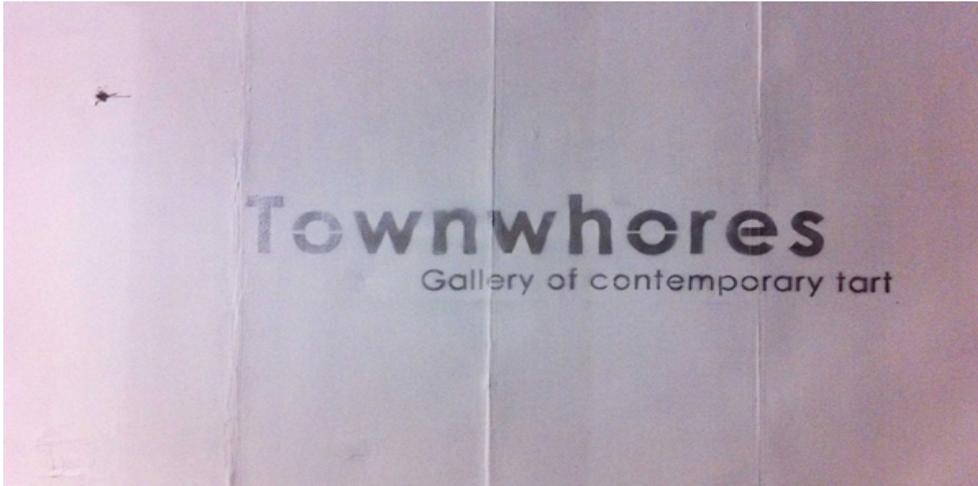


A pretend display of Egyptian graffiti at disappointing Townhouse exhibit



Adham Bakry.

By **Mariam Hamdy/ Special to Daily News Egypt** **September 20, 2011, 4:58 pm**

Graffiti has evolved into a fascinating method of self-expression in Egypt these days, emerging calmly a few months before the revolution then exploding with the events of January 25.

Commemorating the different sides of graffiti and its applications is an exhibition titled "This is not Graffiti" at the Townhouse Gallery, which opened on Sunday.

The term "graffiti" quite literally means to write, and the phenomena of writing on street and public walls has been around since man could mark a surface with a rock; a method by which early men could prove they existed at a particular place and time.

The current recognizable form of graffiti started to appear sometime in the 1960s in New York, with the hip-hop movement being its verbal equivalent. Graffiti, like hip-hop, represents an elementary, immediate means through which youth can react against authorities that hinder their creativity and self-expression.

Society reacted violently against graffiti, rightfully calling it vandalism for ruining public and state property. However, those who had an eye for the avant-garde in the art scene saw it as a new and atypical form of expression, distinguished by bold compositions, colors and mediums (namely spray paint) that were all too juicy for galleries to ignore.

With Andy Warhol churning out screen prints as pop art, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring toying with elements of street painting in their work, graffiti began to be introduced as a valid form of expression like oil painting, sculpture or video.

Slowly, graffiti started to stream into our visual culture, realized in fonts for album covers and products, allowing shoes, sodas and stationary to look rebellious and cool rather than geeky. However, the essence of graffiti remained intact, representing a nuisance to authorities and property owners alike.

Graffiti lingered in the margins of society as a sub-cultural activity, seeping into our world every now and then with a music video, a poster or packaging design. It started to explode into the mainstream at the beginning of the past decade with Banksy, the prolific and infamously anonymous UK artist whose works have become icons of this generation; and Shepard Fairey, whose "Obey" brand was responsible for the "Change" posters in the Obama presidential campaign.

Shortly afterwards, graffiti started to invade Cairo, evolving from tags (names written as signatures at various locations in the city), to masterpieces (entire pieces of work like a mural of sorts). Like the Jan. 25 Revolution, graffiti interrupted the supposedly pleasant monotony of our urban space and predictable municipal living.

The revolution itself being the ultimate fertile ground to express how you really feel against all forms of authority has given birth to graffiti artists of all ages with different skills.

The Townhouse show aims to discuss whether graffiti can preserve its identity if it's accepted as a legitimate form of expression; a good question to ask, as one can clearly lose sight of when the writing on the wall is in fact graffiti, a mural, an advert or trompe l'oeil. One would think that if it's sanctioned or paid for, then the point of the 'art form' is rendered null and



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meaningless. Most graffiti artists believe that legitimizing or mainstreaming graffiti would mark its demise, and I would agree.

So the Townhouse show went ahead by stressing that what they are presenting is not graffiti, since it, by default, cannot exist in art galleries. Yet, at the end of the day, what's currently on display is in fact graffiti. The disappointment in this project is evident upon entry, when one's expecting that — given the legitimacy of the space and therefore the unlimited time, comfort and lack of need for a getaway plan that graffiti artists have to deal with in public spaces — the work would be provocative, raw and outstanding.

I am not letting my outdated belief that graffiti is a form of vandalism color my review of the work at hand; I do like graffiti when it's done in an astute, political and surprising way. Banksy nailed that approach to the T, creating works that catch you off guard and provide a message that has both a sense of humor and a punch to it. None of the works at Townhouse had that in them, despite the aesthetic merits that some of the works contain.

The two pieces in the show that can be regarded as murals are by Dokhan and Hend Kheera. Kheera's piece shows an image of Jesus holding up a demonstration sign in front of an army tank rolling over a large puddle of blood. The piece is easily understood in the light of the military trials and the people's confused thoughts on the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, with the black, white and red driving the clean graphic image to the forefront of the exhibition space.

Dokhan's piece is a gorgeous black and white portrait of a young man with his skull seeping through his skin. Excellent craftsmanship makes this piece a joy to have been met on the streets, but provides an equally pleasurable experience to admire on a gallery wall.

The rest of the artists tried, and I believe failed, to cleverly experiment with the concept of the show. Sad Panda, whose Pandas have been seen all over the city, wrote a sentence in Arabic that translates into; "Graffiti is street art and this is not a street you sons of scum."

Apparently, the viewer is supposed to find the insult funny or alarming, since it's displayed on a gallery wall aimed at the audience or the gallery curators of the show. The irony is that despite his statement plainly articulating his stance on the matter, he remains one of the featured artists of the exhibit. I'd have rather seen this statement outside the gallery space on the walls of the building itself, vehemently standing by its grounds, because being in the gallery space makes it a cheap and desperate publicity stunt.

The same loosely applies to Adham Bakry's piece, who's writing "TownWhores, Gallery of Contemporary Tart," is barely smirk-worthy.

The remaining artists, Keizer, Charles AKI and Amr Gamal, El Teneen and Hany Khaled, have produced pieces that may have been memorable on the streets — most probably because our city is still not used to the sight of graffiti yet — but in a gallery space, where the severe limitations are unemotionally highlighted, they are easily forgettable.

Kareem Abada's video that follows a Graffiti artist in the streets, is decent, but not quite attention-grabbing.

The overall concept of the exhibition is interesting and right on the pulse of what's trending in the city today, but the expectation for the generated works was much higher, especially during these uncertain times.

"This is not Graffiti" is currently showing at the Townhouse Gallery: 10 El-Nabarawy St., Downtown, Cairo. Tel: (02) 2576 8086. Show closes Oct. 1.



Hend Kheera.





Sad Panda.



Dokhan.



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