

From Egypt to Frankfurt with love



Taher's images might as well have been staged, with the composition, lighting and the Egyptian flags carried by protesters looking just right

By **Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt** **November 16, 2011, 3:23 pm**

It's a great feat for an Egyptian exhibition to become an international traveling show. Three of Egypt's young photographers are doing just that; following a successful show in Vienna, they are taking their "To Egypt with Love" exhibition to Germany on Thursday.

Soon after January 25, Safar Khan Gallery hosted "To Egypt with Love," featuring the works of three photographers chronicling the events of the uprising and Egypt during that time. It proved to be a great success, travelling soon after to Vienna, and selling out the entire collection; its proceeds went directly to Egyptian charities.

The exhibition was chosen by Semmel Concerts, a German entertainment company, to forefront their regular show in Europe featuring ancient Egyptian works headed by the famous Tutankhamun sarcophagus. The German travelling show does not showcase the actual artifacts, but rather replicas of the original work. Acting as an excellent true-to-life simulation of the mummies, the tombs and all that can be found in them, the festival offers an unparalleled opportunity for those who can't visit Egypt to experience the beauty of its ancient history.

This year, Semmel Concerts will hold its Egyptian festival in Frankfurt, "A Festival of Egyptian Culture." They rightfully felt that featuring contemporary Egyptian art, film, music and even stand-up comedy would reflect the changes in the country, introducing the new Egypt with its present talents to the world, and not just its historical magnificence.

Having handpicked the photographers out of a large number of candidates for the show, the curator of the gallery, Mona Said, daughter of the founder of Safar Khan Gallery Sherwet Shafei, went through a grueling process of choosing her artists. She sent out her three chosen photographers, Alaa Taher, Hossam Hassan and Bassem Samir to capture original images of Egypt during the uprising. With a decided lack of any political inclinations, the photographs reflect a love for the country not bound by religion, political affiliation or class.

Alaa Taher's work is the most neutral of the presented photos. A biology major who found his true passion in photography, Taher is the founder of ATP advertising agency, which specializes in professional photography, as well as Sowar Online, the first Middle East stock photography website.

His approach leans towards documentation, but in the same vein as in advertising photography, it presents the most striking representation of reality.

His chronicles of the Tahrir protests might as well have been staged, with the composition, the lighting and the Egyptian flags the protesters are carrying over their heads looking just right. His most prominent piece in the exhibition is a beautifully-lit black and white photograph showing people rejoicing during the days of the uprising. The reason behind their genuine looks of happiness is not evident, yet their facial expressions are undeniably overjoyed. The focal point towards which all of their faces are directed to is outside the picture frame, which makes the piece gorgeous in its lack of inclinations: this eclectic mix of Egyptian people are all jubilant for one reason, whatever that cause and outcome may be.

On the flip side, the work of Bassem Samir, an architect with a Fine Arts degree from Alexandria University, focus less on the



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people and more on the graffiti during the Tahrir Square sit-in, where people would use chalk to write on the streets and pavements, and spray paint on the walls. The beauty of this subject matter is that it isn't done by 'professional' graffiti artists, but rather by ordinary people who have no other means to voice their complaints.

This is, in fact, graffiti in its purest form. Samir draws no distinction between good or bad graffiti, yet he seems to have chosen ones that are clever, simple and exceptionally colored. There are a couple of pieces that stand out, if only because of how well Samir has managed to balance his compositions. A personal favorite is an image of a central security forces truck with the word 'corruption' spray painted on it in white. The truck itself is destroyed, looking like an ancient artifact deserted by its people. It ironically sits under a larger-than-life Coca Cola billboard with the word 'Be Happy' in Arabic perfectly situated in the upper left hand corner of the image. The overall feel is surreal — for a moment you're not quite sure where the truck is. It is an excellent example of Samir's keen observational skills.

Equally skillful but with a different approach is Hossam Hassan. His work is altered photography, with heavy influence of graphic design. A graduate of the Applied Arts faculty of Helwan University and founder of Samdzine art studio, Hassan was a graphic designer working in advertising. Slowly leaving the corporate life, he began working on these artworks that at times appear crowded, yet upon closer inspection emerge as strong collage-like pieces.

Predominately red in their color scheme, the pieces are beautifully textured, having a dusty look, as though they were found in your grandmother's trunk. Perhaps it's the fact that they present large landscape views of downtown Cairo and Tahrir Square; the grandeur of the old facades of these areas lends the pieces an air of nostalgia. What cements them in our day and age is the sheer amount of people and traffic in each collage.

In the context of the exhibit, Hassan's pieces are the most opinionated, as the artistry involved cannot but be influenced by a particular point of view. The works present a sense of danger, due to the vagueness of the images one is aware of the subject matter, but not quite certain what it is that is being seen. The works are the most complex of the show.

"To Egypt with Love" opens in Frankfurt Nov. 17 and closes Jan. 22.



Samir focuses on graffiti in its purest form, done by average civilians who have no other means to voice their complaints.



Hassan's altered photography, with heavy influence of graphic design, is the most opinionated.

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