

'Contemporaries Views' from Egypt's finest artists



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By **Mariam Hamdy** **September 4, 2008, 2:00 am**

Featuring some of the best works showcased in Cairo in months, Masar's current show "Contemporary Views created a niche for itself and the gallery hosting it among the repetitive theme of collective exhibitions.

Following the lukewarm end of this summer's art season, I couldn't have been less excited about attending yet another collective art show. The last recent shows were more concerned with emptying their artworks cupboards than presenting solid shows.

That's not the case with "Contemporary Views.

The gallery space itself, located in Zamalek, is praiseworthy. The impeccable precision put into creating a space where artwork is the focal point, rather than the location as in the case of Townhouse Gallery for example, should put Masar at the top of Cairo's preeminent galleries.

The floors are made of dark polished wood, the walls are spotlessly white. The lighting is well directed, elegantly highlighting the displayed artwork. Despite the belief that these elements are blatant ingredients of any gallery, they are, as a matter of fact, yet to be adopted by many, if not most, of the gallery spaces and their curators in Cairo.

The same could be said about the current exhibition. The pieces are handpicked; belonging to what director of the gallery Waleed Abdel Khalek calls the "pioneers of the third generation of contemporary Egyptian artists. Featuring sculpture, painting, graphic design and photography, the pieces include the works of novice artists as well as established names of the contemporary art scene.

Chief among those reputable artists are Adel El Siwi, Mohamed Abla and Mounir Canaan to name a few. This group have been often been accused of becoming victims of their own brands. Whether this assumption is true or not, their works, displayed at Masar, doesn't fail to impress.

Instantly recognizable, El Siwi's androgynous portraits are at once disarmingly affectionate and alien. Similarly, Abla's paintings of Cairo's crowds reek of nostalgia for a time that is in fact not quite in the past as we might deem it to be. Canaan's signature style is detected through his channeling of different media of collage and paint with astonishing ease.

Peppered among these pieces are the uncouth yet welcomed interruptions of Khaled Hafez: loud and colorful painting collages quoting ancient Egyptian relief but with a twist. His paintings are always amusing, appearing macho from a distance yet vulnerable from up close.

Pertaining to that same quality are the paintings of Asmaa El Nawawi, specifically a double portrait of a woman adorned with intricate designs of gold patterns. Distantly quoting Gustave Klimt, the female subjects in these portraits look proud and defiant yet trapped in their own adornment.

The contradictory features in all these works seem to be the underlying theme of the show. The abstractions of Hamdy Atteia's earthy canvases, Taha Hussein's delicately weaved brush strokes, Gehan Seliman's organized amoebic shapes and Sameh Ismail's explosive calligraphy all have a dual personality. They all appear to be overbearing and intangible, yet on closer inspection, the pieces speak of their artists' struggle to capture an emotion or a fleeting thought.

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The piece that stands out as the strongest is Essam Darwish's series of sculptures. Three rectangular chrome structures stand on an edge in a slightly concave shape. It takes a fraction of a second to realize that the rectangular metallic object is molded in the shape of a female lower abdomen: the mound of a woman's lower belly. The belly button is the focal point of all the three sculptures, each presents a different female figure.

The sculptures are simply magnificent, luring the viewer past the cold chrome to experience the warmth of a sensual female figure. The material somehow contradicts the subject; or does it? Collective group shows at various other galleries this summer exuded a demoralizing air of salesmen. Al-Masar's "Contemporary Views" has managed to distance itself from the rest, creating in its stead an excellent perspective of Egypt's contemporary art scene.

Al-Masar gallery: Behler's Mansion, 157B, 26 July St., Ground Floor, Zamalek. Tel: 02 2736 8537, 010 067 0705. Open from 8 pm.



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