

## The naked identity of Nadine Hammam



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By **Mariam Hamdy**

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It isn't every day, or any day for that matter, that one would stumble into a gallery in Cairo that's hosting a collection of nude paintings. It's even rarer to find nude paintings that are solid works of both aesthetic and conceptual clarity.

Rare but possible, for artist Nadine Hammam has audaciously managed to accomplish that feat with her new collection "Akl Aish, currently exhibiting at the Townhouse Gallery.

Hammam's debut solo show presents a collection of life-size paintings. All of them feature nude women, all of whom are stripped bare of any recognizable trait.

This is not to say that the identity of these women isn't known, they all represent particular figures labeled, or "marked as Hammam puts it, by their occupation. They are street workers, businesswomen, employees and housewives. Yet in these paintings, their identities are stripped down to the very basic core.

They are simply females, devoid of all attributes, particularly self-consciousness.

It seems as though it is only in these paintings that Hammam was able to achieve this sense of freedom, be it for herself or the women she's portraying. Aesthetically, she has simplified her figures down to a silhouette of color.

Using vivid and uniform application, she uses bright pinks, turquoise, blues and purple, all of which further abstract the figure from its person. Hammam has a studied sense of balance, particularly evident in the paintings that feature several figures, where she uses mirror-like symmetry.

The paintings are a joy to look at, graphically designed with perfect attention to line.

Due to that graphic quality of the work, a larger space between the viewer and the subjects in the paintings is established, which liberates the former from feeling like a voyeur. At first glance, the nudes feel like mannequins: nameless, lifeless figures whose bodies are merely functional instruments. Hammam's work is not an abstract study of the female figure though. She's adamant for these women exist, to appear as real as possible within the context of her theme and stylistic pattern. The paintings appear to be untitled, but in fact, the numbers in the captions next to each piece refers to the area codes from where these women hail.

A recurring theme in the paintings is the oversized censorship strip that covers the faces of all the women, except when they're not facing the viewer. This particular accent in the paintings allows the viewer the possibility of recognizing these women had the strip not been placed, transforming the paintings into a tabloid-type image.

In this essence, Hammam might be urging the viewers to pursue their own subjective perceptions and impressions of these enigmatic women, despite the fact that the figures are not "naked enough for them to do so with confidence and assurance.

It's through these contradicting elements that Hammam tests the moral obligations and social constraints placed on women in our culture. A further poke on the side finds the sole painting of a male in the show; a large double portrait of a man executed in the same style, laced with Swarovski crystals.

Hammam's placement of this man at the center of the exhibition not only makes the male figure stand out like a sore thumb -

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the way the female figure usually does - but it also reinforces the phenomena of the Alpha male, a gender that need not be so harshly judged on their actions regardless of how crude they may seem but, in fact, is defined and valued for them, hence the Swarovski adornment.

The subject of double standards between genders and the myriad limitations put on women in our culture has been discussed in various forms quite extensively, with abundance of aggression and poor taste. Nadine Hammam has managed to avoid the clichés and make a solid statement through her work.

Akl Aish, Townhouse Gallery, 10 El Nabarawy Street, Downtown. Tel: (02) 2576 8086, 9 am-9 pm



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