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Cairo according to Mohamed Abla



Artist Mohamed Abla.



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By **Mariam Hamdy** / Special to Daily News Egypt **January 29, 2011, 1:39 am**

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With 50 successful solo shows and numerous awards under his belt, Mohamed Abla has established himself as one of Egypt's most prominent contemporary artists. And while fame and fortune usually go to the artist's head, Abla remains as humble as ever; a man who simply cannot survive without painting.

A cheerfully candid and unpretentiously insightful man of 56, Abla is an artist who has spent his entire life pursuing his art. His uncontrollable urge to draw and paint started at an early age, much to the chagrin of his father who deliberately thwarted his passion, regarding it as a waste of time. While his mother did the best she could to cover for her son, she could only do so much: Abla's father eventually shut him out of the house when he resisted demands to join military school, choosing instead to enroll in the Faculty of Fine Arts in Alexandria, from which he graduated in 1977.

There is something uncannily sincere in Abla's way of telling his story; there's no sense of rebellion or adolescent revolt. He plainly felt that he could not avoid making art.

"Art is vague to me," Abla tells Daily News Egypt. "It's like a bodily function, like eating and drinking: I just can't help doing it. I need to do it." Never bitter or remorseful, Abla's calm and unapologetic demeanor is as endearing as it is disarming. For those who patiently follow Abla's work, there is a clear connection between each of his later and more mature works and his city. Abla's canvases burst with color, lines and compositions that cannot be explained or wholly understood if you haven't lived in or at least visited Egypt. Abla blatantly states that no matter where he has worked, he has never managed to produce art anywhere but in Egypt.

"It's not patriotism or nationalism, but I just don't get along with any other place," he says. "I've traveled all over the world, but nowhere fits me like Egypt does. It reminds me of myself somehow."

Starting on an intimate level and progressively expanding his canvases, Abla has slowly investigated his own feelings about his city. One of his most intriguing excursions is "Nostalgia," an insightful look at the social structure of Egyptian society recorded from the time when Abla was a young man.

Abla then drifted to the other extreme, presenting us with "Labyrinth," a series of paintings showing Egypt from a bird's eye view. From the tight micro to the exploding macro, Abla has managed to show us Egypt at its best.

An impressionistic affair, the paintings are best seen at a particular distance: not too far so that the colors can be deciphered, yet not too close that the brushstrokes become a chaos in which one would get lost. And in many ways, this technique embodies his relationship with Egypt.

"When you're far from her [Egypt] you want to get back and breathe in her character, but too much of her can drive you mad, you need to always maintain a comfortable distance," Abla explains.

"Labyrinth" remains Abla's most successful show to date; its biggest strength is the honesty with which Abla approaches his subject matter: Cairo.

His resilience in being true to himself is a hidden thread felt through all his paintings, and it is this truth that draws viewers to his work. Abla states that he does not have any plans to move out of Egypt, and he is proud to be an Egyptian artist.

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his work. Abla abides by no external demands, be it galleries, finances or fame, nor by a trademark style or medium.

The artist has worked almost exclusively with oil early on in his career, moving around six years ago to acrylic paint, which provides the artist with the freedom to work faster and with less constraint. He also worked frequently with video and installation, where he felt that motion and audio were required to present his concept best, as was the case with the show "Family Tree" exhibited in Germany in 2008.

Despite his consistent experimentation with different media and modes of expression, Abla contends that his art will always be defined by painting.

"Painting is sacred to me," he says. "It needs deep thought and true reflection in its execution. The process itself is sacred, regardless of the outcome. This is not the case with video or installation, since they are just vehicles for when I yearn for movement in my work, but not an end in their own right."

"Yearning" is a verb frequently used by Abla. Again and again, he speaks of how there is so much room for the arts to grow in Cairo. He is an advocate of young talents, never refusing a novice who needs his advice or personal support. He also doesn't limit himself to any space, allowing his installations, videos, and paintings to be shown in several locations at a time.

In a show of support to Cairo's growing art scene, Abla plans to exhibit his work at the recently opened Tache gallery in Designopolis. With this show, he hopes to present a break from his city escapades through a series of figural representations titled "Chasing the Light." When asked to elaborate further, Abla slyly states that he is "still in the process of chasing the light," refusing to indulge further.

It seems we'll have to wait until the show's opening to witness the light that would be a progression of one of Egypt's most dynamic artists.



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