

EU ambassador bids a 'paradoxical' farewell to Egypt



The illustrations of Essam Abdallah

By **Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt** **January 23, 2012, 4:53 pm**

Last week saw the last of remarkable events hosted by EU Ambassador Mark Franco and his wife, Rita Jansen, at their residence in Zamalek. As loyal patrons of Egyptian art, the exhibitions, talks, performances and concerts they hosted were truly unprecedented. As ambassadors on a political mission to represent and aid the EU's relations with Egypt, they were exceptionally in tune with the contemporary culture.

With a wonderful reception of who's who in the local art scene representing embassies, cultural centers, counsels and galleries, the local band Islam Chipsy livened up the night. The event was held to inaugurate "Paradox on ," a group exhibit featuring the works of Essam Abdallah, Ali Abdel Mohsen, Ramy Dozy, Nermine Hammam and Sameh Ismail.

An excellent choice of artists, curated by the talented Aida El Torie, one of the most gifted young curators in Egypt and the whole region. Having curated the Egyptian Pavilion at last year's Venice Biennale, El Torie's track record is on the rise, and "Paradox on " is a great new addition to her work.

A curator is responsible for grouping artists and presenting them in a way that compliments their work as well as sufficiently feeds into the concept the exhibition is constructed upon. Very few curators come to mind who manage this task as skilfully El Torie, with an eye for detail and a knack for presentation so far unparalleled among the younger crowd of art producers. "Paradox on " is an idea arising from opposite forces (the literal meaning of paradox) coinciding in a competitive manner (with the addition of 'on' playing off the saying 'you're on!') with an unknown contender for the ultimate triumph of thought in the end.

Completely different styles and range are presented by the artists, starting off with the illustrations of Essam Abdallah and Ali Abdel Mohsen, both of whom create contemporary pieces that are decidedly different from the kind of work available in the art scene today.

Abdallah, an illustrator and cartoon animator, presents two large digital prints under the title of "What's going on?" Two monsters in one piece, and a dinosaur and a chicken in the other, ask one another "What's going on?" while the other responds, "I don't know." The bizarreness of the subjects, their manic stares, convoluted muscle structure and raging color schemes reflects the confusion most of us feel today.

The question and its answer cannot be more suited to our general state of misunderstanding and loss towards the current political and social climate. It's probable, knowing Abdallah, that none of this analysis crossed his mind when making these spontaneous compositions, but his work is always surprisingly relevant regardless, as it is fun.

Abdel Mohsen, on the other hand, has a solid thought-process in his work, concentrating on the deterioration of man, both physically and mentally. His figures mutate into monstrous beings, dribbling and pathetic with a distortion that the artist morbidly describes: "...like a slow moan. The sound of a baby really slowed down and prolonged to a death moan — a social earthquake."

The pieces are all done on recyclable cardboard boxes that have been spread out, further accentuating the mortality of the creatures he creates so eloquently with an expert use of illustrative line and a terrifying imagination.



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The manipulated photography and paintings by Ramy Dozy play on the same notes, but in a completely different manner. Utilizing the viewer's memories of ancient Egyptian monuments, as well as terms and statements from the average Egyptian's childhood, Dozy uses the colloquia to juxtapose against random images. A silhouette of a dinosaur illustrates the traffic statement "No parking allowed here," and a fly supersedes the word "welcome."

These haphazard connections comically recalibrate the mind into forcing them to make sense, bringing forward their original awkwardness as well as one's ability to force sense into that which is ridiculous. Dozy's photography removes monuments from their original pedestals and places them in various areas in the city, once again forcing viewers into making sense out of the chaos. The metaphor this implies of the current state of mind in Egypt today may or may not be intentional, but it is certainly palpable in these sarcastic works.

The works of the final two artists are the more established of the group, with Sameh Ismail's exquisite paintings hanging atop the magnificent digital prints by Nermine Hammam. The pairing of those two artists in the same space is an expert decision by El Torie, as they are beautifully complimentary in a manner that allows each collection to breathe comfortably alongside the other.

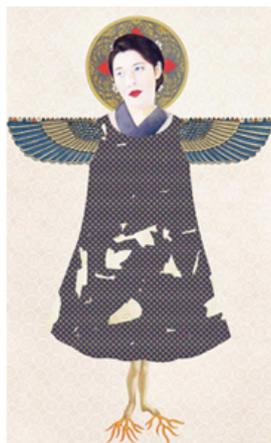
Ismail's pieces depict his signature abstract calligraphy, but unlike his last year's show at Kempinski, these pieces are smaller, more delicate, with a lot of negative space that makes them a study in abstract compositions. Skilfully inked lines, faded stencilled motifs in a flesh colored palette make the pieces soft but not fragile, calm but with a strong presence. With calligraphy at their core, the paintings show Ismail's innate ability in turning line into meaning with simple nods to Arabic script fuelled with the energy of abstract expression.

Below these paintings, the digital prints of Hammam stand regal in large, deep set wooden frames with the undeniable presence of ancient Egyptian statues in a small modern home. From her new series "Ma'at," each print is a self-portrait fused with a woman in history whom the artist holds dear to her heart. Looking at every face, the viewer sees Hammam's face, but in one print with features of Frida Kahlo, in another a Japanese Geisha, or women photographed by the prolific Diane Arbus, or Om Kolthoum.

Seven archetypal women present the artist and her idols in a fascinating mixture of warrior icons: women who stand with ancient Egyptian symbols ("Ma'at" is the Ancient Egyptian Goddess of Truth, Order and Justice), Coptic halos, modern shotguns slung across their shoulders or Boeing planes in their hands, while the hermetic Talasem texts run illegibly through them.

The concoction of elements loads each piece with implications and blatant commentary on what is happening today, with particular emphasis on the artist's self and her attempt to relate to these iconic women in times of struggle and strife. Aesthetically, the pieces are exquisite, and easily the best work Hammam has released to date.

Needless to say, the exhibition is packed with art that grips one's attention and demands a considerable amount of time for its digestion. The EU Ambassador Mark Franco and Rita Jansen have presented us with a last, yet hopefully not final, exhibition that is most certainly not to be missed.



Nermine Hammam's work.



Ramy Dozy.


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