

## Group talent at the Alexandria Library



Hala Abu Shady

By **Mariam Hamdy**

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An artist's debut show is a haunting ordeal. Both the artist and the artwork become vulnerable to the blind admiration of friends and the ruthless criticism of strangers.

A debut is always an exciting and unpredictable affair, subjected to an equal possibility of success and failure. But a group debut is even more so, housing the "make it or break it moment for several careers at once.

"First time Exhibition at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina is showing the debut works of around 15 artists, ranging from fresh graduates to novices, who have never exhibited their work before.

With the exception of one sculptor and a jewelry designer, all the artists have worked with two-dimensional supports, with sizes up to a 2x2-meter canvas, to create oil paintings, photographs, charcoals, pastels and collages.

At first glance, the exhibit looks impressive. The pieces lined up across the main wall of the Library's West Gallery, are the first to grab your attention and incidentally feature female artists. The arrangement of the show as such is effective: These pieces are easily the strongest in the entire exhibition.

Nada Khalil's oil paintings come first. Almost life-size, the canvases are large double and triple portraits of the same person in each painting. Khalil's pieces feel allegorical, reminiscent of Spanish murals whose figures are slightly disproportionate. Perhaps intentionally, the figures feel somewhat dwarfed to fit the canvas and accommodate their twins or triplets. The paintings also have a proletariat feel, with the subjects looking rather oppressed, yet rebellious at the same time.

Equally defiant are the flawless paintings of Samar Al-Sayed Al-Barawy.

The large pieces filled with life size figures are a social commentary on Egyptian women. Two paintings portray weddings; one of a desolate bride in white with a striking blood red background filled with passive onlookers; and another of group of brides all holding fish.

Dead fish is a recurrent theme in Al-Barawy's work. One is tempted to instantly associate this imagery with the Arab belief that fish are the symbol of good and abundance, yet in the morbid surroundings of her paintings, the symbolism feels empty and betrayed.

A commentary on gender is the main theme of Hala Abu Shady's work as well. Composed of nine photographs per piece, Abu Shady's works portray cropped images of a young girl in various expressive portraits, some of which show what looks like a wedding veil around her face. The pieces are carefully composed, sincere and touching, despite the fact that girl's face is never completely visible in any of the photographs.

Most works are worthy of attention, from the beautifully-lit etches of Yasmine Nabil El-Kateb to the uncannily realistic paintings of facades by Riham Samy El-Nahas.

Peppered throughout the show are works by various artists that may perhaps be less striking, but are equally good. Chief among them are a collection of charcoal drawings by Mostafa Samir Mostafa. Looking almost like concept art, Mostafa's drawings are dark and confusing, but the details invested in them are captivating. Not a single smudge or line is unaccounted for, the result being excellent studies of charcoal and pastels.



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It's been a long time since a single show has showcased the works of such talents. The show's success stems from the fact that the majority of these participants are true artists, not amateurs. "First Time is currently showing at the BACC East Exhibition Hall of Bibliotheca Alexandrina, daily from 9 am-9 pm. Tel: (03) 483 9999



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