

The evolution of Hany Rashed



Collection of Hany Rashed work.



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By **Mariam Hamdy/ Special to Daily News Egypt** January 18, 2012, 4:47 pm

The new year has so far brought forth a surge of thoroughly digested thoughts and creations onto Egypt's art scene. Delighted to be proven wrong, this year has started with a gush of excellent exhibitions successfully tackling the myriad events shaping the country post-Jan. 25. Perhaps my personal frustration at not seeing this type of production sooner was due to the excitement one felt on the onset of the revolution. But in a calmer retrospect, whatever work was produced last year was bound to be reactionary, aggressive and adolescent in its approach.

Far from that description is the always whimsical work of Hany Rashed, whose retrospective, titled "Salata," is currently showing at Tache Gallery at Designopolis.

A collection of his various styles since 2006, the exhibition shows the progression of Rashed's skills from the time he was guided by veteran artist Mohamed Abla in the 1990's, and the more solid ways he employed to express himself visually, to his own manifestations today.

It's interesting to see how an artist develops; stumbling over several manners of self-expression while dabbling into diverse mediums, schools and subject matter. Rashed shows versatility in his use of mediums, from painting and printing to collage and drawing.

"Salata" (Egyptian for 'tossed salad') presents a range of the artist's work, from his earlier pieces to a collection never before exhibited tackling the revolution.

It must be noted that Rashed's strongest pieces are his earliest and latest; with some confusion in the middle as to how exactly his styles and mediums come together in a mature and complete manner. Pieces such as the 2007 landscapes of random female figures modeling titled "Fashion Show" and the 2008 scattered figures dancing on a blue horizon titled "The Party," are confused and amateur, both in craft as well as subject matter. Neither displays the artist's otherwise intriguing approach to composition and pop color, and in fact can be seen as detrimental to the rest of the work on display.

Starkly different are his early pieces depicting workers in Maspero. Drawing on his experience as an electrician in the state broadcasting building, the melancholy and imprisonment depicted in the two pieces illicit a cringe as to how these workers live and feel. Terribly sad, dark and claustrophobic, these paintings show minimal craft but a flood of emotion, making them the most impressive of the earlier works on display.

Rashed has been working extensively with collage lately; the best of his works were displayed at last year's "Collage: 100 years on" exhibition at The Gallery. The works currently on display at Tache are in the same vein, highlighting a disconnect that the artist has with lifestyles abroad, as he whites out faces and figures from international magazine spreads. Unable to relate, it appears that Rashed isolates certain elements within each composition, ultimately dealing with these spreads as though they are merely shapes and elements in which he attempts to find a more stable balance.

The best paintings in the current exhibition are his 2010 "Bin Laden" and "Wounded Warrior," drawing on the recent wars with excellent management of a large number of elements, colors and transparencies. In these pieces Rashed includes figures, words, portraits, vehicles and guns without crowding or being obtrusive. He handles this grave subject matter as one would a children's story, with the brightness and wealth of forms that simply illustrate difficult images to minds that aren't prepared to fathom their reality.

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On the contrary, Rashed's latest pieces on the revolution appear taken from actual photographs of the event. Using monoprints (which are single edition prints), images of various people in Tahrir are portrayed with an honesty depicted in the simple blocks of color and jagged lines. Despite the reduction of line and vacuum of detail, the portraits boast a wealth of feeling and nostalgia, bringing back the memories of the emotional rollercoaster Egyptians went through during those tumultuous 18 days. It's uncanny that these images are a year old, and Rashed brings them back with a punch.

Using bright primary colors which decontextualizes the gravity of the assaults represented, monoprints such as "Rock" and "Retreat" are melancholy images of what we have witnessed, but unlike the real images, these are more aesthetically pleasing.

A personal favorite monoprint is "Conversation," featuring two policemen, from the supposedly dispersed State Security forces, having a conversation as they follow the events at the time. The beauty of this piece lies in the extent of the implied conversation, with one man's back to the viewer and the face of the other half covered with large sunglasses — yet the body language says it all. Large, burly men standing pensive, lips pursed and fists clenched, they feel disarmed and confused; a glorious moment for the average Egyptian to whom these figures otherwise personified terror.

This show is a glimpse into the career of an average layman who became an artist, so the work speaks volumes without being too philosophical, with sophisticated images that are, nonetheless, simple to understand. If that isn't enough to drive up to Designopolis for, then Rashed's honest, guileless and austere depiction of the revolution is.

Tache Art Gallery: S-139 Sebara District, Designopolis, 38 KM Cairo-Alexandria Desert Road, Sheikh Zayed. Tel: (02) 3857 2232. "Salata" closes on Feb. 25.



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