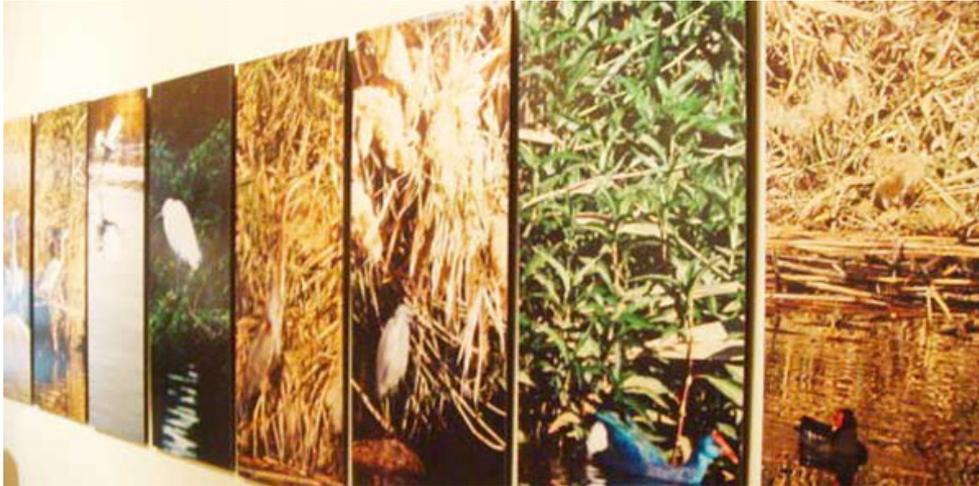


A spellbinding snapshot of Gharb Soheil



A series of photographs by Hoda Baraka aim to draw attention to the pristine beauty of Gharb Soheil in the south of Aswan.



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By **Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt** July 14, 2010, 3:58 pm

Currently showing at the Easel and Camera Gallery in Maadi is a photographic exhibition titled "From Gharb Soheil" by Hoda Baraka.

Inaugurated by Egyptian artist Mohamed Abla, the exhibition opening was a calm and composed affair, despite the magnitude and urgency of the subject matter it tackles.

This is Baraka's first photography exhibition, yet she does not view herself as an artist: She set up this series of photographs in an attempt to bring attention to Egypt's gorgeous scenery, specifically birdlife, and encourage its preservation.

Gharb Soheil, a village located south of Aswan, is considered to be one of the few places left in Egypt whose nature, wildlife and simple beauty remains pristine. Having been "discovered" by foreigners as an area rich in Nubian culture and exquisite wildlife, its locals are wary of potential large-scale touristic investments in their village, thereby destroying its otherwise untarnished environment.

Baraka treats her surroundings with serene yet intense respect. Rarely have we witnessed images of Egyptian suburban landscapes that didn't fall into the cliché trap, and upon hearing of this exhibition, I feared that the work may look unoriginal and all too familiar.

Three particular exceptions aside, this exhibition is far from that.

The three aforementioned photographs all center on men from the region. These images, fortunately placed at the tail end of the exhibition, are the least powerful of all of Baraka's pieces. They lack knowledge of portraiture and passion for the photographed, which Baraka so clearly displays in her other images.

The remaining photographs boast an innate sense of composition, with lines of doorways and windows perfectly balanced to create comfortable arrangements that are as meaningful as they are aesthetically pleasing.

The images of these colorful doorways and windows (all of which are either firmly shut or slightly skewed) inject the work with a sense of mystery — a reminder that a book should not be judged by its cover. The playfulness of their design and color presents a naïve and simplistic existence; yet their cleanliness, order and boldness show inhabitants of strength, organization and pride.

Only pride can describe the excellent series of bird photographs. Baraka captures various types of birds from that region, some of which are threatened with extinction, with expert precision. "They were literally posing for the picture," Baraka says, "They were still and stared back steadily as I was in their territory."

The look of the photographs is ravishing: The birds are shown in various positions, some standing, others dipping in water and one in flight. Two specific images illustrate the talent of a budding photographer.

The first, entitled "Sun Salutation," depicts a bird with semi-spread wings sunbathing on a rock by the Nile. The peace and quiet exhibited by this bird, despite the roaring motor of the boat from which the photographer was shooting, is exceptional.

The other image shows a bird hovering over the Nile, with its reflection mirrored below it. The yellow and ochre of the

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The other image shows a bird hovering over the Nile, with its reflection mirrored below it. The yellows and oranges of the bird's background are typically Egyptian in tone, making the pieces almost emblems of this country's nature, and thereby fulfilling the artist's ultimate objective.

And it's with this objective that the show gains its importance. The exhibition is sponsored by the Center for Environment and Development for the Arab Region and Europe (CEDARE), providing further affirmation to the photographer's seriousness in her quest to raise awareness on environmental issues in Egypt.

However, the pieces are far from dry documentary stills; commercial enough to be sold as genuine artwork, yet not too commercial. Striking that balance is extremely difficult, and can only be accomplished by a photographer with an keen eye and passion for what they're shooting.

"From Gharb Soheil" is a show worth visiting, and it will hopefully not be the last we see from Hoda Baraka.

Easel & Camera Contemporary Art Gallery: 11 /2 Nasr St., New Maadi, beside HSBC Bank, Cairo. Tel: 010 183 4449. Daily from 5-10 pm. Exhibition concludes on July 29.



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