

[France](#)[Africa](#)[International](#)[Culture](#)[Sports](#)[Science & technology](#)[Environment](#)[/ Africa](#)**REPORT: CULTURE**

Paris-based photographer Nabil Boutros monitors Egypt's changing face

An Egyptian-born photographer, now based in Paris, has returned to the country of his birth, hoping that his lens will find the answers to two questions - "What is Egypt?" and "What does it mean to be Egyptian?"

Issued on: 21/02/2013 - 16:04 Modified: 24/02/2013 - 15:37



Nabil Boutros

By: Anne-Marie Bissada

ADVERTISING

[Homepage](#)[News](#)[Podcasts](#)[Menu](#)

[France](#)[Africa](#)[International](#)[Culture](#)[Sports](#)[Science & technology](#)[Environment](#)

For Egyptian-born Paris-based photographer Nabil Boutros, the camera has been a way to record spaces “where people can come in or they have just left”.

Interview with Nabil Boutros

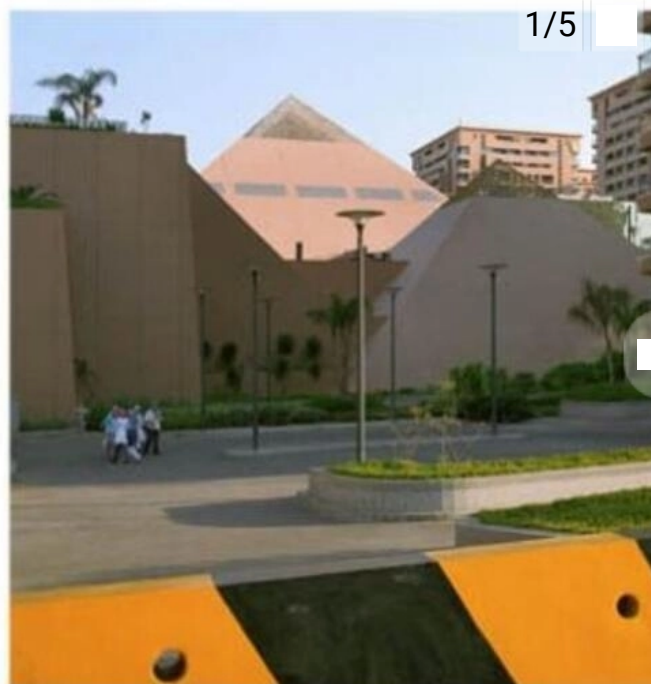
Anne-Marie Bissada

05:08

Either way these are spaces full of presence.

Boutros came to Paris in 1973 to study at the school of Beaux-Arts and, after working with paints and set design, he turned to photography.

Click to start the slideshow



© Nabil Boutros

[Homepage](#)[News](#)[Podcasts](#)[Menu](#)

[France](#)[Africa](#)[International](#)[Culture](#)[Sports](#)[Science & technology](#)[Environment](#)

He stopped all his activities in France and travelled around Egypt for three months with the sole purpose of answering the questions "What is Egypt?" and "What does it mean to be Egyptian?"

Influenced by the work of [August Sander](#), whose portraits between the two world wars captured ordinary people in a brief moment, Boutros wanted to be able to show ordinary Egyptians.

"I went to very popular places where I have never been before, I travelled a lot in Egypt to talk with people and the camera was a medium format," explains Boutros. This was his first contact with the country and from it he produced over [400 portraits](#). But only about 100 of them were shown at the Guggenheim museum in 1996, for an exhibition on African photography of the 1940s to today. They were also shown at outlets of the French store Fnac.

Click to start the slideshow

[Homepage](#)[News](#)[Podcasts](#)[Menu](#)

[France](#)[Africa](#)[International](#)[Culture](#)[Sports](#)[Science & technology](#)[Environment](#)

During this time he also produced a book on the Coptic community, called *Coptes du Nil* (*Copts from the Nile*).

It is filled with photos of Coptic Christians from all over the country, showcasing their daily lives and rituals. It is accompanied by text to explain the history and culture.

In 2003 he was commissioned to cover the new Islamic trends in Egypt and he discovered that society was beginning to change. There was a different form of Islam seeping into the country that had nothing to do with Egyptian Islam, he says.

It was then that he decided to use his photography to make more ironic statements.

Click to start the slideshow



1/10

© Nabil Boutros

[Homepage](#)[News](#)[Podcasts](#)[Menu](#)

[France](#)[Africa](#)[International](#)[Culture](#)[Sports](#)[Science & technology](#)[Environment](#)

To them, Boutros notes, “modern is beauty”.

