

## The sad life of Lise Allam's 'dolls'



Lise Allam's exhibition examines the state of discarded dolls.



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By **Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt** **October 7, 2010, 5:28 pm**

Currently showing at Gezira Art Center in Zamalek is an exhibition entitled "Dolls" by Lise Allam, a Danish artist who has been living in Egypt for more than 30 years. The show, which features a substantial number of oil paintings, as well as a few sketches scattered in between, is easily one of the most conceptually and aesthetically solid shows of the year so far.

An uncanny concept at first glance, the exhibition examines the state of discarded dolls, a few of which appear in vitrines in the center of the exhibition as though they are some sort of sacred historical specimen. The fact that children are encouraged to make dolls the center of their reality and imagination — only to be told to discard them as they inch towards adulthood — is what intrigues the artist. The idea appears somewhat modest at first, yet the depth to which emotions are conveyed through Allam's work is simply startling.

The images at first appear sinister and fearful, with paintings of dirty, broken dolls with half-closed eyes and matted hair, lying, sitting or standing on the floor, or even suspended in mid-air. However, as each painting presents a lifeless,

abandoned plastic creature, personalities and histories start to emerge, turning what was initially deemed as sinister to downright tragic.

"It was the idea of trying to reassemble the dolls, with all their scars and fractures, back together that led me to think, can they be complete again? And if they are, as dolls, mirrors of those who possessed and discarded them, can the same be done to their owners?" Allam explained to Daily News Egypt.

In that light, the work takes on a larger-than-life question: Can people unbreak their hearts and spirits?

With each painting, Allam compels art viewers to confront this question, capturing their attention long enough to ponder the details of each doll. Through excellent application of carefully placed brushstrokes, she manages to capture the effect of permanently stained plastic bodies of the dolls, the sticky, flat hair coiffed into curls or braids, and the glassy blue irises of their dislocated eyeballs.

Despite these disturbing features, the dolls show a real sense of vulnerability and weakness that makes the one feel sympathetic rather than fearful of their dispositions.

"Dolls are the extensions of our hidden selves," Allam says. "Through dolls we live out all that is forbidden, or rather, all that which we do not permit ourselves to do." It is no wonder then that the portraits of these dolls show the sadness of a dream or fantasy tainted and scorned.

Not only are the portraits of these dolls skillfully painted and presented, but it's their surroundings that make the paintings all the more special. Several of the dolls are painted in a garden-like background, as though they were hastily left in a backyard for a more enticing activity.

The juxtaposition of the bright greens and reds of the flowers and bushes against the dirty broken doll is outstanding, contrasting the joyful sensation of childhood against the tragic protagonist of the painting. In other pieces, the background is a plain solid color. In others, it's comprised of black and white diamond pieces reminiscent of circus clowns.

In all cases the surrounding background, be it a setting or a wash, allows for intriguing contrast that brings each doll to the

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immediate reality of the viewer.

One of the finest features of the show is a collection of portraits, each displaying a doll's head on a 30x30 cm canvas. The pieces are poignant and heartbreaking. One piece in particular shows the beautiful face of a doll. Save for the dirty plastic skin, it is intact, with no scars, fractures or lost features. Yet it seems forlorn and lonely, with a lifeless-yet-distant look in her eyes that could elicit the deepest of disappointments in any observer.

"Dolls" may not appeal to everyone: It's complex, beautiful and disturbing — a profound representational record of the dejection of the human condition. Rarely have I come across a show where the 50 or more pieces on display exhibit a concrete concept developed with each piece. The inventive, diverse use of medium, on the other hand, is dexterous as it is experimental. This show is a must see.



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