

Visual art

An ancient obsession

New York artist Ellie Ga shares her fascinations with the Lighthouse of Alexandria, Egypt.

By DANA SELF
Special to the Star

New York artist Ellie Ga's narrative work exists along the contiguous borders of exploration, objecthood, memoir, history, performance and tale telling.

At Grand Arts, 1819 Grand Blvd., her exhibit, "Square, Octagon, Circle," is a visual narrative of Ga's exploration of the Lighthouse of Alexandria, Egypt, or, rather, what remains of it.

The title refers to how the three sections of the Pharos, as the lighthouse is known, would have looked from an aerial view.

Videos, slides, objects and photographs comprise this lyrical search for the essence of the lighthouse, its various poetries, histories, explorations and the lighthouse's currency in contemporary culture.

One of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the lighthouse was built around 280 B.C. to guide ships into Alexandria's harbor. An earthquake destroyed it in the 14th century.

Living, as we do, in an age of exile — from one another, our histories, and from a sense of continuity — exploration is a strategy to collapse time and distance, and to, of course, connect ourselves with a past, however mythical and unstable the past may seem.

Ga's research into and ob-

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session with the lighthouse reveals the myths surrounding its design, construction, and uses.

Her travels to Alexandria, Egypt, and her dives to the ruins are the touchstones of the exhibition.

"Sayed," a five-minute single-channel video, includes narrations of her dives with Sayed, her guide.

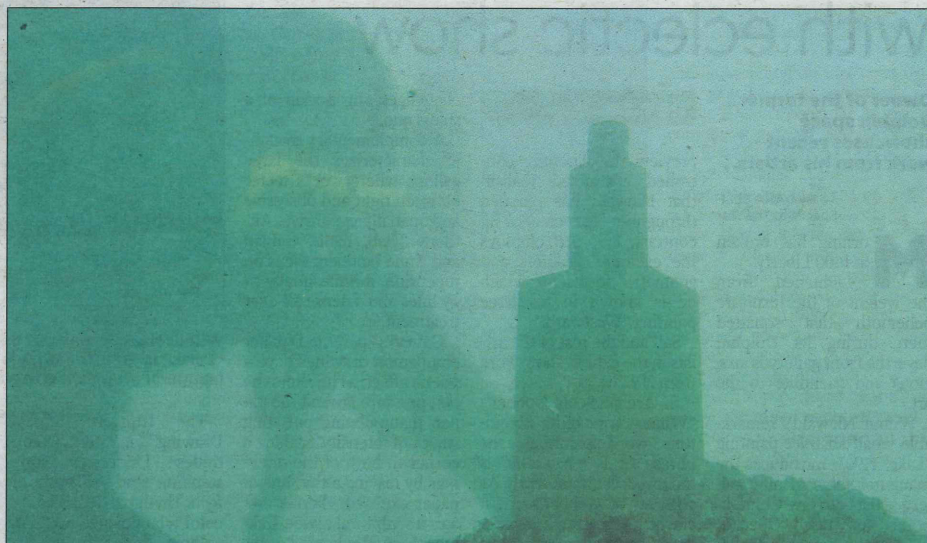
"Four Thousand Blocks," a 23-minute, three-channel video, mines the symbolism of texts and language. In this long complex narrative, Ga layers her storytelling, shifts perspectives and weaves together various histories.

On one screen, pale and waxy hands gather type from a typesetter drawer and painstakingly arrange them, letter by letter, into coherency. Another screen shows (darkly) a tray of developer bath in which a photograph emerges.

Clarification and obscurity coexist here and throughout the narrative, illustrating the elusive nature of knowledge and historical memory.

In "Measuring the Circle," a two-channel video, Ga commingles Sostratus the architect, Archimedes' Palimpsests, an ostomachion, a silver lighthouse made for former president Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and the erasure and reconstruction of history.

Ga's sculptures, "The Grand Replica" and "Archimedes' Mirror," expand, along with the photograph, "Silvershop, Falaki Street,"



FROM THE ARTIST AND GRAND ARTS

Underwater diving excursions, captured in this video still, were part of New York artist Ellie Ga's research into the Pharos Lighthouse, now a submerged ruin, in Alexandria Egypt. The video is part of her exhibit "Square, Octagon, Circle" at Grand Arts.

On exhibit

"Ellie Ga: Square, Octagon, Circle" continues at Grand Arts, 1819 Grand Blvd., through Oct. 26. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday and Friday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. For more information, 816-421-6887 or grandarts.com.

the video's story. She places the mirror across from her silver replica of the lighthouse, which is a replica (created in the Falaki Street silver shop), of a silver sculpture made for, but never accepted by Mubarak.

The sculpture is illuminated by a red light that bounces off the circular mirror.

While most artists are explorers in one way or another, but mostly metaphorical, Ellie Ga actually participates in investigatory missions. Having spent time on a French research ship near the North Pole, Ga is driven by extraordinary curiosity and physical challenge.

Ga's exploration suggests

the fusion of past and present, and real time and the imagined time of history's things. Time becomes unfixed and rootless while Ga excavates the stories of the lighthouse and the myriad signs and symbols surrounding its history.

As a storyteller, and mediator of our experience, Ga performs her role as interpreter, participant, social historian, and observer. Her exhibition becomes, then, more than travelogue or memoir, but a physical manifestation of what "to explore" means, when sifted and reclaimed through her exhumation of language, history, texts and objects.



Ga's exhibit includes a replica of a silver lighthouse made for former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak but never accepted by him.