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Finding Neverland in Cairo



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By **Mariam Hamdy / Special to Daily News Egypt** **March 18, 2010, 2:00 am**

Currently showing at the Palace of Arts at the Cairo Opera House is a refreshing little show titled "Capturing Neverland. Orchestrated by Sara Khazem, a Lebanese-American photographer, the show exhibits the products of a workshop conducted by Khazem to teach street children and orphans in Egypt the basics of photography.

The exhibition hosts the work of 17 children.

Unless you've read about the exhibit beforehand though, nothing explains this crucial detail at the show. Furthermore, the personnel who appear to be working at the Palace of Arts confuses you further, affirming that the show is in fact "about street children and orphans, not "by them: a prime example of the consistent miscommunication at the Cairo Opera House galleries.

The work on display though is simply stunning. At first glance, the subject matter appears to be repeated and somewhat cliché, produced by amateur photographers, which is essentially the case in here. There isn't a particular theme that defines the works except that each picture focuses on one element; all are mainly portraits showing random men, women, children and a few animals in various states. The images are fairly simple in their conception, with predominantly straightforward compositions that clearly capture the expression of the subject being photographed.

Yet despite its seemingly unexciting subject matter, the stunning factor about these images is the composition. The cropping of the images, the angle from which the image is captured and the color palette show an excellent eye for detail. Astonishingly, these images were taken with a disposable camera by children who were never fortunate enough to own one. Having attended a photography workshop, the quality of photographs produced point to both the talent and skill of their teacher, Sara Khazem.

The title of the show, "Capturing Neverland, is a reference to J. M. Barrie's beloved children fable "Peter Pan and his magical world where no child ever grows up. The idea was to capture the true essence of these children and showcase their talent in a way that they, and consequently we as viewers, would have never had access to. Despite the reference to a never-ending childhood, the photos are surprisingly mature in style; more distinct and seasoned than the works of many adult photographers exhibiting here in Cairo. There is a firm grasp by these children on how an image should be captured and represented to others in a clear and beautiful fashion.

A few images speak to the viewer louder than the rest. Particularly touching are two images of street children gazing on their photographers as they were one and the same. The photograph does not have the voyeuristic feel of the journalistic image, but rather a sense of familiarity and even camaraderie between photographer and subject. Both images are shot on black and white film.

Khazem is not the first artist to inspire such an idea. There are numerous initiatives taking place in Egypt that aim to provide opportunities for less fortunate children to express themselves in ways that stretch their imagination and exhibit skills they're unaware of.

Not all initiatives produce quality results though, simply because the artists can be too concerned with whom they're working with rather than what they expect them to produce. Khazem has achieved what her workshop and its ilk should hope to prove: that given the right amount of attention, care and opportunity, any child, regardless of background, can create beauty and grow to change both their world and ours.

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"Capturing Neverland : The Palace Of Arts, Opera Grounds, El Gezirah, Cairo. Tel: (02)2736 7628, (02)2736 7628. For more information, please visit: <http://www.capturing-neverland.org/>



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