

Arts chocked by 2011 intensity, with rare glimpses of hope



Gamal Abdel Nasser's whimsical sculptures were one of this year's highlights.



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By **Mariam Hamdy/ Special to Daily News Egypt** **December 25, 2011, 5:55 pm**

This year has been an emotional roller coaster for Egyptians, and it seems that the ride will continue to thrill and terrify its way into 2012. Our social, political and economic milieu has changed so drastically this year that no one can honestly gauge what will happen next, or what exactly needs to be done for our nation to firmly get back on its feet. What's certain, however, is the fact that we need to work harder than we ever have to redeem our country's social fabric, economy, trust in its government and ultimately, belief in its own potential.

This most certainly applies to the arts, which unfortunately have not fared well this year. An obvious reason for this would be the fact that a lot of artists are either heavily involved in the protests, or are rendered speechless as spectators. Those who try to produce fall short of their potential; if artists are unsure of their position, the work almost always comes out washy and vague.

Graffiti has had its fair share of coverage, and perhaps it deserved it considering the vacuum of production in other mediums. Graffiti artists ranged in their abilities from excellent depictions of stencil masterpieces, to the average spray painted opinion here and there. Some of these graffiti 'artists' lost their cause with their inclusion in the Townhouse show "This is not Graffiti", where the institutionalizing of the medium has both rendered it null as well as belittled the subject matter it was discussing. It was a publicity stunt that catered to a crowd that seemed somewhat removed from the happenings in the city at the time.

Most other galleries hosted shows that either attempted to remain relevant by exhibiting photography from the revolution or helping young up and coming artists present their work. The former set of exhibitions were interesting in chronicling the events that have undergone, yet as the year rolled on, the images have proved to be a lot more sensationalist and dramatized than they actually were.

It's unfortunate that we now have to look back at these images with sadness as seemingly not much has changed, yet it was quite clear that they had no longevity to start with.

The shows aiding the budding artists were great in sentiment, yet unfortunately the most anticipated of which fell flat in resonating with the general public.

Tache's group show 'Pulse', presenting 47 new artists, had good intentions, yet sadly was overzealous and cumbersome in its outcome. It has to be stated however, that Tache has had it tough this year. Debuting its first show and space on Jan. 22, the gallery has barely had a breather in its attempt to establish itself during this year's intense turn of events. Despite its series of barely interesting exhibitions, Tache managed to end their year with a bang, almost matching its incredible debut show "Huda Lutfi Retrospective". Currently, it is hosting an exhibition of photography commemorating a book on Siwa: an excellent show and one that can finally aid the gallery in taking a more mature and guided approach to exhibitions.

Other galleries made the brave move of inaugurating their debut shows during this volatile year, which gave those who follow the arts scene a sense of hope in the belief some people continue to have in Egypt and its future in the midst of those packing for more "stable" countries. Gallery Misr and The Gallery opened this year with interesting and solid shows. Gallery Misr presented "Selections", a group show of some of the biggest artists in the city, and The Gallery debuted with an original exhibition celebrating "100 years of Collage". Both spaces are excellent in terms of how they are laid out, and set the bar for new galleries fairly high.

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Other notable galleries such as The Zamalek Art Gallery and Safar Khan have played it safe, with a steady strew of exhibitions presenting work by established or young but seasoned artists in the scene. Zamalek Art Gallery provided momentary relief from the current state of affairs with Gamal Abdel Nasser's sculpture show, which was a genuine joy to visit. The whimsical collection created an out of country experience— a much needed departure from the otherwise difficult news we're bombarded with everyday, and a feat in and of itself.

Safar Khan presented the young Egyptian spirit abroad with the "To Egypt With Love" exhibition, hosting the works of fresh young photographers, with bona fide images of Egypt during the revolution.

Otherwise, galleries have either repeated old shows in an attempt to boost sales, such as Al Masar Gallery's repeat exhibition on figural representations, or presented us with classic collections by contemporary Egyptian masters. Of these are Picasso Gallery's retrospective of late president Gamal Abdel-Nasser (not to be confused with the sculptor), which despite being a brilliant collection of work, raised an eyebrow in terms of choice of subject matter.

Generally, the art scene has somewhat drowned in the high seas of current events, and that's not too much of a surprise. A positive note is the fact that it continues to try, the negative is that it doesn't try hard enough. Galleries are ready to take in artists and are opening in hoards, allowing all kinds of producers and mediums to present themselves. The shocking realization is that they lack artists. Even when good artists are found, they lack a level of production with enough consistency that a gallery which plans its exhibitions months in advance can rely on. Artists have begun to only work towards an exhibition opening date, which is a heartbreaking point in any creator's career, as well as the start of the downfall of genuine art creation.

One can only hope that the new year will bring inspiration to those who are choked by the current state of affairs, and shake the dust off those who have slowed down their production.



Bassem Samir was one of the photographers featured in Safar Khan's "To Egypt With Love."



The Gallery debuted with an original exhibition celebrating "100 years of Collage", including this piece by Hany Rashed.

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