

Selling art to the city



Selfridges' "God Save the Cream" promotion.



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By **Mariam Hamdy / Special to Daily News Egypt** **November 12, 2009, 2:00 am**

Having just returned from viewing several exhibitions in London, I was able to look at the art scene in Cairo with a fresh eye. This is not intended as an analytical comparison between both cities' approach to art, but rather shedding of light on an aspect of art not vehemently tackled in Cairo.

The definition of what an artist is and the ultimate mission of their chosen mode of expression have been in controversy for centuries. Everything from the beautification of the world, the clarification of truth, social and political commentary to the artist's own emotional relief have been cited as reasons, with the ultimate decision that the artists' motives are best left to case by case analysis. Yet what all agree to is that artists should be disposed to just making art.

Now how is the artist's work exposed? Either they go to a gallery and pitch themselves, or the gallery approaches them. Museums, collectors and, most importantly, art dealers all tip the balance to whether an artist's work retains longevity or is just a sizzle in the pan. In Cairo, all this networking happens at such a hushed tone that the general public has no awareness of the existence of an art scene, never mind its productions.

This is where London is different. The city's dealers, marketers and gallery managers have managed to assimilate art into its various forms to all strata of society, from exhibition posters on the sides of buses and in the subways, store windows, newspapers and clubs, to the quotation of modern day artists in the marketing of entirely non-art related products. What London has managed to do is bring art to the forefront of everyday discussion, so that it takes center stage with politics, sports, movies and general local affairs.

One may argue that Cairo has bigger problems than to worry about assimilating art into its mainstream, but so does London. The fact is: if everything was dealt with as an artist would deal with a painting, the general level of conceptual thinking would rise and spill over into other aspects of our society.

In 2005, the Tate Modern, one of a family of four Tate art galleries housing the UK's collection of British art from 1500 and of international modern art, hosted a retrospective show about Frida Kahlo, the Mexican portraitist made famous through Salma Hayek's portrayal of her in the film "Frida".

As is the case with most Tate exhibitions, it was a success, yet what was intriguing was how the city responded to it. Every store in the country boasted at least one mannequin with large flowers in her hair to match Kahlo's signature hairstyle. Selfridges, the world renowned department store known for its eccentric window displays, had the entire store front covered in life size Fridas dressed in the latest trends of 2005's boho-chic.

If you weren't interested in art at all, you couldn't help but be initiated merely through shopping. This integration is what Cairo desperately lacks.

The Tate Modern is currently hosting an exhibition titled: "Pop Life: Art in a Material World" till mid January. Perfectly suited to the fact that artwork was the least affected 'commodity' during the otherwise disastrous economic recession this year, the show exhibits the works of greats such as the late Andy Warhol, Keith Haring and Martin Kippenberger to the controversial Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami.

The Tate wanted to bank on the fact that all of these artists have been rightfully accused of the commoditization of art, so

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much so that the booth dedicated to selling "art", an idea developed by Keith Haring, was set up in the middle of the exhibition. None of the artists find this fact insulting or derogatory in any sense. Instead, they use the publicity to boost further sales of their work and the works of their fellow artists, in the process removing art from being the talk of the high browed to being the talk of the high street.

Parallel to the superb exhibition - the painstaking attention to detail in the presentation of the work was awe inspiring; another sad discrepancy in the majority of our shows in Egypt - Selfridges further commemorated 'Art in a Material World' by hosting the latest fad in London, the new ice cream company comically named "The Icecreamists: Agents of Cool.

Taking ice cream to a whole new level, the company had an entire exhibition space where they showcased their latest flavors in an underground club-like atmosphere, with a rebellious approach to ice cream labeled: "God save the Cream. Whether the simultaneous celebration of art as a commodity at the Tate modern and the irony of creating a huge production over what is ultimately a product with a five-minute shelf life was intentional, remains a speculation. Yet it's the fact that the layman is bombarded with these images - and consequently thoughts - every waking moment in the city's center is what I find truly intriguing.

Cairo needs this approach to widen its horizons and lighten the general mood of the city. Ultimately, the essence of what's being praised here is the art of presentation, packaging and consequently selling.

Artists, their dealers and their gallery managers need to approach artwork much like a politician approaches an ideology or an advertiser approaches a product: to sell it to the people. This is an art form in its own right, and if tackled, can open the floodgates to all the untapped potential in our city; art-related or otherwise.



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