

Egyptian stars make an unremarkable 'visit' in Hanfaninha exhibit



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By **Mariam Hamdy / Special to Daily News Egypt** **September 10, 2009, 2:00 am**

I've always been weary of being an art critic rather than a supportive advocate of arts. It's difficult, when the artist under scrutiny is a young, aspiring one, and there's a thin line between harshness and plain honesty. But poor art is poor art; to water down the inadequacies of a certain art is, in effect, to conceal its weakness.

Currently showing at Hanfaninha art gallery, a new space known for exhibiting the works of younger creators, is Emma James's debut show "Re-portrays/claims/captures/visits. This collection is essentially an 'Egyptian-ness' representation of a 20-year-old British young woman who has lived in Cairo for 18 years.

The works are mainly canvases that encompass what appear to be printed photographs of predominately Egyptian stars. The images have been filtered into black and white then painted unto canvases. The end result appears to be manipulated Photoshop images painted in acrylic unto canvases.

The strongest asset of the pieces on display is their composition. The images are cropped, mirrored and balanced in the rectangular canvases in a very skillful manner. The exceptionally well-colored series of Om Kulthoum images rightfully take an entire wall. The unfortunate excessive use of black tones is somewhat diluted by the very selective treatment of yellow and green tints. Nevertheless, the lasting impression you get from these images is been there, done that.

To be fair, the collection is quite pleasant to look at. With a few exceptions, most of the pieces would look just fine as wall decoration in an office or a retail store. It's quite palpable though that James doesn't intend on selling coach art but rather more serious paintings, and herein lies the true shortcoming of this collection.

The one question that immediately hit me as soon I finished inspecting James' show is this: Do young artists research the milieu in which they're about to debut their artwork at all? One would've thought that James and her young peers would take a tour around galleries in the city to consider how their work would fare.

James' pieces, despite being decoratively pretty, show a superficial view of the idea of 'glamor' in Egypt; a flat concept that has been replicated by numerous artists to death. The employment of Egyptian icons such as Souad Hosni, Tahiya Karioka, Samia Gamal and the legendary Um Kulthoum, as well as Farid Al-Atrash, Omar Sharif and Adel Emam, has been exhausted throughout the years. James has in fact used the exact images previously employed in coasters created by Equinox and sold at Diwan, to the wall art of Abou El Sid restaurant.

It's not that these subjects have become cliché; it would be a grave mistake to imply as such. Yet their treatment in James's work: the filtering, the repetition of the images, the addition of decorative gold and silver coins and the overall Warholian "pop touch, has been excessively executed within the same exact context in dozens of cultures along the past 50 years.

I expected that a young, inspired, multicultural artist would have approached such subject matter in a more original way, dissimilar to this rampant style that has overtaken Cairo since the late alertness to graphic design as an art form in the early 90s.

Despite these unforgivable flaws, going to James's show would make for a nice stroll after iftar, particularly if you haven't visited the excellent location of the Hanfaninha gallery yet.

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No to a bloody future for Egypt

Hanfaninha Art Gallery, 41, Mohamed Mazhar St., Zamalek, Cairo; 8 pm. Tel: 012 344 2114



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