

CAIRENE DREAMS

Susan Hefuna looks at her precious Cairo through its intricate *mashrabiyas*.



My favourite city is frozen in my memory. It has life, heart and feeling. It has smells, intuition, noise, dreams, surprises, empathy, luck, love and a river. It is filled with light, energy, colour, fantasy, stories and memories. They say that once you drink from the Nile, you will always return.

I spent much of my childhood in the Nile Delta, an old-fashioned and ordinary playground where I would drink in the deep green of the landscape, watch farmers travel back and forth from the cotton and rice fields and see cows with blinkers walk in endless circles all day long to pump water from wells. I remember that there was no electricity, so there were no phones or television in the village in those days. Memories of my family's rare trips to Cairo occasionally pop up: I recall sitting in a café with my parents as a young girl, listening to Umm Kulthum's famous *Enta Omri* on the radio.

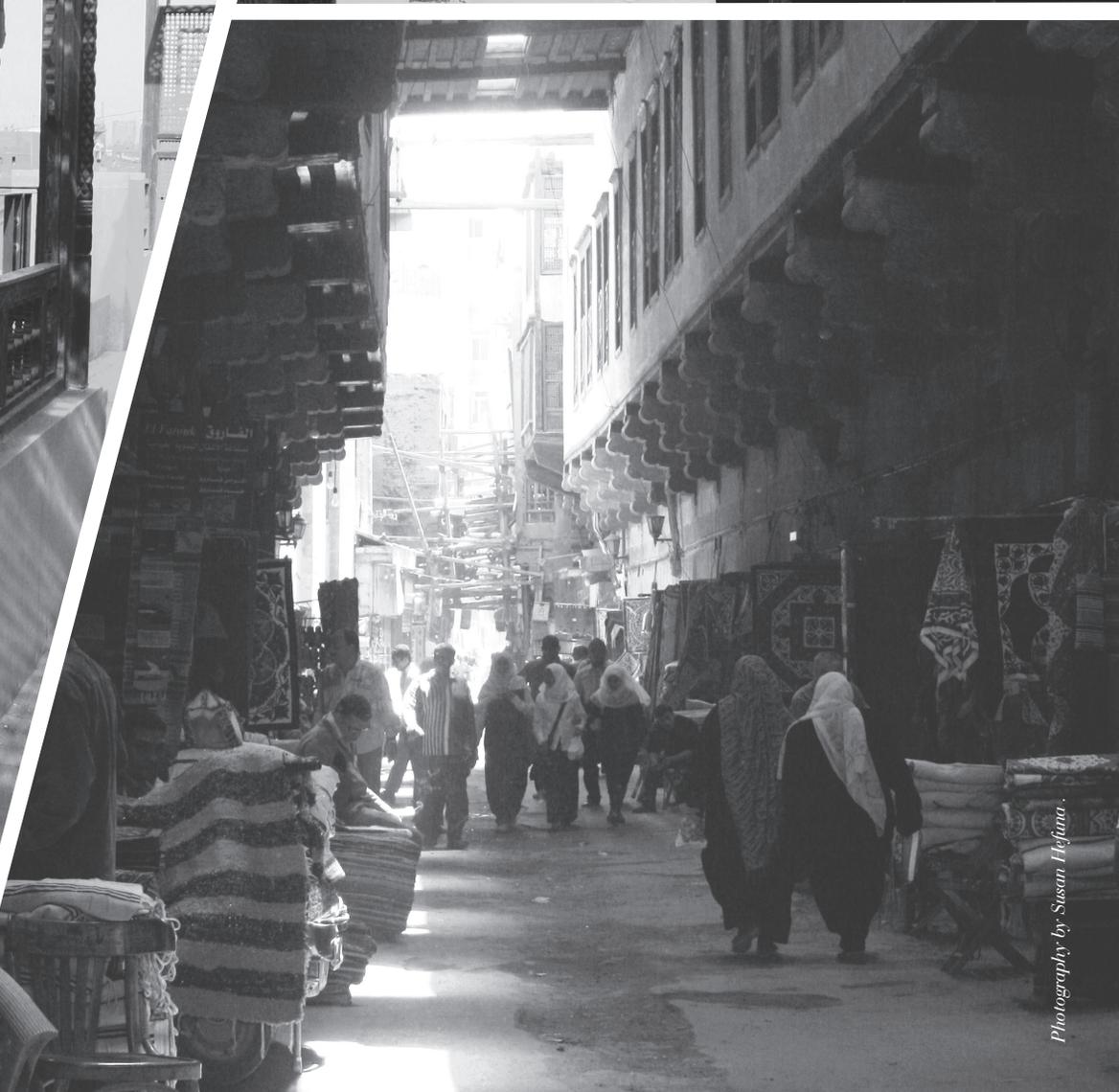
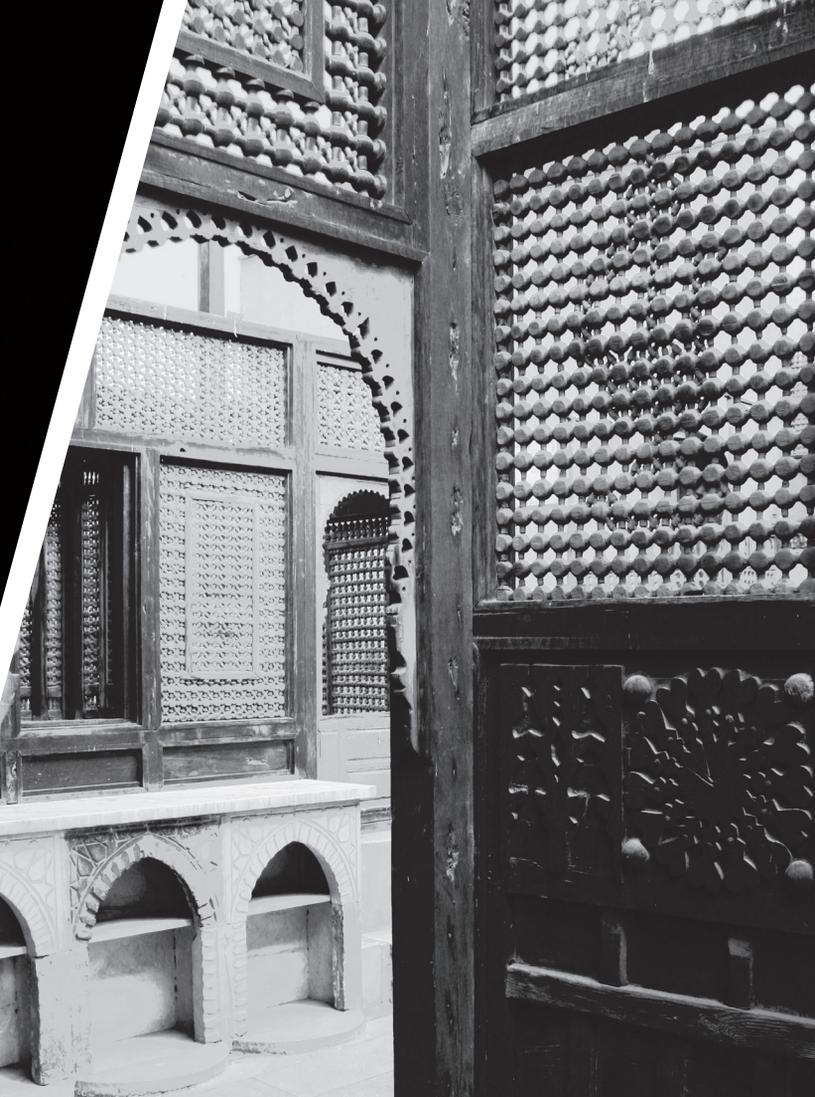
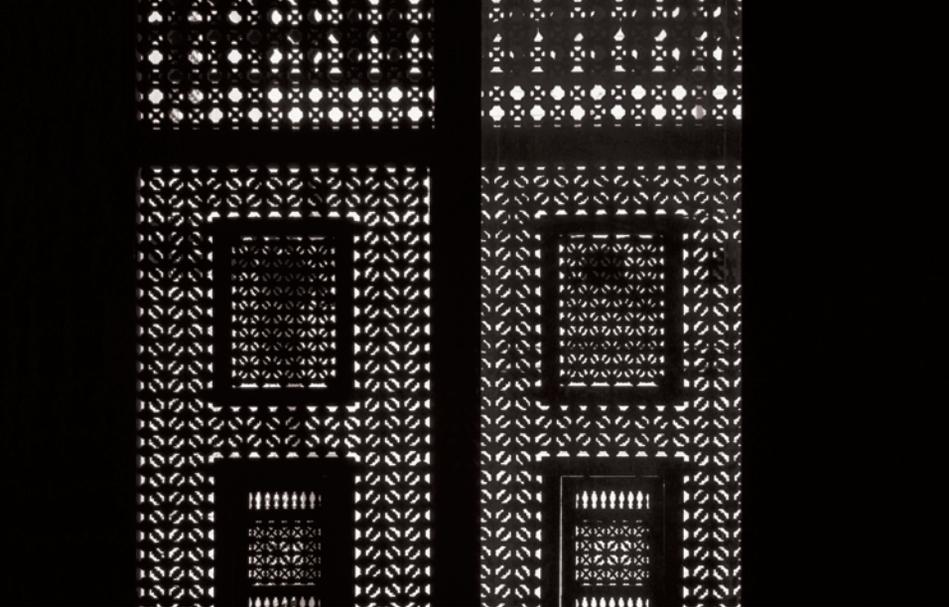
When I think about Cairo, I remember a city that truly never sleeps. It is where I discovered *mashrabiyas* – those carved wooden latticework screens that adorn the windows of townhouses in Old Cairo. Gazing at their interlocking patterns

brought the science lessons of my student years to life, making me aware of atoms, molecules and DNA, those tiny details that illuminate us about the bigger structure of the universe. I came to see similarities between my ink drawings and the complex patterns of *mashrabiyas*.

When I became an adult and an artist, I continued to explore my Cairo for its unlimited resources, using it as a laboratory for my imagination and subsequent artworks. I enjoyed smelling, hearing, feeling and tasting the city. I enjoyed these 'Cairotic' moments of time and place. Magical experiences remain etched in my memory: visiting the 17th-century Gayer-Anderson Museum in Old Cairo; eating *koshary* (Egyptian dish of rice, lentils and pasta) at Abou Tarek with friends; sending postcards with 'Greetings from Cairo' printed on them; listening to the sounds and stories of people on the street and becoming part of those stories. Cairo can capture your feelings and become an indelible state of mind.

Cairo, I look at you now and I can't recognise you. What happened to you and to your streets?

Cairo, where are you? 



Photography by: Sasan Hefiana