

A man, a woman and a pantomimist



Though full of potential, the exhibit fell flat.

By **Mariam Hamdy** **November 6, 2008, 2:00 am**

Cairo Atelier, one of the older exhibition spaces tucked away on a side-street in the middle of downtown's assortment of galleries, is currently holding a potentially perfect show titled "Sending the Clowns . out by Sarah Khalil.

Unfortunately, it has almost become a custom for a perfect concept to fall flat through a not so perfect execution. In fact plenty, if not most, of the art works produced here in Cairo fall short of their potential due to the short-winded, or perhaps short-sighted, execution by their creators.

The choice of title of the show and the design of its invitation are suitably intriguing. Both of them manage to pique the viewers' curiosity - essentially the purpose of any art exhibition invite.

The show consists of a collection of black and white photographs: portraits of a young man in a suit, a young woman wearing a black dress and a pantomimist. These characters are portrayed in isolation from each other as well as together. The

pantomimist appears to be like a ghost, totally unacknowledged by the male and female protagonists of the pieces.

The manner the pantomimist is portrayed in is magnificent. Pantomimists have always been depicted as kind, silent and androgynous. The pantomimist featured in Khalil's photographs is a mischievous and charming young man, successful in eroticizing the otherwise asexual nature of pantomime. A particular example is a close up of the pantomimist licking a cigarette: An exquisite combination of theater, fashion and rock and roll.

It's tempting to claim that the success of Khalil's work lies in the casting of her subjects, but that wouldn't be entirely accurate. Despite the fact that her subjects are fascinating indeed, Khalil's compositions are the true star of the show.

The compositions are subtle yet impeccably well studied and orchestrated. The close-ups are well cropped, allowing the eyes to focus on lines and details in a comfortable fashion without feeling smothered.

On the same note, photographs featuring two or all three protagonists are never crowded or overpowering: The overall effect is soft, yet arresting. The way Khalil orchestrates her photographs render the protagonists and their peculiar relationship seem controlled by the pantomimist, presenting him as a devil of sorts.

On the downside, the work lacks a heightened sense of contrast which could have injected the pieces with an additional dramatic punch. There are a few instances of misplaced focus that may have needed some revision.

The overall effect is decent but certainly unexceptional.

The subject matter of the photographs is more fitting for smaller photo sizes.

Smaller sizes contain a lot of tension between the protagonists within a tight space, allowing for a more arresting effect. That's why the two larger portraits of the pantomimist emerge as the least successful element of the show.

Alas, the generated tension is ultimately diluted as the photographs are drowned in a room full of bad presentation. The absence of proper, appropriate framing is one of the biggest defects of the show. The pieces are sloppily mounted on foam board, an amateur presentation technique that should be left within the confines of college classrooms, at best.



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Moving to the surrounding space, it's difficult to ignore the black fabric that covers the walls of the entire room, which should have complemented the works in terms of color, but has instead murdered them. The pieces of fabric have been stapled together, and the staples show clearly on the walls.

An offensive assault to the senses, the staples are both tacky and distracting, not to mention barely effective in holding the fabric together which was tattered and loose at the edges.

Perhaps the most bizarre part of the exhibition is a pseudo installation piece placed in the center: A huge, gold and red art nouveau-style chair. Shrouded by black fabric from the ceiling, the chair not only has absolutely no function in the basic scheme of the exhibition but it upsets the entire experience of viewing black and white photography. The chair and its placement are downright ugly and a sign of, I must confess, bad taste.

Khalil should have allowed the strength of her work to shine through without overcrowding it with unnecessary complementary elements.

Lessons could be learnt from this sizable failure. It's a particular shame when the strong potential of artwork like "Sending the Clowns.out is gone to waste.



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