

Cairo in the alternate eyes of Juan Carlos Noria



The image of four veiled women in the middle of concocted Cairo background is linear and offers a fresh views of the city.

By **Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt** July 1, 2010, 3:09 pm

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Currently showing at Articulate Baboon in Designopolis is an exhibition by graffiti artist Juan Carlos Noria. Born in Caracas, Venezuela and raised in Ottawa, Canada, Noria was known early on as a figure skater, then a skateboarder and now is a full time graffiti artist and an ardent advocate of live painting.

His new exhibit, titled "Cairo," is as interesting as his career path, ranging from comic-strips to realistic photography. He translated his experience of the Egyptian capital into a collection of paintings that in turn represent how he saw the city. All samples of Noria's exhibit presented here do not do the work justice; the painting approach treads a thin line between painting, sketching and spraying, all rolled into one.

The pieces vary in size, from small to mural-size work, all of which depict different facets of Cairo. The work can be regarded on two levels: the content and the technical aesthetic. The latter boasts a unique skillfulness: The spray painting is quite astute. The use of spray paint consistently reminds the viewers that the creator of the work is a graffiti artist in essence.

Having said that, the paintings stimulate a feeling of discomfort. The work appears blurred, with details in both the fore and background creating confusion in regards to space — a feature not necessarily perceived as negative.

The expert use of spray paint however shows a talented artist, bending the difficult and broad medium into functioning like oil or acrylic in all their precision. It's a shame though that spray paint was heavily manipulated to function like oil or acrylic, not given the opportunity to behave as it would on a public wall space. It would have been more intriguing to see graffiti artwork about a city that is so intolerant to graffiti on its walls.

The content, on the other hand, varies from the cliché to the genuinely insightful. The cliché should be excused; it's predominantly the work that directly pertains to Khan El-Khalili (Khan El Khalili chairs, hanging merchandise in stalls...etc), a reflection of a foreigner's experience of Egypt. The more insightful work comes in two styles, one with a comic approach to social commentary, the other being more implied depth of meaning through landscape. The comics are interesting — straightforward, colorful and sketchy.

Personal favorites include a small thin landscape canvas, charting the evolution of cars and taxis into Egyptian men on horses in the middle of the city. The other depicts four veiled women in the middle of concocted Cairo background. Conceptually, the images are linear without much depth; they are principally alternate, fresh views on Cairo.

Of the more painterly canvases, the best pieces are the ones that show Cairo with all its beauty and darkness simultaneously. The landscapes that Noria portrays show a sliver of lights in the distance, whereas the rest of the canvas is shrouded by pitch black darkness in the foreground.

Not to wax poetic, but the obvious "light at the end of the tunnel" concept springs quickly to mind, and is expertly presented here that the work feels both mature and genuine, far removed from the fiery reactionary works of graffiti.

Grffiti has always been perceived as a form of 'low art,' yet neither the gallery space nor the artists pay any mind to that belief. The exhibition is typical of Articulate Baboon's approach, presenting a young and fresh look on contemporary themes.



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NORIA'S work is aesthetically delightful, definitely worth a visit, particularly for art students, if only to study his skillful use of his medium and how he presents it in a fashion that can only be positioned as fine art.

Articulate Baboon Gallery, Shop B105b, Designopolis, KM 38 Cairo/Alex Desert Road, Sheikh Zayed, 7 pm (Closes July 15).



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