

In the glorious realms of Anfoushi



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By **Mariam Hamdy** / Special to Daily News Egypt **April 15, 2010, 2:00 am**

Drawing is the basis of art creation, be it with pencil, charcoal, or any other mark-making edge. Yet despite that obvious fact, many aspiring artists overlook the medium as a preparation stage in the more serious and respected process of painting.

One look at Rabab Nemr's body of work proves otherwise.

Nemr is a veteran Egyptian artist whose work has been exhibited consistently since her graduation from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Alexandria in 1963. Her current exhibition at the Zamalek Art Gallery features what can only be regarded as the best work she has produced to date.

That said, Nemr's work has always been nothing short of exquisite. Her attention to detail is magnificent, using miniscule strokes of graphite in order to create the large and cumbersome men and women of Egypt. Her current show is entitled "The Sea at Anfoushi, a popular neighborhood in Alexandria famous for its local fishermen.

The work is simply brilliant. It's been a while since I walked into a gallery and stared in awe at every single piece; nothing is less than perfect in Nemr's approach to her subject matter. For those familiar with her work, Nemr's figural representations are the same as they've always been. With deep, kind eyes, squashed features in the center of the face, heavyset bodies and large hands of builders, her men and women are quintessentially Egyptian; alien yet at the same time familiar. However, this is the first time Nemr has employed so much color in her work.

The contrast between the grey graphite tones and the colors is fascinating. Despite the slight brightness of the colors, veering towards the fluorescent at times; through them, Nemr has managed to strike a balance between the grey tones that are consistently shrouding the skies of Egypt and unnatural colors with which buildings, boats, clothes and sometimes faces are dyed.

The most intriguing aspect of the work is its craftsmanship. Skill such as that of Nemr's has not only become rare but somewhat unfashionable: there is too much emphasis on conceptual art lately that it seems as though aesthetics have become optional. Yet with Nemr's work, her subject matter is presented with such skill that viewing her work can function as a marvelous learning experience.

Two particularly exceptional pieces are presented side by side at the gallery. The first is a classic Nemr: a black and white graphite drawing of fishermen. This piece captures the epitome of her style, with traffic of fishermen drowning a substantially large square canvas. The swarm of faces appears to be suffocating, but as the piece draws you in, you find that the men are not uncomfortable. On the contrary, there seems to be a hidden method to the seeming chaos, rendering this particular artwork a true masterpiece and an essential collector's item.

The other drawing is of The Last Supper. The subject matter is profound, especially in light of the reference to Jesus as 'the' fisherman. True to the classic composition, Christ is seated in the center of the 12 apostles, all of whom have glasses of wine in front of them on the table. A single fish on a plate is placed in front of the figure of Christ, an allusion to the Coptic iconography which uses a fish to represent the Prophet.

Everything about the drawing appears measured, creating a composition that looks staged but not fake. The ultimate feel of the piece is that of a Mexican mural: bright colors, thick bodies, religious subjects abound with political commentary. Yet despite the heavy content, the work looks as if it resides in a naïve and simple existence.

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It's this contrast that makes Rabab Nemr an asset to contemporary the Egyptian art scene. It's exceptionally rare that I write an exalting review of an exhibition as this one, but it's equally rare that an artist covers all their bases as Nemr does, and with flair.

The show is a wonderful collection of work and it is not to be missed by lovers of art and Egypt alike.

"The Sea at Anfoushi, closes on May 5. Zamalek Art Gallery: 11 Brazil Street, Zamalek, Cairo. Tel: (02) 2735 1240. Open every day from 10:30 am - 9:00 pm except Fridays.



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