

Arab reality meets abandoned childhood memories in new Townhouse shows



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By **Mariam Hamdy**

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Townhouse Gallery is currently hosting two shows dealing with the personal and the global, highlighting Cairo's ability to maintain a distinct culture despite its consistent dilution into the international mainstream.

The first is an installation by Ayman Ramadan entitled "Hekaya (Story) and the other is photography exhibition by Adham Bakry called "Mat El Kalam (Words are Dead). The mere titles of the shows, not to mention their stimulating postcard invites, suffice to propel anyone curious enough to pay them a visit.

And the two shows don't disappoint indeed. Adham Bakry's first solo exhibition is a collection of photographs from various Arab countries featuring Arabic typography or calligraphy, either in the form of posters, signage or just street graffiti.

Drawing on the personal customization of international methods of signage and advertising, Bakry focuses on "the local versus the global: theme. The humor featured in the collection is attributed, not only to the sometimes ridiculous content of the messages, but to the sly techniques Bakry uses to place those messages within the composition of his photograph.

The photographs are well balanced, with particular attention to color composition. The latter is mostly grainy and boasts an abundance of texture, with a splash of pop colors that bring out the text in each photograph.

One remarkable piece shows a woman, wearing niqab (face veil), walking underneath a stenciled sign reading "Factory for Rabbit Cages. Another sees a sign, placed on the smallest expanse of a wall between two streets rampaged with speeding cars, with "For Fixing Shoes written underneath an arrow.

The connotations may or may not have been intended by the photographer, but the irony certainly is, and that's precisely what the title of the exhibition implies. "Mat El Kalam is an Egyptian proverb meaning "there is nothing left to say; a kind of poetic equivalent to the excessively used "No comment.

One does in fact fall speechless on entering Townhouse's factory space, where Ramadan's installation is exhibited. "Hekaya, Ramadan's third solo presentation at Townhouse, is basically a larger than life swing; its height double that of an average swing and its width equally so.

Behind the swing is a video magnifying the middle area of the harness that holds a child, moving back and forth at the same speed of the actual swing. The video exaggerates the already haunting emptiness of the structure and the creaky sound of rusty metal is blasted through speakers with every move of the harness. The haunting stillness of the secluded site renders it quite intimidating to approach. The floor of the space is damp, injecting the entire place with a humid and stuffy air.

The swing has always been a symbol of childhood, innocence and joyful memories; a sign of a place where imagination soared to infinite heights, a place devoid of any worries or complications. Ramadan has managed to deconstruct these notions, using the swing in a radically contrasting context to comment on the state of the world.

The swing, once a place of solace, is seen through Ramadan's perspective as an eerie and unstable mass of rusty metal. It is at once sad and horrific, nostalgic and alarmingly present. It laments our reluctance to preserve it, reminding us of the fear we gradually developed of coming near it to salvage its remains or to at least throw it away. One is incapable of anything but

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simply leave it all behind.

The sheer magnitude of the structure is overwhelming, reminiscent of the swings found in local Moulids (traditional carnivals). Again, it is inexplicably Egyptian in texture and ambiance, yet the swing also remains a universal quintessential ingredient of childhood.

The fusion between what people can identify as "Egyptian (and that's never something concrete. You know it when you see it) and what's foreign in essence always makes up for an interesting, multifaceted work that with an eye on issues lurking beneath the art veneer.

Accomplished, well studied and well-presented, both shows succeed in provoking thought and emotion, be it a nod to the irony of our city and the world it's in or a heart jerk to the current state it reached.



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