

Beginner's luck eludes 'Oum El Dounia'



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By **Mariam Hamdy** **September 10, 2008, 2:00 am**

Art critics often find it difficult to strike a balance between polite assessment and blatant honesty. It's even trickier when the artist in question is an amateur: Does one take the supportive approach and laud the sheer effort, or the brutally honest approach that doesn't discriminate between amateurs and veterans?

A perfect example of such a quandary is Villa Grey's current exhibition "Oum El Dounia (Mother of the World) by Dr El Sayyed M. El Sayad.

El-Sayad has been a practicing physician in some of the leading hospitals in Cairo, retiring in 2005. Having participated in several collective shows in the past, "Oum El Dounia marks El-Sayad's first solo show.

The show is a collection of photographs, the subjects of which are predominantly compositions of old Cairo, save for a few portraits. The angles from which the photographs were taken are interesting, albeit not particularly original.

Most of the photographs depict typical views of el-hara (alleyways), along with a few details of architectural elements that can be found in any architecture textbook. El-Sayad nostalgic look lacks the charm of location photography and, consequently, the images appear to embody basic ideas that rarely come to life.

The most intriguing of the pieces on display are the portraits. The images exhume a sense of intimacy that reflects the connection El-Sayad has forged with his subjects. Ranging from the sobering drama to the colloquially amusing, the subjects of these portraits feel authentic, echoing the title of the show that attempts to capture the true essence of the capital.

Perhaps the reason these portraits work best is that most of them show the talent and potential of the photographer, blending light and composition in harmonious matrimony that feels natural and vibrant. Alas, the same can't be said about the rest of the exhibition, which relies heavily on uncalled artificiality.

The blatant use of Photoshop is a taboo for photographers of El-Sayad's ilk. It's no secret that numerous photographers use Photoshop for both commercial and artistic objectives. The artistic, in particular, veer towards experimentation and the key approach in crafting such images is subtlety.

Unfortunately, Dr El-Sayad totally missed the mark. It's clear from first glance that the contrast in the images has been dramatically heightened. The masking, which is the separation between various areas of the photograph, was not tackled with delicacy, leaving vast outlines between different colors in what otherwise would've been truly remarkable images.

On a similar note, the use of filters is quite difficult to conceal or ignore. Nothing could scream 'amateur' more than the use of a filter in a photograph, or in any other area for that matter. Filters should remain where they most prominently appear: in the first year of art schools.

The problem with the amateur use of Photoshop is that it does more damage than improving the quality of the photographs. The photographs are much more appealing from a distance than they are up close; usually a sign of an unsuccessful photograph.

Not all the photographs in the show employ the added effects of Photoshop though, yet the ones that don't (with the exception of the portraits) appear somewhat dull and more often than not, out of focus.

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However - and this is the pat on the back part of this review - the exhibition shows a genuine belief and fascination in the subject matter, which may be its sole saving grace. Dr El-Sayad's transparent love for Cairo is evident in his photographs, regardless of the failed method he employed in their creation.

Oum El Dounia is currently showing at Villa Grey, 24 Abdallah Al Kateb St, Dokki, Giza. Tel: (02) 3338 2184.



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