

Bad display choices mar Safar Khan's summer collection



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By **Mariam Hamdy** August 14, 2008, 2:00 am

Zamalek is known for its elite collection of art galleries, compared to the rather contemporary galleries such as Townhouse and Artellewa that are more concerned with sales.

These galleries include Safar Khan, Zamalek Art Gallery, Extra and Picasso, all of whom employ the summer season as their peak time for art sales.

Archives are sifted through, paintings are dusted off and previously exhibited works are tastefully put together: The curation becomes about showing off the pieces rather than creating a wholesome and well-planned show.

There is a general, common perception that summer exhibitions are irrelevant to art connoisseurs, but are of great significance to art dealers and buyers.

Although summer might be regarded as a slow season for galleries, it's actually not. Most of the galleries profits are made during these comprehensive exhibitions that showcase a collection of pieces from past shows.

Generally, and this is certainly the case for contemporary galleries all around the world, most galleries don't seem to the average art consumer with regards to sales. Public opinion regarding sellable art seems to differ from the opinion of the gallery owners in terms of display choices. This is not only detrimental to artists, but can easily push back art movements in a city like Cairo where contemporary art isn't mainstream, yet wishes to be.

On that note, more galleries need to be established in Cairo for contemporary art to enter the mainstream, but the current balance between privately-owned galleries, both financially and artistically driven, is heading in the right direction.

Comprehensive shows like the simply titled "The Collection at Safar Khan gallery this month help strike that balance.

Housing an eclectic collection of paintings, Safar Khan has created a quaint little space with a spectrum of works from abstract, to landscape to portraiture, with equally varied price ranges.

Chief among the pieces displayed were the portraits by Souad Mardam-Beh, the most eye catching canvases on entering the small exhibition space. Large and beautiful, the portraits are intense and full of texture.

On the other hand, the drawings of Zakaria El Zeny are the complete opposite; pieces that lack texture but are full of personality. A collection of small sketches depicting voluptuous Egyptian women, each piece is witty and realistic, despite the caricature approach El Zeny ascribes to his feverish lines.

Equally grabbing are the beautifully lit paintings by Nagli Bassilious. One piece in particular, depicting a woman and her children in a small alleyway are eerily real: The way the Bassilious captures the moonlight on the bodies of his subjects and their surroundings are indicative of pure skill and observance.

The same could be said for the excellent charcoal drawing by Hamed Abdallah and the equally skilled Hanna Stevenson whose landscapes are dreamy and well captured.

On a more abstract note, and one that is decidedly different from the rest of the pieces on display, the paintings by Emad

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On a more abstract note, and one that is decidedly different from the rest of the pieces on display, the paintings by Elnaou Abou Zeid are excellent studies in color and tonality.

Each of these pieces would be a great addition to any art lover's collection, yet the way the paintings are exhibited is unfortunate. It needs to be stated that the Safar Khan gallery is an exceptionally small space but that hasn't quite presented itself as a problem in its previous shows.

The works of "The Collection" exhibition are haphazardly displayed, with all the pieces appearing to be hung wherever empty wall space was available, disregarding how each painting compliments the other.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to sell. Striving artists do need the cash after all in order to continue working.

However, these intentions need not be as blatant as Safar Khan has made them during this month's exhibition, a major misstep that may actually backfire on both the work and its sales.



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