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30 degrees of separation between Oslo and Cairo



wo photos (top left and right) were edited to merge scenes and people from both cities.



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By **Mariam Hamdy / Special to Daily News Egypt** **June 29, 2009, 2:00 am**

The seemingly unobvious similarities between two dissimilar cultures, is the theme of "30 Degrees, a new exhibition currently held at the Gezira Art Center in Zamalek.

The show consists of sets of photographs, essentially portraying a comparative dialogue between two artists: photographer and founder of Artellewa Hamdy Reda and visual artist and curator Pekka Persson.

Upon visiting Reda and the local art space he established in his neighborhood of Ard El-Lewa, Persson, who currently resides in Oslo, Norway, decided to create a photographic project whereby both artists would interpret their personal impression of the other's culture through their art.

The name of the show is based on the geographical distance measured from the location of the artists' place of residence: Oslo is 30 degrees north from Cairo; Cairo is 30 degrees to the south.

The show consists of a series of photographs, a slideshow and a video installation. The latter, titled "Ruba Bekia - Everything is Broken, comprises of a split screen projection placed in a room with fragments of reflective materials thrown in front of it. The reflections of the videos on the materials create a peculiar effect; the idea is to show the similarities between Norwegians' approach to recycling and that of the Egyptians.

It's an interesting contrast to present, since the processes are quite alike in essence. Nevertheless, the aesthetics of the installation is not that intriguing. Once a similarity between the cultures is drawn, one is not further enticed to watch the remaining reel.

The photography is the main medium of the show. Most of the photographs, save a few that are somewhat clichéd, are visually engaging. It is neither the photography itself nor its components (such as lighting, composition or even subject matter) that grabs one's attention, but rather the grouping of the photographs within each series.

Rather than focus on the differences between the cultures, the artists concentrate on the similarities, doing so superbly without altering the essence of either culture. For every little girl hopping on a street in Oslo, the artists found another child doing the same in Cairo. The postures of their subjects were similar, despite their staggering differences in attire or surroundings.

The work allowed the viewers for once to focus on the similarities between otherwise very different cultures, which is the essence of communication as both artists propose.

An installation of photographs titled "Red on Green explores further this concept. Footstep stickers in red and green are glued along the floor that led to it, signifying the individual's choice of stopping or moving forward.

The photographs are all reverse in color, displaying red where green should be, among other color reversals. The photographs follow the same idea of presenting visual language that is similar and recognizable for both cultures. The concept behind the red and green combination though falls flat. It feels as though there is a concept layered upon another concept for no conceivable reason; it doesn't harm the installation overall, but it does lead to an excessive form of clutter.

Two photographs in particular are especially intriguing. One of them shows Norwegians bathing in rare sun in a park,

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wearing shorts or swimsuits while reading or listening to music. The subjects are edited to include a backdrop of the informal redbrick building settlements that surround Cairo.

The contrast is great, and despite the fact that the editing work could have been a little more precise in terms of execution, the overall effect of the photograph is quite stimulating. The other photograph is built on the same concept: young Egyptian street children roaming around graffiti stricken streets of Oslo.

More of these hybrid photographs can be seen in the slideshow in the exhibition, yet I wonder why the pieces are not printed. The details of the photos are lost as the slideshow is displayed on a very small frame-like screen rather than larger projection or plasma.

Overall, "30 Degrees offers a less exercised perspective in the comparative view of both local and foreign cultures. The concept behind the exhibition, from its title to its photographs is refreshing, solid and definitely worth visiting.

Gezira Art Center: 1 El-Marsafy St., Zamalek, Cairo; Tel: (02) 2737 3298.



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