

Art space flourishes in slumping economy



A piece by Hossam Sakr, an artist of international acclaim, whose works are on display at Lot 17.

By **Mariam Hamdy** December 11, 2008, 2:00 am

While it's not unusual to hear that there aren't enough art galleries in Cairo, a lack of purpose can turn an initially good project into a mediocre affair - as is the case with a few galleries currently operating in this city.

Founders who have learned from these sizable failures are the current owners and organizers of the newest gallery space to grace the streets of Zamalek: Lot 17.

The quaint nook is big enough to house a considerable number of paintings, yet small enough for the average viewer to contemplate all of them with a 360-degree twirl. Not that their target is the average viewer; on the contrary, Lot 17 has a list of distinctive clientele that helps the gallery fulfill its ultimate purpose: to sell the works it displays.

Although art viewers may find this objective somewhat inferior to the fundamental purpose behind the creation of art, or perhaps even demeaning in that it equates art to the functional bazaar of the applied arts of design, one has to applaud Lot 17's approach.

Lot 17 hosts a new show every three weeks, aiming at creating exhibitions that are like its space: brief, comprehensive and with an intense punch. The works are chosen according to content, color, size and salability, the latter being a characteristic not many gallery owners would admit to. One has to question whether that is a good thing.

The main problem with many Cairo galleries is that they are as jaded as the artists they exhibit. The essential elements for any exhibition are the Romantic (a characteristic generally left to the artist), the practical and the analytical component. With a mixture of experience and an eye for the avant garde, a good curator can steer the interests of art collectors towards the artists they represent with some simple marketing skills. Only a few of the well-known galleries, who have a clear vision of their purpose are capable of doing so.

Lot 17 will likely become one of those spaces. Kicking off with a collection from Omar El Nagdy, the gallery not only managed to establish itself among its competitors, but also held its own with the representation of such a distinguished artist.

The gallery's purpose is to create a place where art collectors and, more interestingly, interior designers can buy pieces that would complement their homes and add further value to their investments. The founders of the gallery space are, as a matter of fact, interior designers who have realized the importance of visual arts in the completion and finesse of their designs.

Lot 17 is not only concerned with distinguished art collectors and dealers, but aims at raising interest in the visual arts by facilitating the buying processes. The gallery has established a purchasing deal with Citibank, where the art purchased at exhibitions can be paid in installments over a period of time that is at the clients' convenience and according to the banks financing plan.

An afterthought to the more old-school galleries, this idea of paying for works of art in installments is ideal as the arts are probably the only commodity (if they are to be considered as such) that remain almost entirely unaffected by economic downturns.

It was less than two months ago, in the trenches of the international economic downfall, that Damien Hirst, the infamous pioneer of the Young British Artists movement in the UK, sold out the most notoriously expensive three-day auction at



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Christies' Auction house in London, to gross almost \$200 million.

It is this passion to own what emotionally touches or what visually translates into prestige which drives many art collectors, and not just the love of the medium. Lot 17 understands that and targets at servicing it.

Currently, the gallery is hosting the works of Hossam Sakr, another artist of international acclaim whose work is instantly recognizable.

Hopefully, the success of the gallery will allow for an expansion of its space, as it seems that currently, its ambition overtakes its size. One could only hope that it would remain as strong and not lose its momentum as many of its peers have done.



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