

Reassuming your position



Jill Maged's video piece "The Final Tour."



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By **Mariam Hamdy** / Special to Daily News Egypt December 18, 2009, 2:00 am

The Townhouse Gallery is currently hosting a group show titled "Assume the Position, carefully translated into Arabic as "Khaly Balak (be careful or take care). Hosting the work of nine different artists from around the world, the show attempts to steadily redefine first impressions.

It takes various situations, from everyday encounters to more large-scale events, and reshuffles our positions to them, from spectators to participants or vice versa.

The concept seems slightly confusing, but so does the oversized statement that hangs in the gallery attempting to explain the work. The statement confuses more than it informs; it does little than wax poetic, further reinforcing my personal plea on banning printed art statements inside gallery spaces that explain the theme of the presented artwork. It negates the entire process of experiencing art. If the artwork needs to be meticulously explained, then it simply isn't good enough to stand alone.

Which is certainly not the case with some of the work exhibited in this show. The memorable pieces needed no more than a title for some clarification, such as the series of photographs by Amgad Naguib and Enrique Metinides. Depicting car accidents both in Mexico City and Cairo, both artists present black and white photographs featuring the remnants of car crashes that go as far back as the 1950s. The photographs are vintage, textured and unedited, which gives the event an illusion of even more depth than an average journalistic photograph today.

The interesting part isn't the destroyed car - which sadly is only interesting enough to see when it's in a dire condition - but the people standing around it. Mesmerized as they stare, the trance of the onlookers is only interrupted if they see the photographers snapping a picture. They look to the camera, and despite the disaster they're witnessing, they actually smile. It's a very interesting series of photographs, taking the focus off the initial theme of car accidents and onto the people surrounding it. To quote critical theorist Guy Debord: "The spectator becomes the spectacle.

Equally beguiling, yet not as immediate in effect, are the photo collection of Osama Dawood. His photographs show protestors of the 2007 G8 summit, just not during the actual process of protesting. He catches them in a state when they're most relaxed - while urinating in a nearby field to protest zone or sitting in a balcony in between protests. The photographs are well composed, the random positioning of people peppering fields of grass. Once again, the subject becomes the protestors and not what they're protesting against - further cementing the clever title of the show.

The most intriguing piece in the exhibition, and easily one of the more impressive video pieces exhibited this year, is Jill Maged's "The Final Tour." The video shows a man and a woman on a Vespa driving through a city set against an amazing piano score in the background. The woman, Jill herself, wears a red coat; the city is a European one (explained later in the title as Liverpool, UK), and the overall feel is that of a romantic 60s French movie when colored films were a little grainy.

The entire video, as a matter of fact, was filmed by surveillance cameras, as Liverpool is a city known for having one of the most advance surveillance systems in the world. The minute this piece of information is thrown - through text posted at the end of the video - the entire concept of the piece changes.

The viewer is no longer immersed in a love story somewhere in Europe, but rather in a terrifying chase. One moment the gallery space where the video is projected feels like a warm and comfortable cinema complex; the next, it's a seedy CCTV security booth. The woman in the red coat instantly changes roles from a lover to a spy or assassin. The excellent video is a

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real revelation, creating a jolting effect with what appears to be minimal effort on the artist's part.

The remaining works in the show function within the same conceptual framework, but are not as strong as the aforementioned ones. The theme of the show provides a very welcome break from the usual themes that govern the Cairo exhibits, and is worth the visit.



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