

A splendid showcase of Sameh Ismail's abstract calligraphy



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By **Mariam Hamdy** /Special to Daily News Egypt **August 25, 2011, 5:43 pm**

Although Sameh Ismail has been active in the local art scene for the last 10 years, his work has never really gotten the attention it deserves, until now.

In association with the Zamalek Art Gallery, The Kempinski Hotel is currently holding an exhibition by Ismail.

Ismail is essentially a calligraphist, distinguished for paintings and sketches that markedly stand out from the vast body of calligraphic works in the city. His early works established a particular approach to Arabic text, one of elegant whimsy and a monochrome palette. His words are drawn in the same way a fashion designer draws the fabric flow of a gown, with a sense of freedom and simplicity that rids his text of the sometimes overbearing strength of firm classic calligraphy.

Having followed the work of Ismail from the very beginning, I can attest that he is one of the, sadly, very few artists whose work steadily grows, evolves and transforms to the better. Always maintaining a sense — rather than an element per say — of his own brand, Ismail's latest work at Kempinski marks a rather big leap in his style.

The pieces are predominantly paintings, ranging from manageable sizes to over a meter in both length and width. For those who have seen Ismail's earlier works, this exhibition is surprisingly abstract; one would argue that there are a few pieces devoid of calligraphy altogether.

"I was interested in and inspired by the walls of our city, especially after the revolution," Ismail told Daily News Egypt. "People would write messages or do graffiti and then police/military would cover it up. One party would write a message and the other would paint or write over it, resulting in walls that look like the mess and chaos we are actually living."

Each layer or color is added to the piece with a different temperament — some powdery soft, some jaggedly irritated and others thrown unto the piece in rage, mirroring a society following confused and antagonistic beliefs.

As a way to ease viewers into his latest pieces (and an excellent curatorial decision by Zamalek Art Gallery) the exhibition is led by three framed sketches of Ismail's last exhibition. These are exquisite lessons in composition. It has been a painfully long time since I've seen an ink sketch that displays a masterful use of the medium as well as an innate understanding of balance within the frame.

The calligraphy in these pieces is more visible — though much less so than his even earlier works — and somehow explains the artist's approach to lettering and line to those unfamiliar with his work. They also contrast his vibrant use of colors in the current exhibition, as his earlier works were more monochrome.

Unlike his previous works, which are mainly ink sketches or paintings done in the ink sketch vein; his current exhibition boasts a rich texture. The support has paint dumped on, splashed on, scratched with a knife and carved in by a thin edge. In fact, there are two pieces where things get somewhat excessive, giving the impression that the works is about to get noisier. However, they don't quite slip over the edge. Part of Ismail's success as an artist is his ability to know what works, what doesn't and when to stop — a set of skills that many, if not most, young artists lack today. He's just gotten started on texture, so judging by the rest of his repertoire, one feels confident he'll be able to safely get the hang of it.



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For those who have a problem digesting abstract art, this is a great introductory show to the most elusive of all art forms. The passion with which Ismail approaches the work is palpable, easily acknowledged by the average viewer. On the same note, the works are not purely emotional; there is no sense of neurosis in how these pieces were made. They are very skillfully composed and planned. Once again, Ismail excels at composition, making each piece, no matter how loud in terms of brushstrokes or color it may seem, easily absorbed.

The month of Ramadan is known for the proliferation of calligraphy exhibitions, perhaps due to the spirituality, text and messages that calligraphy usually carries. Of all these shows, Ismail's is the most interesting, bringing calligraphy to the modern world with skill and panache that makes viewing the works a genuinely pleasurable experience.



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