

## A tour in Damon Kowarsky's splendid 'Cities'



Images of Istanbul are characterized by the rich texture of the buildings.

By **Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt** **May 15, 2011, 3:30 pm**

Currently showing at Mashrabia Gallery is an exhibition titled "In Visible Cities" by Damon Kowarsky. As the first show I attend that does not speak of the January 25 Revolution, "In Visible Cities" was a refreshing break and a genuinely interesting step into how art can make one think of the current events without being painfully obvious.

An Australian artist who studied printmaking at the Victorian College of the Arts and the Glasgow School of Art, Kowarsky traveled extensively around the world, most specifically in the Middle East, but more recently along the Silk Road and Uzbekistan. His Mashrabia show consists of a series of prints that record his experience of the cities he encountered.

Printmaking is a technique that can be sadly underestimated in Egypt's modern art milieu. Printmaking is generally perceived to lack the flair of painting and its exclusivity (in terms of art collection — prints are made to be duplicated), while the skill needed for sculpture or drawing is not as clearly evident in a print to the average viewer. This misconception could not be more wrong; printmaking is an exquisite art form, relying on skill, tremendous craftsmanship and a particular sensitivity to line, form and composition that most other art forms can so easily forgo.

All of the qualities are vividly on display in Kowarsky's work. The majority of city images are presented in a slightly larger than A3 size paper divided into three prints, with a few larger pieces of single prints. The depicted cities vary in culture, history and shape — from New York to Istanbul to Cairo.

The artist showcases a large number of prints in the show; some stand out more starkly than others though. Of these are a couple of prints of New York. In a single print, and one of the few that are almost square in frame, a bird's eye view image of New York is seen. As though caught from the window of a tilted plane, the print is beautifully composed to show the lengths of the skyscrapers against one another, juxtaposing slender architecture against stubby short buildings. The choice of shades of deep blues in the foreground fading into distant grays creates depth that makes the print come alive, and eliminates the otherwise two-dimensional effect that printmaking can be accused of.

More beautiful are the images of Istanbul and Cairo, mainly due to the rich texture of their buildings, with Istanbul trumping Cairo in landscape. The prints of the latter, more specifically a bird's eye view of Darb El-Ahmar, are a single landscape interrupted twice to create three consecutive prints. The maze that is created by the mess of buildings and skewed rooftops is reminiscent of M.C. Escher's confusing prints, perfectly capturing the essence of Cairo's chaotic architecture.

The emphasis on line is brilliant, because despite the decided lack of intimate details on the buildings, each carved line leads into the next, making the composition packed with walls and rooftops without being noisy or imposing. How Kowarsky managed to make the otherwise drab and ugly landscape of Cairo's poorer neighborhood an intricate tapestry of line with minimal detail is what makes these prints particularly special.

Easier to love purely for the occasional dome or cone top in the landscape, the images of Istanbul boast the same craftsmanship in the carving of line as the other prints, but added to it is an exceptionally delicate color gradation. Keeping the color scheme between shades of deep blues and grays, the gradation allows for both depth as well as thorough understanding of light in the image. The two prints of Istanbul are particularly interesting, depicted as though they've been taken from a fish eye lens, with a slight distortion on the edges of the image.

Another exceptional print is of Jaisalmer, a town in Rajasthan, India. Here the artist applies a different color scheme — the



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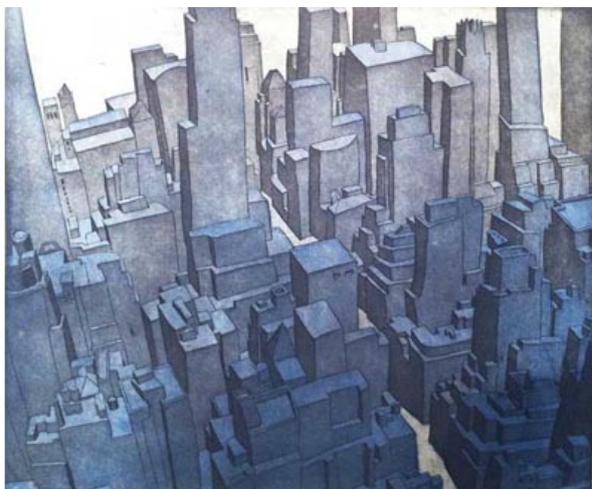
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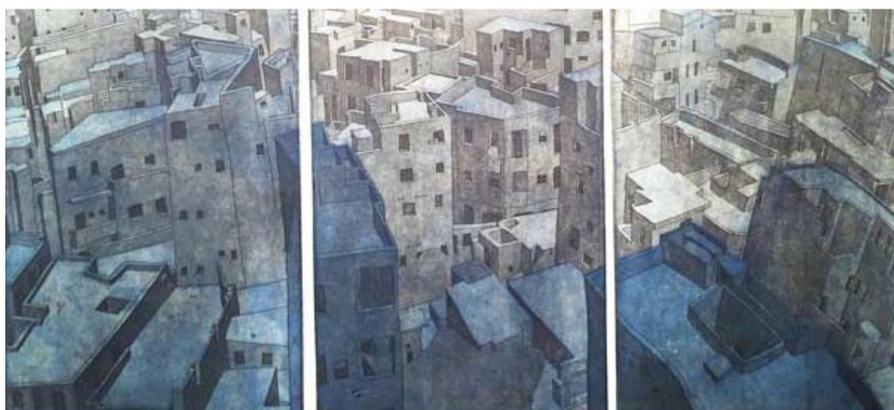
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only print in the whole exhibition that deviates from the blue/gray or plain gray format. Appropriately, Jaisalmer is represented in shades of rusty browns and reds, presenting a hot, dusty yet calm landscape. Two thirds of the landscape is presented as an expanse of rust red color, with only the horizon line carving out building walls — with the occasional yellow square signaling life inside these buildings. In the entire mass of buildings, only a few of them can breathe — the rest are condensed in an almost underground concoction of buildings. The overall effect is simple but strong, like a solid punch.

The rest of the prints vary between the excellence of those mentioned above and the inconsequence of the less interesting. The latter include many prints of planes or helicopters that lack the mystery of the landscape prints. Overall however, Damon Kowarsky's exhibition is not to be missed — if only just to prove that printmaking can be just as versatile and touching as painting and drawing.



One New York print is beautifully composed to show the lengths of the skyscrapers against one another.



The maze created by the mess of buildings and skewed rooftops captures the essence of Cairo's chaotic architecture.



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