

Lights of the Divine



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By **Mariam Hamdy** February 29, 2008, 2:00 am

The Sony Gallery at the American University in Cairo hosted the opening of Reem Al Faisal's "The Shape of Light, a definitive standout among recent art shows.

Al Faisal, a writer and photographer who happens to be the granddaughter of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, unveiled her latest work: a collection of black and white photographs taken from the photographer's extensive travels around the world, from the Middle East to China to Ireland.

Al Faisal attempts to show in her photos "signs of the divine in nature and in man, stressing that "light is one of the many manifestations of God which he casts through our life to remind us of His constant presence.

Al Faisal's black and white photographs have brilliantly succeeded in conveying her sense of wonder and awe.

All photographs have a grainy feel to them, a sense of static or noise that can be seen in empty spaces. The photographs feel as though they are stills from a documentary or film, emphasizing the feeling of a search for the Divine and the directionless route the artist chose to follow.

The monochromatic scheme of the pieces perfectly fits Al Faisal's purpose. Black and white photography detaches viewers from reality while allowing a greater deal of detail to be portrayed. The manner through which the artist captured light, or the lack of it, in her photographs leaves no room for gray areas, a smart tactic that sustains the viewers focus on Al Faisal's main theme.

The photographs have an exceptionally well studied contrast, so that the tones appear honest and forward.

The subjects of Al Faisal's photographs are predominantly landscapes and various scenes of the hajj - the annual pilgrimage to Mecca - along with a few portraits of people in mosques or in prayer. The subjects of the pieces aren't entirely original or unusual, but the distinctive, intimate approach Al Faisal employed to capture her subjects rendered her photos memorable.

All the pieces had impeccable compositions employing the thirds rule, where the piece is divided into three balanced parts. The way that Al Faisal orchestrates her work gives room for two thirds of her photographs to be taken up by skyscape, while the remaining third feature the main landscape - the primary subject. The resulting impression of rays of overwhelming serenity strikes viewer: The landscapes grant the viewer a sense of magnificence, and perhaps it's in otherworldly majestic area where Al Faisal has found and portrayed the Divine.

Photographs of the hajj carried the same essence. The manner through which Al Faisal captures the pilgrims in their unison of prayer looked like a stream or a river current. There's a strong element of tranquility and completion about the pilgrim's stature that felt sacred, without being specific to any particular religion.

On the same note, Al Faisal's photograph of Jeddah's port had a similar sense of reverence, and it is truly one of the best pieces of the show. It illustrated how the artist had found the Divine not only in his creation or through his worship, but even in the most unlikely structure made by man. The smaller photos of the show aren't as strong, perhaps due to the fact they're not as meticulously composed. Despite the fact that their size allowed for a more intimate relationship with the viewer, the limited scope of these pictures contained none of the splendor and wonderment of the larger pieces.

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The layout of the show is superb; each piece has enough room to breathe and to be digested by the viewer. The smaller pieces were placed like punctuation in a well-written sentence, providing a needed pause between one larger piece and the next.

"The Shape of Light is a perfect presentation that is definitely worth seeing.

"The Shape of Light Sony Gallery for Photography The American University in Cairo Tel: (02) 2797 6165 9am-9pm



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