

## Impressive 1,000 maps leading to nowhere



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By **Mariam Hamdy/ Special to Daily News Egypt**      **September 13, 2011, 5:41 pm**

The Palace of Arts at the Cairo Opera House has inaugurated its latest exhibition, a colossal one man show titled "Memory Maps" by Ashraf Ibrahim on Monday.

The opening was quite the happening, with the minister of Culture Dr. Emad Abou Ghazi in attendance as well as the staff of the Austrian embassy. The Palace of Arts has rarely seen such a dense crowd of audience, officials and TV cameras.

Sponsored by an odd combo of Mercedes Benz and the Egyptian Law firm Ibrachy & Dermarkar among others, the exhibition is impressive in its presentation and details. The catalogue is quite thorough, including a foreword by the Egyptian minister of Culture, the Austrian Minister of Education, Art and Culture Dr. Claudia Schmied and Director of the Austrian Cultural Forum Cairo Dr. Rene-Paul Amry.

It also features text by the artist explaining the concept behind the work; the catalogue folds open to a rather large poster of

a collage with a lot of displayed pieces. Attendants also received a CD of a possible exterior presentation of the works outside the actual facade of the Palace of Arts itself, as well as a soft copy of the artist's text and his installation process in pictures. I have never come across such an exhaustive catalogue— not in book form— for any exhibition in Egypt or elsewhere.

The exhibition is the fruits of Ashraf Ibrahim's labor during a three month residency in Vienna in 2007. Unsettled by the Austrians' relentless use of maps, Ibrahim channeled his culture shock to translate differences between his culture and theirs. He developed this idea into the belief that "life is a colossal map and a huge visual text as well," meaning that our memories are maps of our minds, and that these maps are in turn mingled together to render life as one large text from which we all read and find our way. The title is followed by the question "A 1,000 maps and still a maze?" further stressing the chaotic nature of our perception of life.

The works are basically maps of Austria — the small folded pamphlet-looking maps usually handed over to tourists — drawn on by the artist. A thousand maps were used, all of which are defaced by the artist in multiple ways. The sheer volume of presented work is awe-inspiring; it must've taken the artist years to assemble these works for this exhibition. Every wall, corner and staircase is covered with maps.

It must have been quite the challenge to set up such loud and somewhat confusing mass of work in such a badly designed art space such as the Palace of Arts. As one of the worst architectural designs for art display in Cairo, the Palace of Arts has the ability to suffocate even the best of art, with its maze-like corridors and small gallery spaces making it a chore and a literal pain in the neck to admire work on its walls. However, due to the wallpaper-like nature of this work, one manages to forget how annoying the space can be for the length of the exhibition.

Despite the prodigious effort made apparent in terms of production or curation, it pains one to say that the work itself is not as remarkable. Some of the pieces present very detailed topography, such as illustrations reworking actual lines in the maps, while others seems like haphazard doodles that are not inspired at all by what they drawn on. Colors, designs, shapes and line vary widely, with no consistency other than the maps seeping from under the works in one way or another. The biggest problem is the composition: entire gallery walls are covered with drawn-on maps without much consistency in terms of balance or form.

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The most successful pieces are those where one major shape is created across several maps— personal favorites include a creature resembling a child-like three-eared rabbit on a bright pink background, and another a group of beaked lemming on a solid blue background. They are whimsical, quirky and fun, but how they relate to the main concept of the show is not quite clear. Perhaps these shapes are taken from Ibrahim's personal memory, but it's the finished feel of these pieces that drew my attention, versus the otherwise sketchy scribbles on the maps displayed.

An odd statement to make, but the show is impressive in every possible way except for the actual content of the pieces. Yet I do recommend visiting "Memory Maps," if only to admire the sheer dedication of an artist bent on presenting his work in the best possible manner.

The Palace Of Arts: Opera grounds, El Gezirah, Cairo. Tel: (02)2736 7628. Opening hours: daily from 10am-1pm and from 5pm-7pm. The show concludes on September 22.





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