

Quiet sadism sweeps old Cairo



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By **Mariam Hamdy** February 10, 2009, 2:00 am

Darb 1718 is the newest non-profit arts center in Cairo. Located in El Fustat, the center strikes an interesting balance between its surroundings of the millennium-old mosques and churches and the collection of contemporary art houses.

Founded by renowned Egyptian contemporary artist Moataz Nasr, the center opened with "Crossings, a collective exhibition that hosted an exceptional array of artists from all over the world. For its second presentation, Darb 1718 is hosting two shows simultaneously: "Pixigrainz by photographer Omar Khodeir, and "In the eye of the Beholder by Ingrid Mwangi and Robert Hutter.

Omar Khodeir is a filmmaker who has devoted seven solid years of his life in Paris to honing his craft and developing photography skills. Currently dividing his time between Paris, Cairo and Vancouver, the artist has assembled a collection of photographs in his new commendable exhibition.

The photographs are untouched, not manipulated either in the darkroom or by any computer software; a refreshing change for the current photography scene Egypt.

The pictures are basically close-ups of various surfaces caught on camera.

The surfaces, be it a wall, a floor or a torn up poster, are presented in an abstract light. The images are somewhat unrecognizable, so much so that one needs to look closer so as not to confuse the work with actual abstract paintings.

Khodeir states it is his main concern "to explore his surroundings, not to alter it, and his show clearly illustrates this concept. The attention to detail and color combinations in the close-ups are exquisite. At a glance, one may assume that notion behind zooming in on an object or space to find a rhythm or balance within its textures is an amateurish proposal. Despite the fact that this may indeed be the case with one piece, it certainly isn't with the entire set of work.

Each and every picture has been framed by a trained eye, and the cropping of the images brings out wonderfully balanced and harmonic compositions both through shapes and colors. Khodeir says that he "wants to find a camera angle from which the forms can be the most they can be. And he does that exactly.

The second floor houses "In the eye of the Beholder and "Constant Triumph, a collection of photographic and video works by Ingrid Mwangi and Robert Hutter. "In the eye of the Beholder is a disturbing video show featuring a European-looking woman, dressed in red and white against a red background, dissecting an eye.

Had one not witnessed such a procedure in a biology class of some kind, one would be inclined to suffer a distressing physical reaction. The idea was to comment on the "greatest asset of women, that being their eyes. The video, if one could endure the aggressiveness jolt instigated by the procedure, is textured and calm, violently contrasting its subject matter.

On the adjacent wall lies another video, "Constant Triumph; an homage to Mwangi's sister, who died at an early age, that charts the last phases in her short life. The video contains several beautiful frames, specifically ones depicting Mwangi's sister in empty expanses of land, or at the doorstep of what appears to be her home.

The absence of the video's protagonist injects the work with a heavy undertone, giving it both depth and sadness. The video is personal and watching it feels like an intrusion of sorts; yet what almost spoils this experience is its close vicinity to the

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video of the dissected eye. Somehow the works feel unrelated, and having them share such an intimate space leaves the viewer uncomfortable.

This rather uneasy sensation is further augmented with another video presumably displaying the artists' bodies that are branded with random words such as "Cut and "Steal and "Hurt with what appear to be scars is in an opposite space. In front of this video is a disturbing photograph of three children with black eyes that appear gouged out.

Adjacent to both these works is an installation of photographs and videos of the sea, waves and children building sandcastles. This piece is both elating in subject matter while its presentation, predominantly blue in color, is relaxing.

Yet the work, in general, feels completely removed from its morbid surrounding.

Despite the coherence of the ground floor's "Pixigrainz exhibition, the top floor's collection of works is confusing as a whole, in spite of the fact that each of the pieces is remarkable on its own. The work feels aesthetically and conceptually unconnected; a letdown in an otherwise great art space.



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