So he set about photographing the modern buildings and architecture in such a way that people had to question the image.

One particular example of this was a suburban compound just outside Cairo, called Dreamland. It is a closed area that houses a golf course, homes and just outside is a large mosque - one that is almost a caricature, something found in a Disney cartoon portraying the Arab world.

People then began to either appreciate the beauty of **these images**, while some could see something was wrong without pinpointing what exactly.

After working in Jordan on a project about **the Bedouin**, he returned to Egypt and noticed again a new change whereby people were dressing in a particular manner and were being perceived as just that. “...people with long beards becoming sheikhs and having authority, some surat of Koran and saying what is good and bad”.

This inspired Boutros to produce a **series of photos** of himself where he changed his look to create 25 Egyptian men. Each photo was shot using the same lighting and same camera.

Click to start the slideshow

[Homepage](#)[News](#)[Podcasts](#)[Menu](#)

[France](#)[Africa](#)[International](#)[Culture](#)[Sports](#)[Science & technology](#)[Environment](#)

© Nabil Boutros

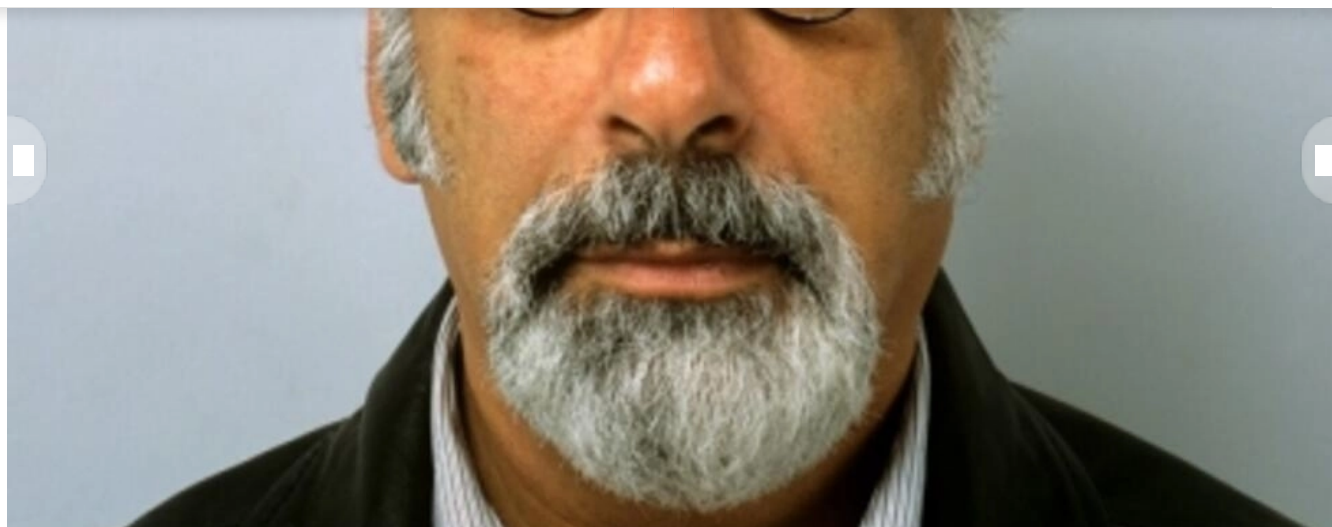
In December 2010, when his work was being shown at a gallery in Cairo, there was a bomb attack on a church in Alexandria.

His friend suggested that they do something to counteract the effects of the attack, so he took nine of his photos and wrote "We are all Egyptian". The poster was then printed and distributed in four Egyptian cities.

When the Egyptian revolution erupted soon afterwards "We are all Egyptian" became a popular slogan and many protesters carried Boutros's poster.

[Click to start the slideshow](#)

[Homepage](#)[News](#)[Podcasts](#)[Menu](#)

[France](#)[Africa](#)[International](#)[Culture](#)[Sports](#)[Science & technology](#)[Environment](#)

© Nabil Boutros

What began as a way to reconnect with his country of origin has become a chance to create images of irony that serve as a commentary on the changing society in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries.

His latest project?

“I will be showing myself in glamorous photos, wearing the *hijab* [headscarf].”

This project, says Boutros, is about all the religions that blame women for being the object of desire.

Share :

[Homepage](#)[News](#)[Podcasts](#)[Menu](#)