

## Rana Chalabi's not so wild horses



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By **Mariam Hamdy** / Special to Daily News Egypt      December 6, 2009, 2:00 am

Currently showing at Lot17 in Zamalek is a new exhibit titled "Khayal wa khuyool (Fantasy and Horses) by Rana Chalabi. An exceptionally small exhibition space, Lot 17 always manages to offer a considerably large amount of pieces on its limited wall space only just barely without suffocating or cramming up the space.

Rana Chalabi is a painter with a steady collection of exhibitions under her belt since 1997. Despite her generally calm and spiritual subject matter, with themes ranging from the desert to Sufism, her work can be distinguished by a wild application of both color and brushstroke.

Chalabi's earlier exhibitions in 2008 were quite stimulating, particularly the portraits of dancers and the swirling dervishes. The choice of color was wild but brushstrokes were contained within the enclosure of the dancers' bodies. The background was calm enough for the dancers to appear vibrant and the overall effect was that of a modern take on an age old practice. Each of these earlier pieces boasted an experienced use of line and composition as well as an expert choice of color.

The theme at Lot17, as evident from the title, centers on horses. Each of the pieces on display shows a horse or two in movement. Sadly, most of what was said about Chalabi's 2008 exhibitions doesn't resonate in her latest one, as the work here lacks a lot of what made her dancers and dervishes shine.

The one word that comes to mind when describing most of the paintings containing color is "excessive. There's too much going on in each painting; too much to grasp the fantastical world in which these horses are intended to exist. The first obstacle hindering the viewers from grasping the paintings is the combination of color. In the majority of these pieces, there's confusion between the use of bright primary colors and their more subdued tones. What may have caused this distortion is the deeply unattractive use of large black brushstrokes that outline most of her horses and that muddy up the waters of the rest of her color palette.

The horses themselves are deeply flawed. For a subject that has been depicted throughout history in more ways than anyone can follow, the child-like portrayals of these horses are so anatomically incorrect that they're almost comic, particularly the horses' hair. It's clear that Chalabi wasn't aiming for realistic depictions, yet the creatures' bodies were so awkwardly structured that I was not sure if they were static or in motion. The sweeping movements that distinguished her earlier exhibitions are nowhere to be seen here.

The pieces containing the least amount of noise are her black and white paintings, simply because of their choice of tone. The pieces reminded me of Chalabi's excellent whirling dervishes - also in black, white and patterns of red, without their sense of movement. Yet the thickness of the black lines shackles the imagination, weighing the horses down and further hindering the sense of movement.

The better of these black and white pieces are the small watercolors, hung somewhat inconspicuously below the larger pieces. Probably inspired by Japanese paintings, these pieces come closest to realizing the intended theme of the show, featuring air light, anatomically logical horses suspended in empty space. It's unfortunate that the rest of the work is not accomplished in the same vein as the smaller pieces, or in fact, as Rana Chalabi's earlier work.

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