

A digested record of art history in 'Alexandria'



Sculpture by Alfons Louis.



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By **Mariam Hamdy** / Special to Daily News Egypt **January 7, 2010, 2:00 am**

One of the most tantalizing things about Cairo is the little surprises it always manages to tuck away in its street corners. Of those surprises are the tiny galleries that are small enough to remain hidden, yet big enough to house a decent collection. Safar Khan Gallery in Zamalek is one such treasure trove, currently hosting a show titled "Alexandria."

With this impeccable sculpture exhibition, Safar Khan is the place to go during the first slow weeks of the new year. Featuring the works of Sarkis Tossoonian, Alfons Louis and Said Badr, "Alexandria has turned Safar Khan into more of an archaeological site than an exhibition space.

Art connoisseurs have grown weary of exhibition titles, and "Alexandria is no exception. The title instantly brings to mind an array of cliché images of sea, the bridge and other over-photographed sites of the city. But walking through the gallery with preconceived ideas, I felt a slap on the wrist for my snap judgement.

The title, "Alexandria, is written in Latin script, pointing towards the ancient world approach that all the exhibit's artists have taken up in this show.

Dr Sarkis Badr's sculptures are monumental. Made of pitch-black basalt, the stone is fashioned in shapes that strike a balance between the primeval and the ultra modern. On the flat sides of his otherwise curvaceous sculptures is a tiny illegible script written with intense precision. The overall effect is something akin to the spiritual; a complex act resembling reliefs of hieroglyphs found in a tomb.

The most aesthetically distinguished aspect of Badr's collection is the contrast between the ordered and systematic method by which the script is carved into the stone, and the free flowing shape of the sculpture itself. Despite being relatively small, the pieces appear to be sections of a much larger structure; remnants of a much more complicated civilization than is perceived at first sight.

Less complicated but equally ancient are the works of Sarkis Tossoonian and Alfons Louis. Tossoonian's bronze sculptures are comprised mainly of figures, with plates of what appears to be a gold sheet placed somewhere in their composition. One piece has the figure wrapped around with the gold sheet, while another holds it up to the viewer as one would a mirror. The texture of the figures is rough, as though worn away by weather, yet the gold sheets appear smooth and intact. One is reminded of the beautifully elongated sculptures of Alberto Giacometti - just somehow more Mediterranean.

Alfons Louis's works are significantly larger than the rest, with the impression that they are remnants of a much larger wooden door of a church or a mosque. The combination of the old carved wood and the iron hinges with the flaky paint is optimum; so much so that the carvings are almost secondary to the contrast of the textures against one another. The most striking of Louis' pieces are the smallest: a wooden block with a deer carved on it, pierced by three large crucifixion nails.

The strength of this little and simple structure is astounding: it commands the viewer's attention. The wooden block and the image of the writhing deer defy the painful sight of the nails piercing through its being. It's truly an astounding sculpture.

The pieces appear to be arranged in chronological order. The most ancient of them are Said Badr's linear, simple statues constructed on a conceptual approach to signs and form in basalt. Next are Tossoonian's pieces, more involved with a perspectival method to concepts, which employ three-dimensionality and the carving of the human body in bronze. Then

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finally, Alfons Louis' work, which use decorative arts that are merged with seemingly religious subject matter, to offer a more contemporary approach to spirituality.

The exhibit feels like a progression from ancient Egyptian, to Greco-Roman, to Coptic art. Safar Khan has kicked off the new year with quite a show, one that is absolutely worth the visit.



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