

The shallow, misleading revolution of "Thawret El Looool"



Thawret El Looool.



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By **Mariam Hamdy/ Special to Daily News Egypt** **September 12, 2011, 5:10 pm**

I was somewhat surprised not to have heard of the latest publication discussing the contemporary Egyptian art scene released this past August. A book titled "Thawret El Looool: Chats with Young Egyptian Artists" written by Mariam Elias, aims to create links between young contemporary artists, their work and the generation to which they belong.

Furious with myself, I purchased the book from the Townhouse Gallery store and within an hour I understood why such an important subject to artists and critics alike didn't attract any buzz. The book was, at best, forgettable.

There are many things wrong with this book, starting with its presentation. The wise advice that urges you to "never judge a book by its cover" will almost always fall flat when it comes to a book about art or design. An art book needs not be creative in its layout — at least, it should have a relevant cover to the content and display colored sample of the discussed work. Both front and back covers are composed of kitsch images of Cairo pop culture, and all images inside the book are of black and white photocopy quality.

However, what is truly unforgivable about Elias' book is the basic content. If I disregard the myriad of atrocious spelling and grammatical mistakes that riddle the text, I simply cannot disregard the drastic lack of references and research. For a writer in her mid-20s, her personal experience of the arts cannot possibly suffice to support her thoughts, theories or analysis of the current milieu. Even if the work in discussion is ultra contemporary, there are endless references that could have and should have been employed to give the discussion of the work, artists and their current situations in Egypt further depth, color and, most importantly, historical context. Only four references are used in the entire 101 page book.

The title itself is frustrating: it has nothing to do with the content. Led by an introductory chapter of sorts (where all the four references are used), the book is divided into subsequent chapters titled "Chat rooms," each one posing a question for the artists featured in the book, followed by their answers. The book does not tackle the revolution at all, and the "laugh out loud" abbreviation is painfully irrelevant (though the chat room concept may explain it, but barely). The title is gimmicky and when translated in Arabic, "El Looool" sounds like something from a third-rate Eid movie rather than a book about art that should be taken somewhat seriously.

The content barely touches on the parameters of the Egyptian art scene: the movements that have been around in the city in the past 10 years even if they're diluted, the gallery boom in the last five, the emergence of the modern collector, the vital historical background to the contemporary art scene and the general trends of the arts both regionally and internationally. The subjects at hand, I must stress, are thoroughly under-researched and the tone with which the book assumes trends and gives random pieces of information feels condescending.

Most importantly, Elias explores contemporary arts from a perspective that completely disregards 'older' artists, even if they are still producing arguably more than their young counterparts. The chosen artists are a list of youngsters selected from three or four group exhibitions between 2009 and 2010, and their work is mainly confined to pop culture reproduction and image appropriation.

There's obviously nothing wrong with their approach, but based on their rather narrow scope and use of medium, they fail to see the larger picture in the art scene, consequently making false assumptions on 'other' artists as well as galleries and how

they function. To claim that the chosen artists and their work is a median sample of Egyptian art today would be misleading; making the local art scene appear like a very small niche that needs a very particular frame of mind to be understood.

Elias's choppy and shallow questions for the artists reap no solid conclusion, as the artists' answers are always contradictory and based on personal experiences rather than any researched or examined study. Once again, the artists themselves are not at all to be blamed — they, after all, are merely answering questions. The overall effect leads one to ask: "What point is being made here? What am I supposed to get from this book?" I unfortunately have no answer.

The concept behind the book is noble and interesting, and if there's one thing that Elias is to be commended for is her bravery in putting herself out there this way. However, one would've advised her to research deeper and seek advice from accomplished writers, artists, gallery owners and professors — anyone who would've added valuable and much needed editorial experience to this project. Sadly, however, the execution is deeply superficial and immature, making "Thawret El Looool" a decidedly bad choice for the reader seeking to learn more about Egyptian contemporary art.

On that note, it must be pointed out that there's an undisputed vacuum of good books about modern and contemporary art in Egypt, and radio silence when it comes to solid, uncompromising criticism.

As such, this lack of critical analysis and documentation of the arts creates an artistic environment devoid of standards, allowing well-intentioned yet inexperienced efforts to incorrectly represent the scene and place personal margins as to what is accepted as good. As a way to inform the average reader on what is in fact a good read discussing or presenting modern Egyptian art, here is a compiled list of titles to get you started:

Al Funun Al Tashkiliya Fi Misr: Ela Ayn? (Visual Arts in Egypt: To Where) by renowned critic Mokhtar Al Attar (published by Al Hay'a Al 'Aama Li Al Kitab). This book offers an excellent approach in exploring the origins of modern Egyptian art.

Ruwaad Al Fann wa Tali'at Al Tanweer fi Misr (Pioneers of Art in Egypt) by Mokhtar Al Attar (published by Al Hay'a Al 'Aama Li Al Kitab). The book presents an excellent listing and analysis of the works of the country's pioneering artists.

Al Tawagoh Al Igtima'i lil Fanaan Al Masry Al Mo'aaser (The Social Tendencies of Egyptian Contemporary Art) by Izz El Din Naguib (published by Al Maglis Al A'laa li Al Thaqafa). This enjoyable text presents an in-depth discussion about the social soil in which the Egyptian artist is molded.

The Dawn of Modern Egyptian Painting 1900-1945 by Izz El Din Naguib (published by Dar Al Mustaqbal Al Arabi).

Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt by Jessica Winegar (Stanford University Press).

Twentieth Century Egyptian Art: The Private Collection of Sherwet Shafei by Mona Abaza and notes by Sherwet Shafei (published by AUC Press). Despite the writing being somewhat uninteresting, the collector's notes and the images are a joy to look at.

Self-titled artist books and catalogues, which can be found in all bookstores in Egypt, spanning artists from the prolific Gazbia Sirry and Salah Taher to Adam Henien and Adel El Siwi are also essential. These books vary in quality of text, but are helpful in introducing readers and art enthusiasts to Egyptian artists and their work.



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