

El-Semary perfects art of unraveling layers of history



By Ayman El-Semary.

By **Mariam Hamdy/ Special to Daily News Egypt** **January 8, 2012, 5:20 pm**

Last year, the arts were largely not up to par, with a handful of exceptions that only just matched the events ablaze at the time. Concerned with levels of production, most galleries have put on a solid schedule of events that hope to crown this year one of change and progress.

As usual, a pioneer of such thoughts and one of the best to execute them is the Zamalek Art Gallery. I have a personal affinity to the space and the artists it represents — there's no denying that all their initiatives are as successful as they are subtle.

Last year, they proposed the Kempinski Hotel lobby as an exhibition space that brought a wider range of audience to art shows, as well as presented an unorthodox approach to exhibiting. This year, they debut their first show at Kempinski with an exquisite collection of paintings by the talented Ayman El-Semary.

There is a steady crescendo in El-Semary's work that illustrates his research and development as an artist. Only few in Egypt manage to present this kind of consistency. He obsesses over a particular subject matter without allowing himself to become a victim of his own trademark.

El-Semary's obsession is the surface of walls that have surrounded him since childhood. In the more rural areas of Egypt, the walls are never sanded off before being repainted, creating a layering of paints that go back to the conception of the building itself. Experiences, memories and entire scriptures are built on top of one another, always covering up the past but never quite letting it go. El-Semary found this to be a metaphor for our country, making us people of many layers and an unclear existence.

Having spent years of research by literally cutting chunks of walls out of their buildings to examine the layering and colors, the artist became enthralled by how pigments on brick or stone erode over time. Finally arriving at the perfect technique that emulates the stripping of wall layers on canvas, he was ecstatic to present these pieces to the world at Kempinski: "I finally feel that I've honed my approach to the subject matter, and that I can properly express what I want the world to see."

Simply put, the work is excellent. Pastel colored compositions expertly balanced and intricately treated, each piece looks like an excavated wall from our history. Some purely illustrate the artists' latest technique in emulating an endless number of layers scratched off one another to reveal records of color, and these are a perfect study in abstract composition. The remaining pieces present images reminiscent of ancient Egyptian reliefs, as well as scriptures of some kind. These are homage to the idea of excavation, the slow reveal of history under layers and layers of life and experiences.

A personal favorite depicts a large cow from behind, gilded in gold leaf. The idea that wealth was historically signified by a cow still remains, and El-Semary highlights this continuum of thought in our culture.

The scriptures are a quotation of the artist's earlier efforts at the Faculty of Arts: "I had tried to create my own language at one point, and ended up with eight symbols that represented letters of some kind. I never developed words with these, so now I use them as repetitive motifs in my work." These motifs further bury his paintings in the idea of dusting off remnants of the past.



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The beauty of the pieces lies in their seeming simplicity and their light, airy colors. Accented at intervals with areas of gold gild that seem decorative, at a closer look, it's an organized and collected concoction of symbols that indicate a rich history, both ancient and recent. A particularly gorgeous piece is one with a large circle, bordered in gold. Filled with El-Semary's motifs, the piece looks like a description of an ancient ritual, or a symbol of a religion of sorts.

The basic, central composition is surprisingly exciting and gripping, as are all of El-Semary's pieces.

A great collection of work to kick start the New Year, El-Semary's exhibition sets a standard for what is to come: A complete, collected and solid group of researched and beautifully executed paintings. One can only hope that other art production this year will continue in the same vein.



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