

The fantastic creatures of Francisco Toledo



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By **Mariam Hamdy** **September 15, 2008, 2:00 am**

The Mahmoud Mokhtar Culture Center is currently hosting a collection titled "Zoología Fantástica that strike a perfect balance between being thought-provoking and entertaining.

Judging by the last few exhibits, finding an art show that satisfies both artistic ends has become increasingly rare. Recent works that have succeeded in enticing a pensive conversation were quite grave, both in terms of content and aesthetic. Adversely, the works that are visually lightweight are also frivolous content-wise.

"Zoología Fantástica, one of those rarities, is the work of world-renowned Mexican Francisco Toledo, who is widely regarded as Mexico's greatest living artist and is credited with single-handedly creating a new school of artistic expression in his home country.

Toledo possesses a range of talents second to none: He is a master printmaker, draftsman, painter, sculptor, ceramist, and in his current exhibition in Cairo, he proves to be superb at water colorist.

The exhibition is based on the "Book of Imaginary Beings by Argentinean poet, essayist and short-story writer Jorge Luis Borges, which is the original Spanish "Manual de Zoología Fantástica, or "Handbook of Fantastic Zoology.

The handbook contains the descriptions of over 120 mythical beasts from the Spanish-speaking world of folklore and literature. In the preface, Borges says that the book is to be read "not straight through, but rather we would like the reader to dip into the pages at random, just as one plays with the shifting patterns of a kaleidoscope.

Viewers are advised to regard Toledo's watercolors from the same perspective. The works are aesthetically exquisite. Toledo's delicate attention to line is worthy of a magnifying glass, much like an intricate lithograph. His choice of medium shows the steady hand of a skilled artist since water color is known to be the most difficult type of paint to control.

It also shows contradiction; watercolors are considered less forceful than oil or acrylic paints, for example. Using a soft medium as such contrasts with the eccentricities of the subject it's depicting. Regardless, Toledo has managed to display a range of colors that was predominantly earthy but not at all dull.

Toledo's cleverest decision was the toning down of colors. Had he made the colors as fantastic as his creatures, the work would've appeared like an overdose of bizarre information. The creatures are both amusing and disturbing, ranging from the slightly peculiar to the downright strange. Most of the works have exceptionally exaggerated genitalia of both sexes with the dominant male organs blatantly featured in most of the pieces.

The exhibition doesn't contain beautiful, picturesque animals such as birds or felines; most featured animals are those that would usually elicit fear or awe or both. The eeriness of the creatures is striking. They aren't just composite edits of various animals; they're altogether new beings. The question that lays heavy on the viewer is how much of the pieces are Borges' descriptions and how much are Toledo's additions to them.

Toledo's artwork reflects a deep appreciation of nature, particularly animals not conventionally associated with beauty such as bats, iguanas, toads and insects. The pieces not only display the artist's highly developed sense of the fantastic, but also his exceptional skill in the use of fine lines and water colors.

Both in concept, medium and aesthetic, Toledo has managed to create hybrids that are playful and monstrous at the same

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time.

The experience of the show would've been more entertaining had the descriptions by Borges been readily available to the viewers, yet that wasn't the case. Only one copy of the creatures' descriptions was printed, which wasn't enough to use for what would have been an entertaining comparison.

"Zoología Fantástica is currently showing at the Mahmoud Mokhtar Cultural Center, inside Mahmoud Mokhtar Museum, 5 El Tahrir St. Dokki, Giza. Tel: (02) 2735 1123.



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