

## Egypt's 'Potterist' unleashes sublime creations



The bizarre proportions are alluring and do not leave the viewer unbalanced.

By **Mariam Hamdy** / Special to Daily News Egypt **June 18, 2009, 2:00 am**

It's somewhat difficult to believe that an exhibition of clay pots could be such an altering experience. Pottery, despite being an age-old medium and respected art form, is sometimes regarded as limiting when it comes to the actual execution. The current show held at Al-Masara gallery proves this assumption to be completely unfounded.

The exhibition, titled "The Potterist: Muhammad Mandour, features the work of the artist currently considered one of the pioneers of modern pottery in the Middle East. Muhammad Mandour's exhibition hosts an array of his latest creations: Modern expressions of pots with both Islamic and Pharaonic connotations.

Born and raised in Fustat, Cairo - Egypt's, and probably the region's, most renowned neighborhood for the art of pottery - Mandour learned the craft at a young age. Having won numerous awards, including the prestigious Venice Biennale in 2002, Mandour has managed to develop his craft into an exquisite art form. He continues to hone his creations in his home at Fustat where his unmatched skill was nurtured.

On entering the gallery space, viewers are immediately caught up with the soothing color and organic shapes of the pots. The palette that the artist uses contains a beautiful variety of flesh tones and grays, all of which further lends to the purity of the pieces.

The only break in the color and texture take shape in the form of a few pieces that are lacquered and smooth, rather than matte and rough. These pieces are best described as delicious, appearing to be made out of blocks of melting chocolate. Their form is superb and unparalleled.

The structure of the rest of the pots is alluring in its bizarre proportions: The main body of the pot appears like a fully-blossomed womb while the neck of the pot is miniscule in comparison. Yet this lack of proportion does not leave the viewer unbalanced, on the contrary; the stretched body of the pots extends a light and airborne feel, very much like a balloon.

The effect of the pots can only be truly experienced firsthand simply because their sheer size and form are quite unusual. Mandour's pieces are the physical manifestations of the word "sublime, in the sense that they feel as though they were excavated from another planet rather than an ancient civilization. They seem to breathe and glow from within.

Something appears ethereal in Mandour's creations, and despite their large size and weight, they feel as though they are floating in a different gallery space. This feather light effect of the pots is obviously an attribute of their form, but also largely due to the perfect lighting of the gallery.

Lighting is a vitally important yet frequently overlooked aspect of any exhibition and it can truly make or break any presentation. Mandour has not only considered the lighting of the show, but has perhaps made it a major factor in the success of his exhibit. So much so that one is tempted to imagine the artist has personally set up the pots in the homes of those who bought his pieces to insure that they maintain the same effect.

Mandour's show is almost flawless, except for one dispensable aspect. Across one of the main walls of the gallery are printed photographs of pots similar to those on display. The photographs are black and white, appearing to be historical artifacts of sorts. Though they're related to the actual works, the photographs are, aesthetically, a far cry from the pieces on display. They don't pose a real distraction yet, judging by the reactions of the viewers, they're readily ignored.



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Al-Masar gallery has managed to provide its audience with a gratifying experience. Muhammed Mandour could not have been more aptly named "The Potterist". It isn't just a title, it's an artist's passion personified - one of those rare gems of perfection that must be seen.

Al-Masar Art Gallery, Behler's Mansion, 157B, 26 July St., Zamalek. Tel: (02) 2736 8537.



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