

An amateurish exploration of the self



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By **Mariam Hamdy** / Special to Daily News Egypt **August 18, 2009, 2:00 am**

The Townhouse Gallery is known for the innumerable workshops and activities it provides aspiring young artists who wish to develop their talent and enhance their culture with their work. The gallery's latest presentation is an exhibit titled "But a Shadow of Myself, the fruit of Townhouse's Outreach Program led by artist Alexandra Zevin.

The walls of the first space are covered with collages created by participants. The idea of the workshop was to explore themes of identity, perception and communication. Participants traced their shadows and paired them with words that best describe them.

The second space is lined with black paper covered in chalk writing, apparently by the viewers and visitors of the gallery, allowing the audiences to contribute their own input. The third and final space features a projection of three videos: animated collages by the participants directed by Zevin, a behind-the-scenes video of the process of the workshop, and an animated painting by Youssef Ibrahim describing his own world.

The concept behind the exhibition seems straightforward overall; as far as a workshop is concerned, the show does look indeed as though it is the product of a project. Yet an aspect that one can almost always trace in such exhibitions, especially those featured at Townhouse, is the palpable amateurishness of the end result.

Although the young artists may in fact be amateurs, the exhibition looks like a high school project rather than a formal exhibition presented in one of the most frequented art spaces in the country.

The most distressing area of the show is the space with the audience's contributions. The space is too crowded, haphazardly organized, looking like an abandoned blackboard rather than a wall of street graffiti. It exercises no command on the viewer and doesn't truly encourage participation. Having come across many successful audience-based installations, it was the presentation of this room that failed its concept and not the opposite.

The participants' artworks are lined up inside the silhouette of thought bubbles that arise from the silhouette portraits beneath them. The aesthetic of this basic concept comes across as naive rather than simple or minimalistic. What is thoroughly absent from the work and its presentation is a sense of savviness and wit. The overall effect appears to be safely guarded and conservative, rather than experimental and wild as one would have hoped.

The highlight of the show is the featured videos. The animated works in particular are quite exceptional. Depicting a frame by frame movement, one becomes instantly aware of the thought process of the participant and how he/she has arrived to their final piece.

Zevin and Ibrahim's direction is absorbing, entertaining as much as aesthetically rich. Mirit Mikhail's piece represents the actual spirit of the workshop in progress, allowing the viewers a more thorough understanding of the workshop process in the hope that more people will participate.

Sadly, the youthful spirit bursting in that video is absent in the work they have produced.

The intention behind the Outreach Program is commendable and there are hints of potential that can be traced sporadically throughout the exhibit, but it requires more decisive curation. The overall show is enjoyable, but is more catered for the friends and family of the participants rather than the general public.

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The exhibition opens at 7 pm, Townhouse Gallery, 10 El-Nabarawy St., Downtown, Cairo. Tel: (02) 2576 8086.



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