

'Tank Girl': A failed, tired exercise in shock tactics



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By **Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt** **March 11, 2012, 3:57 pm**

Currently showing at Misr Gallery in Zamalek is the much anticipated, hugely buzzed about exhibit "Tank Girl" by Nadine Hammam. Art lovers were looking forward to the usually controversial works of Hammam, particularly in light of the liberal versus conservative discourse that has preoccupied intellectual circuits. Few exhibits of late have created the type of excitement "Tank Girl" has effortlessly generated.

Sadly, my personal intrigue towards Hammam's latest work fell flat upon entering the gallery space. I tried to fight the sense of disappointment with each image I came across, but it was truly unavoidable.

Each painting presents a silhouette of a woman in a sexual and confrontational pose, with stances ranging from the demure classic pin-up to those with legs wide open. The silhouettes have writing on them in bold, Arial font-like, with statements that may have passed as romantic if not written in the presence of an inviting naked body. Instead, they are either forward sexual invitations or statements of the catchy song lyric variety.

The idea behind the show — the basic human need to be loved — is interesting.

Employing women as her subject as well as her canvas is Hammam's trademark, and one that has been successful up until this exhibit. In her earlier work, she brilliantly portrayed women's obvious and usually ill-treated sexualities in a way that questions their treatment by men, society and women themselves.

Here, she attempts to further delve into this subject matter through love and sex, following birth, and what seems to be the inevitable demise of relationships. The exhibition attempts to remain current by touching upon the country's current state of supreme patriarchy and military rule, through the title piece.

However, the work fails to impress both aesthetically and conceptually. Despite having a sound platform from which the artist could have expanded her palette, each piece is reduced to an amateur variation of her earlier work. The silhouettes of the women are too similar, if not almost exactly the same, as those featured in her exhibition at Safar Khan in 2010.

Furthermore, the treatment of the silhouettes has changed. Hammam's gorgeous super flat paint application and intricate Swarovski stone outlines have been replaced by this crackled silver paint applique that is painfully reminiscent of aluminium foil. The use of silver paint is a grave mistake; not only does it look like a freshman's mixed media craft's project, but the meticulously painted deep indigo blue background becomes flat and dull in contrast. Technically, the silver clashes with the red color of the font, making the writing flashy and difficult to read.

Rendering the text to a strain on the eye is the use of condom wrappers to spell out certain words. That, both as a conceptual as well as aesthetic choice, remains unexplained. It feels as though the goal is to shock for shock's sake, rather than to serve the ultimate concept behind the work, as one would assume that condoms are related to safe sex or birth control, neither of which appears to be at the heart of the subject matter at hand.

To use condom wrappers to signal that the relationships in question are sexually active is immature and superfluous since the women's poses are more than enough to fuel that idea.

Regardless of the reasoning behind the Durex branded text, the visual outcome further cements the work in the arts and crafts realm and away from complete and mature artwork.



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The statements on the paintings include: "You said you wanted me so here I am," "For how long will you love me," "I need a revolver more than I need you," and, my least favorite, "A girl with a hole in her heart."

The latter illustrates exactly why the work fails to command or intrigue as Hammam's last exhibit did: The song lyric wording, the word "hole" written in condom wrappers (a vulgar and derogatory reference to the use of the word 'hole' on a woman), the basic positioning and cropping of the female silhouette lending to a boring composition, the unexciting color palette of blue, red and silver, and the overall feel that one has seen this many, many times before.

Flashes of Hammam's wit are detected in places, but the need to shock and provoke have overshadowed what could have been a valuable work. The use of condom wrappers on the word 'revolver' signals a double meaning as a gun can be a phallic or patriarchal symbol, but the statement is so redundant, so college-girl-in-distress-like, that the wit fizzles out almost instantly.

Sadly the same applies to the title piece. Surrounded by large text that reads "Go Love Yourself," a play on the obscene and juvenile command, hangs a large painting with a female silhouette wearing a red bra, daringly riding a pink army tank. The tank gun is eerily shaped like a penis, sprouting what appears to be a sperm from afar, but up close transpires to be mice or rats. Aesthetically, the way the elements arrangement in the piece are wrong, from the awkward anatomy of the woman (her head is too big, her feet too small, her thighs adjoining to her hips at an odd right angle), to the skewed angle of the tank, to the sperm-like rats sprouting from the tank to the painting to the floor.

Conceptually, the description of the piece states: "The artist's of such complex symbols suggests a more assertive role for women to ridicule and bring down this military power along with its associates." One is not sure how assertive can a knickerless woman in a red bra be against the military rule. Despite the much needed advocating of the involvement of women in politics and in the country's change to the better, the method the artist is suggesting here is not quite convincing, even on a metaphorical level.

The most upsetting aspect of the exhibition is that the two best pieces are not displayed in the main hall, but rather at the gallery manager's office, which, if one is not asking for a press kit or looking to buy a piece, would not see. These pieces are by far the best, most mature and clever presentations of the show, with excellent execution and play on concept.

Titled "Got Love 2011," these pieces show several female silhouettes, playing on the homoerotic. Beautifully painted in Hammam's super flat acrylic dye and lovingly outlined in Swarovski crystals, the pieces perfectly illustrates artist's skill that is nowhere to be seen in the rest of the exhibit.

The wit in choice of concept is exquisite. Where the eye sees several women engaged in intimate embrace of sorts, it is actually the same silhouette being repeated over and over in different angles and in reverse. Playing on the polygamous

male fantasies, Hammam reaches out to the woman to love herself, to allow herself to be all the women she wants to be — the ultimate realization of the fantasy to both man and woman.

Nadine Hammam is a respectable, talented artist whose usually provocative work is intriguing and aesthetically pleasing and regrettably, this exhibit is certainly no example of that. Her "Got Love" paintings should be put in the forefront of the exhibition, if only to prove that the artist is in fact capable of excellent work, despite what the rest of the show is showing.

"Tank Girl" is showing at Gallery Misr: 4A Ibn Zanke St., Zamalek, Cairo. Tel: (02) 2735 0604. Closes on March 29.



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Nadia Sabry

I am surprised that you are an art critic and do not know the difference between paint and silver leaf.

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