

Surrealism undermined by "Breaking Boredom"



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By **Mariam Hamdy**

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Six of the best illustrators and graphic designers in Cairo are holding a group exhibition called "Breaking Boredom at the Townhouse Gallery.

Featuring George Azmy, Mahmoud Hamdy, Ibrahim Eslam, Hani Mahfouz, Mofa and Engy Aly, the show seemingly has the perfect ingredients of an explosive display of surrealism manifested in graphic design and illustration.

The epitome of surrealism - a work of art founded on the hypothesis that reality is relative to the observer - is found in a famous group game known as "Exquisite Corpse. Originally conceived for literature before it was borrowed by visual arts, the game has players write a phrase on a piece of paper and passing it to another player, subsequently writing something in response.

The game continues until every participating player has written something; the end result being an incoherent sentence that presumably has a profound emotional meaning. The surrealists came up with the name of the game, calling it "The exquisite corpse will drink the young wine upon initial playing. The sentence is contradictory and perverse; a phrase that is intriguing yet makes no sense. "Corpse implies death, "young wine implies fresh life, while calling a corpse "exquisite is simply absurd.

The essence of the game lies in its collaborative nature and the unpredictable work of art, eliminating independent authorship. More subtly, it suggests that the artists share some ideas or emotions subconsciously.

Exquisite corpses are not uncommon. It has often offered fertile ground for substantial poetry, music and art. The latest presentation to the legacy of the game is the featured exhibition, "Breaking Boredom.

Unfortunately, the show isn't quite as explosive as expected. The employed surrealism was toned down to digestible bite-size pieces that made only a slight attempt to displace themselves from reality.

The artists created 12 fine quality prints, each consisting of four consecutive contributions. A few of the pieces are true exquisite corpses, namely "The Color Grace Bleeds Coldly and "Wanted Sawsan Chirps for the Popping. These particular prints readily make associations and despite how distorted they are, the viewer feels as though he/she is looking at something familiar akin to a dream.

Both pieces are spontaneous and inelible but ultimately complete; they clearly exemplify the concept and the entire work does feel like a true creative collaborative effort.

The same can't quite be said about most of the remaining pieces in the show.

Despite the refreshment of witnessing accomplished graphic designers and illustrators showcase their skills, the prints feel manufactured. The naiveté of the "Exquisite Corpse concept was replaced with the commercial feel of "what would make sense.

This concern for the end result of the game itself was visible in these works, defying the basic purpose of the concept that stresses collaboration rather than outcome. It seems as though the artists were too courteous, resulting in a work that looks too clean. Generally the pieces lacked what each of the designers had in their own individual work: Originality, punch and flair.

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A remarkable aspect of the show is that each print had smaller printed replicas available for sale at the affordable price of LE 20 each. I couldn't conceal my enthusiasm over watching people walking out of Townhouse with artwork rolled under their arms like baguettes.

What's odd, however, is that the prints on display, whose sole difference from the small replicas is their size, are on sale for the unreasonable price of LE 3,000 each.

The success of "Breaking Boredom lies in how it presents the outcome of a conceptually sound experiment made by accomplished designers, but the work falls short of being just mildly interesting, or being solidly surrealistic. For all their provocative wishes and cunning inventions, the surrealists were concerned with the tragedy of being human, but the artists involved in this show seemed more concerned with breaking boredom. Exhibition open 10 am-9 pm, Townhouse Gallery, 10 El-Nabarawy Street, Downtown, Cairo. Tel: (02) 2576 8086



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