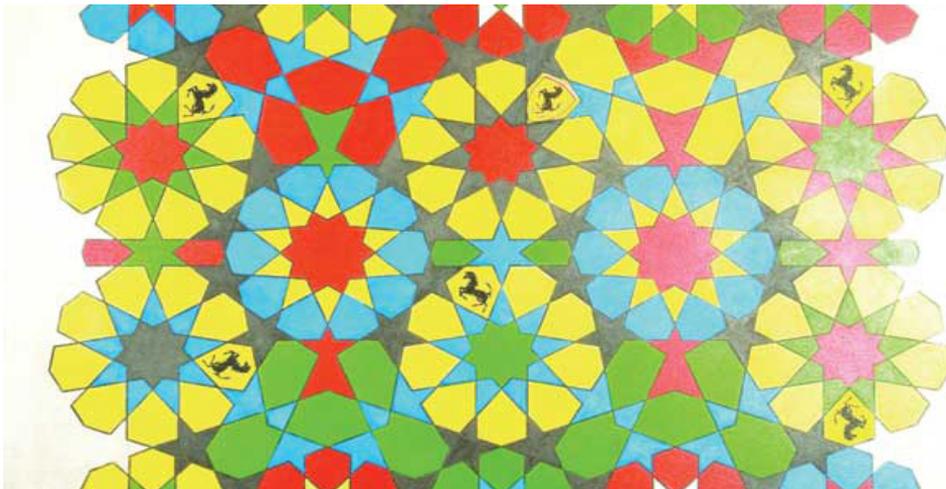


Islamic design receives pop treatment in new exhibit space



"Tribute to Schumi."

By **Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt** **May 28, 2010, 4:03 pm**

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The newest addition to the ever-expanding Cairo is Designopolis, a colossal project located a few kilometers after the Cairo Alexandria toll station. A Bonyan development, a subsidiary of the vast Citadel Capital Group, Designopolis is a comprehensive design complex that caters to everything related to the upper class home, from mortgage companies to interior design consultancy.

It's not, however, a corporate complex; Designopolis is an interior design heaven. With every possible local and international home furnishing brand found in there, the project fills in a major gap in the market, although the products it offers are considerably expensive.

The sheer construction of the complex is as impressive as it is enjoyable. No wonder then that the latest gallery space in town, the comically titled *Articulate Baboon*, found home in Designopolis.

The space itself — which opened last week — is outstanding. Minimal but not decidedly unassuming, the exhibition space bears a resemblance to the up and coming galleries of London: a garage/artist studio turned gallery. With concrete floors, textured wood ceilings and inviting expanses of white walls, the space is one of the few in Cairo that are properly designed for artists to showcase their work.

Currently showing in *Articulate Baboon* is the latest exhibition by internationally renowned Palestinian artist Laila Shawa. A Gaza native currently residing in London, Shawa has had a steady series of exhibitions since 1965, including an impressive five paintings in the permanent collection at the British Museum.

Her current show at *Articulate Baboon* is titled "Arabopop!" an exhibition of pop style paintings that are both intriguing and playful. The entire premise of the show is based on the twisting of Islamic and Arabic geometric designs into a more psychedelic milieu.

The skill and craftsmanship of Shawa as an artist is particularly evident in her exquisite attention to balance, both through form and color. Any practicing artist will attest the major difficulties in the creation of a stable and cohesive composition through abstracted and geometric designs, but Shawa has taken her problem-solving skills into a whole new level with this exhibition.

Using pop art colors as primary ingredient for her pieces, Shawa adds a bouncy feel to what otherwise should've been sober designs. The paintings are essentially Islamic designs on overdrive: the expansive exhibit feels like a giant kaleidoscope. The colors are a brilliant mix of fluorescent pinks, oranges and yellow, with deep greens, purples and blues, and a touch of metallic in silver and gold. This is no noisy palette though; Shawa manages to skillfully tie the colors together in a way that doesn't interrupt the composition but immerses the viewers further into its wild and overwhelming presence.

A smart, inventive addition to the pieces is the incorporation of iconic images into her paintings. Wedged ever so discreetly in her geometric designs are small sticker-like pin-ups of Disney characters. At first, they are barely visible to the viewer, but upon a more thorough inspection, you realize that they are the main focus of the piece, perhaps due to their offbeat



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existence within the pieces. The randomness of her character choices — which include Mickey Mouse, Tweety, Sylvester and the Ferrari Horse logo — and their awkward placement make the pieces all the more surreal and fun.

The framing and placements of the pieces in the gallery space are remarkable. The framing do wonders in presenting the paintings as formal and dignified despite their mischievousness, and their even placement across the walls of the gallery allow for enough room for digestion. Articulate Baboon is out to be taken seriously and judging by their first exhibit, they are indeed off to a promising start.

Both Articulate Baboon and Laila Shawa's "Arabopop!" are worth the drive to Designopolis. It has been a while since an exhibition in Cairo has solely focused on interesting and skilled aesthetics, rather than concept. A great deal of thought and implied commentary can be made on the warping of these organized and systematic Arabic designs that have nourished our artistic heritage, but it's refreshing to see work that is as much a joy to look at as it is to mull over.

Articulate Baboon Gallery: Shop B105b, Designopolis, KM 38 Cairo/Alex Desert Road, Sheikh Zayed. Daily from 10 am-10 pm. Exhibit closes on June 14.



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