of domestic spaces, Barbáchano gives room for queer Egyptians to self-identify in his photography despite their confinement. In tension with his portraits are the landscapes which hold a feeling of repressed chaos. Barbáchano captures most of these scenes as the night sky slowly creeps in, seemingly silent but dangerous. He uses tense, strictly surveyed spaces to provide an exterior to the confines of the queer men inside, as the empty streets of Cairo become a part of muffled survival. Slowly, the viewer can begin to grasp the

²Grant Walsh-Haines, “The Egyptian Blogosphere: Policing Gender and Sexuality and the Consequences for Queer Emancipation.” *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8, no. 3 (2012): 43.

³Timothy J. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*. (University of California Press. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 95.

⁴ Pedro Barbáchano, Project Statement for *So you understand me, my friend*, 2019.

⁵ Pedro Barbáchano, Project Statement for *So you understand me, my friend*, 2019.

strain between the repressed physical bodies and their inner mental spaces.⁶ Using our exterior point of view, we see that the queer community has become normalized to the point of imperceptibility, “shrouded in cultural silence.”⁷

The contrasting themes of public and private apply to spaces outside the physical as well. Many queer men in Egypt also find comfort and community in a virtual space, where they can safely connect with other queer people and explore their experiences together in anonymity. The violence which prevails in the public spaces of Cairo forces queer men to confinement within their private residences and technology can offer an expansion of space and a platform for queer emancipation. Barbáchano uses these contrasting images to break the binary of public and private and unravel the silent survival of gay men, as he states, the act of speaking allows for the queer community to continue the struggle for simple existence.⁸ In conclusion, *So you understand me, my friend* becomes an exercise in queer continuance, as Barbáchano contributes to a growing movement of online content which challenges the repression and violence happening daily in Egypt.

⁶Timothy J. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*. (University of California Press. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 127.

⁷Grant Walsh-Haines, “The Egyptian Blogosphere: Policing Gender and Sexuality and the Consequences for Queer Emancipation.” *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8, no. 3 (2012): 53.

⁸ Pedro Barbáchano, Project Statement for *So you understand me, my friend*, 2019.

Works Cited

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