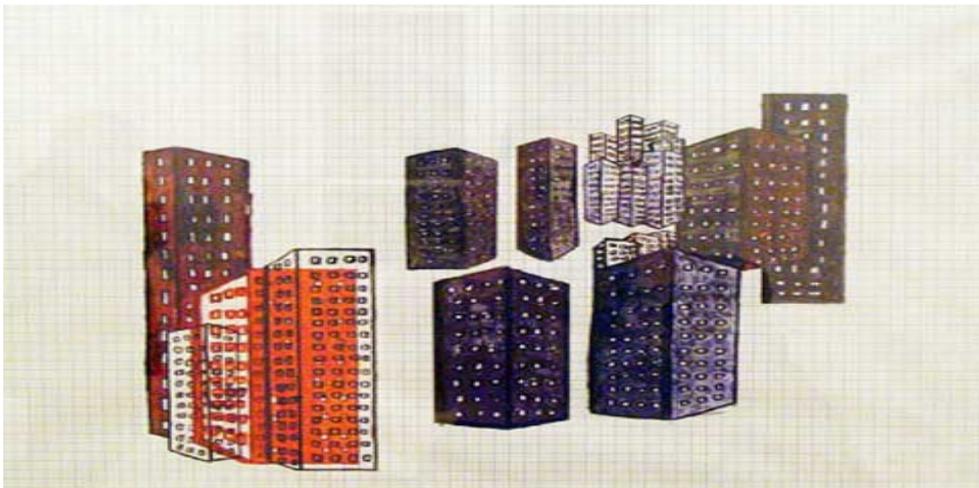


Hidden horror of Cairo's monstrous buildings



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By **Mariam Hamdy** February 19, 2009, 2:00 am

There are endless commentaries on the increasingly chaotic urban landscape that is Cairo. Mostly negative, the comments tend to focus on the disastrous consequences of the monstrous multiplication of buildings, incoherence of architecture and the crowded contents of these structures.

Yet not many have attempted to make sense of this chaos and find some kind of hidden poetry within it. Townhouse Gallery is currently hosting a show entitled "Constructions and Hidden Monsters" by Nermine El-Ansari who may have succeeded in doing just that, despite her flaws.

The show mainly consists of drawings, photography and a sound installation. The first piece seen upon entry is an altered black and white photograph of Cairo's slum districts. From afar, the photograph appears to be a strip of dense building structures. All edifices are packed in the center of the photograph with breathing space above and below. The photograph is displayed on several panels, allowing for a panoramic view of the slums. The buildings are laid out as though they're situated by the Nile with their reflections in plain view below.

On a closer look, however, it becomes apparent that there is no water, and the supposed reflections are in fact different buildings.

The outcome gives an unsettling gist of organized chaos; a sense that there is a system that governs this mess of constructions, but no one can quite figure out what it is exactly. What further accentuates the feeling of suffocation one experiences when staring at the photograph is how the artist chooses to display her panels. By placing them in a corner, viewing the photograph gives a heightened feeling of being trapped inside a closed cycle.

El-Ansari employs the same approach in her drawings. Using millimeter graph paper as her support, she uses predominantly black, red and blue ink to weave a web of structures that follows an invisible system. Almost always huddled in the corner, the drawings look ordered and disorganized at the same time. The artist's lining approach is thick and somewhat clumsy, and despite the fact that such methods may have been intentional, the resulting drawings feel like doodles rather than purposeful pieces of work.

The next room is strikingly different from the previous displayed work. Consisting of four pieces, two of which are photographs of dense cloud formations in the sky, the room has a futuristic and somewhat morbid feel. What contributes to this impression is the other two pieces in the room: One featuring a building nestled in the middle of a deserted, mountainous plain at a skewed perspective, and the other showing four photographs depicting two heavily-tattooed arms of a man. The very same tattoos are mirrored on the walls of large buildings in the other two photos.

The inked skin of the man feels as though it was stretched across the building wall, an image that, alas, is badly reproduced. The idea is clear, yet the execution of the image is poor.

The setting is a little confusing; the subject matter is simply not in sync with the rest of the exhibited works. However, the experience of regarding these particular photos serves as a welcome sorbet between courses of a meal, detaching the viewers from the density of the portrayed buildings in the previous spaces, before entering the most interesting area of the exhibition, the sound installation.

In a black space, large panoramic canvases are hung side by side in the center of the wall, across the corner of the room. The first half of the canvases is covered, in an almost orderly fashion, with drawing of red brick buildings and small iconic

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representation of helicopters. This theme then melts into the second half; a pastel colored smog of barely discernible buildings portraying Cairo on an early winter morning, minus the helicopters.

The sound of swirling helicopters fades in and out of the space, creating an effect that is both familiar and unnerving. The darkness of the room transforms the viewers into voyeurs, sneaking at unsuspecting structures before them, whilst the sound and presence of helicopters reverse the equation, resulting in an eerie feeling akin to being under close surveillance.

Aesthetically, the body of work presented is mildly appealing, somehow lacking depth. Overall though, "Constructions and Hidden Monsters is a conceptually sound exhibition that manages to trigger a number of thought-provoking questions.



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