

Perusing through the 'Gardens of Egypt'



Anna Boghiguian's "Gardens of Egypt" is showing at Safar Khan Gallery.



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By **Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt** **October 14, 2010, 6:08 pm**

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Currently at the Safar Khan Gallery in Zamalek is a show titled "Gardens of Egypt" by Anna Boghiguian. A highly anticipated show, Boghiguian is an artist who has been exhibiting work since 1980; work that is as aesthetically intriguing as it is thought-provoking, and many were looking forward to more of her loving yet decidedly not rosy depictions of Egypt.

Unfortunately, that was not the outcome. The exhibition, which was intended on depicting the public gardens of Egypt — with their somewhat dry and dusty foliage, lush yet tramped-on grass and visitors enjoying the outdoors — did not quite deliver that feel.

The body of work consisted of several paintings of public garden landscapes, featuring figures sitting in the middle of the garden. Two of these paintings appear as portraits of women in niqab, seated centrally both in the middle of the painting and the garden. The remaining pieces are small square canvases of flowers.

The work feels frozen, showing no heart or soul neither to the people featured nor the garden landscapes. One of the best features of Anna Boghiguian's work is that despite being clearly nourished by melancholy, it's always full to the brim with genuine and heartfelt emotion. Her previous paintings, especially her ink sketches of Alexandria (also exhibited at Safar Khan in 2000), showed a true love for the city that was untainted with naive optimism. It was work that presented honesty and an unobstructed vision of chaos of a city that is very much loved despite.

In this exhibition, the "Gardens of Egypt" appear miserable. This may have been a deliberate decision by the artist, but the way it was executed feels like an unwelcome accident. Boghiguian is known for her thick, watery black outlines, which did wonders in work that represented the hustle and bustle of everyday life; but in a garden, the black outlines have washed over all the greens and pinks of the flowers, lending a rather messy effect. The artist's otherwise apparent mastery of thick water color brushstrokes was lost here, resulting in work that appeared uncharacteristically amateur.

What lent most to that unfortunate feeling was the depiction of the people in the landscapes. They were static and stiff, as though held in a trance rather than just sitting in a garden. Of the larger two pieces in the show, the people depicted look like victims of voyeurism, caught in the act of something unseemly, frozen as the artist captured them like deer in headlights. The result was uncanny and somewhat confusing.

On that note, the portraits of the two women in niqab were also bemusing, as the entire figure of the woman filled the painting, leaving barely enough space to feature a few pieces of foliage and flowers to suggest her garden surroundings. The blackness of her robe was a stark contrast with the greens of what can be seen of the garden, yet the reason behind having not one but two prominent pieces of the same subject appeared puzzling. It added more to the general furor of the collection.

The collection of smaller canvases on the other hand, did not share the same muddiness of watered blackness of the larger pieces. The presented flowers were thickly painted with bright pinks, reds and fuchsias, significantly deeper and more mature than the landscapes paintings. The brushstrokes and mastery of paint application in these little pieces presented the "Gardens of Egypt" with all their murky contradiction, dust and faint optimism — just as the rest of the show should have.

The flowers, up-close and decontextualized, showed more passion than any of the larger pieces in the show, proving to those who have not seen Anna Boghiguian's previous work that she is in fact an artist with great understanding of her subject matter and skills.

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Sadly, "Gardens of Egypt" was not up to Boghiguian's usually impeccable standard of work — it was a surprising break from what was expected. One will look forward to more of her older works in her next show.



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