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## Scenes from the city



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By **Mariam Hamdy** January 11, 2008, 2:00 am

It's become difficult to acquire an objective perspective about a city as crowded and pulsating as Cairo. People are so immersed in their surroundings, both physically and mentally, that stepping back to look at the larger picture or regard it from an alternative, abstract sense can be excruciating.

This is where artists come in. Despite inhabiting the same place as the rest of us, artists are capable of looking at the big picture and presenting it in a way that engages us long enough to discuss and contemplate.

Iman Issa is an artist who is constantly making her job look easy. "Making Places is her first solo exhibition at the Townhouse Gallery and it is refreshingly minimal.

Issa's work deals frequently with space and the alteration of landscapes. In 2003, she contributed an exceptional sculpture to the Wasla workshop in Sinai: a large gold cube that looked indiscernible in the middle of the desert. It was a truly beautiful and simple piece that greatly affected its surrounding landscape"Making Places deals with the same concept. The show consists of three parts: A series of ten photographs, a five channel video installation ("Making Places ), and two large video projections ("Skyline and "Car Wash ).

The photographs, as well as the five video installations, are all of buildings and urban landscapes in a non-Egyptian city. All the photographs, and perhaps two of the videos, have a solitary figure (the artist herself) carefully placed within the landscape, holding an object.

The objects featured include a ball, balloon, vase of flowers, flashlight and megaphone. The interesting aspect about the choice of these objects is that they are all items that evoke artistic recognition or are part of a participatory activity: a vase of flowers is to be admired; a ball is to be thrown between two people; a megaphone is to be heard and a flashlight is to see and be seen.

Having these objects used by a lone figure in a seemingly deserted landscape negates their purpose and makes the figure, and the viewer, feel increasingly lonely.

The objects are being used at a basic level - the ball is thrown in the air, the balloon is being inflated - and are not de-contextualized. The figure in use of these objects however, is completely out of context.

In an impeccably clean, empty and predominantly straight lined backdrop, the adult playing with these toys in a childlike manner is almost eerie. The naive existence of this lonely figure within the overbearing weight of the buildings gives the otherwise calm, peaceful pieces a sinister feel.

One is immediately reminded of Edward Hopper's famous paintings of lonely America, where there's this undeniable feeling of something being slightly off center or just plain wrong.

On the same note, "Skyline is a projection of a series of urban landscapes. The angles and close-ups from which these projections were shot show enough of a building or a street, but are composed in such a manner so as to leave the viewer wanting, unable to identify where this city or town is located.

Composition is the key to this piece, and Issa is brilliant in creating abstract paintings from tangible landscapes. The

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projections were still frames, filmed over a period of time where light created movement in the stagnant scene. Skyline is a great piece, a moving painting, and it dutifully compliments "Making Places.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for "Car Wash, essentially a projection displaying a car wash.

Cars going in and out of the washing area with people and water sprays scurrying around don't have the same effect as the rest of the show. The concept behind the work - dramatizing a mundane landscape or surrounding into a theatrical presence - may have been the same but the blandness of "Car Wash disrupted the rhythm of the whole show.

This is a regrettable undertone for what otherwise would have been a spot-on exhibition.

Regardless, Iman Issa is an artist to be reckoned with, her work is almost always a hair's breadth away from being normal, and it's in that tight proximity to the perfectly acceptable that she dwells best.

Check Agenda for more information.



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