

## A brilliant idea lost in execution



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By **Mariam Hamdy** February 1, 2008, 2:00 am

The prospect of attending an art exhibition in Ard El Lewa seemed quite intriguing to me. Ard El Lewa is an area located parallel to the posh Mohandiseen neighborhood. It is a district that is significantly less urbanized and somewhat isolated from Zamalek and Downtown, the center of the Cairene art scene.

Its owner and founder, painter/photographer Hamdy Reda, took the initiative of transforming a kiosk-type space, located in the heart of Ard El Lewa, into a white cube format of an art gallery. This is not only a proactive and daring approach to the art scene in Cairo, but also a great example of how an artist can create a little haven for both his peers and art lovers, while also drawing attention to the place he was raised and continues to live in with all its charm and dysfunctions.

Despite the exciting concept that Artellewa embodies, it is a very difficult and volatile gallery to manage. The fact that the space of the gallery is quite small means that it needs to be carefully managed and cleverly curated. Avid art lovers who go through the agony of penetrating through the muddy alleyways of the area before having to walk for some considerable distance to the gallery except to be rewarded with fresh, innovative works that matches the novelty of the gallery. Sadly, and judging by its latest exhibition, this point of view is apparently an idealistic one.

The current show at Artellewa is entitled "100 mm; a group exhibition displaying miniature pieces of several Egyptian artists. The pieces are not confined by any certain technique, and vary from ink, paint, collage, photography and drawing, but share only the fact that they are 100 mm small. Although the idea initially seems quite intriguing and exciting, it is safe to say that those descriptions are not applied to what has been presented in Artellewa.

It's quite apparent that there was no real effort put into neither the exhibition itself nor its curation. The only exceptions would be Nermeen Youssef's claustrophobic photographs of children huddled up in a small frame, and Mandy Gehrt's four-part Polaroid.

Both of those pieces feel pretty intimate and make good use of the small size assigned to them. Similarly, Osama Abdel Moniem's drawings are so intricate they almost itch. It is, in fact, the non-photography piece that also shows substantial effort put into its making.

Miniature making is a delicate art. The beauty of these small pieces lies in the tangible pleasure they provide their beholder with. The feeling that the viewer attains from the piece is akin to the nostalgic emotions induced from regarding a pictorial diary and looking back at it in fondness of either detail or sheer simplicity. This is not the case with this show, and it seems that none of the artists used this opportunity as a challenge to creatively contain themselves within the allocated 10 cm.

Some of the artists took a stab at being creative by using random objects such as coasters, a cigarette pack or train tickets as a support to draw on. However, the items are de-contextualized and are used merely as a replacement for paper, further establishing the feeling of nonchalance by the artists participating in the show.

It's unfortunate to say that the majority of the work looks like an after-thought, and it feels as though the artists have acted quickly after receiving a phone call from the curator and begrudgingly sent in their pieces without much consideration of how such a tiny space could be used to best effect.

Most of the work presented could've easily been thumbnails of larger pieces on the gallery's excellent website. Nothing about the works being 100mm small rendered them special or gave the viewers the need to look closer and curse the absence of a

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magnifying glass, which should've been the case.

Eventually, "100 mm seems like a collection of the curator friends' works responding to an idea of his rather than a properly balanced show. It's unfortunate that the drive and passion to create an art gallery in the least expected of locations is not as strong as the art occupying its tiny spaces.



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