

Those tense Egyptians and their fascinating universe



This image boasts an effect that is Egyptian in essence with un-Egyptian splashes of color.

By **Mariam Hamdy** April 28, 2009, 2:00 am

Townhouse Gallery is currently hosting the latest exhibition by celebrated artist Sabah Naim. An Egyptian artist of international acclaim, Naim's work has been exhibited at prestigious venues all over the globe, from the Smottamenti at the 50th Venice Biennale, to London's Hayward gallery, Paris' Center Georges Pompidou and Tokyo's Mori Art museum.

Naim's body of work has been softly evolving, changing subtly in subject matter and approach, yet always maintaining the artist's trademark monochromatic palette. Naim's approach to her work is instantly recognizable: the manipulation of photographs with various inputs of color, abstractions and her signature use of neatly folded newspaper. In the current show Naim introduces embroidery to her photographs, confirming her belief that medium should not be limiting to what she's attempting to portray.

Naim's work has always carried social commentaries, but ones that don't judge. She captures her subjects in compositions that allow her viewers to follow their stories and read their expressive faces. Quintessentially Egyptian and specifically Cairene, Naim's subjects are almost always crowded, stressed and lost in a state of anguish and concern.

The most engaging of Naim's works date back to the period between 2000 and 2006. Her paintings of that time juxtaposed chaotic portraits of stressed Egyptians with a seemingly organized and orderly abstraction of folded or rolled local newspapers. The contrast between the tiny, barely visible words describing the reality of Egypt and the images of Egyptians was simply brilliant, striking a chord with viewers worldwide.

Naim's current self-titled show at Townhouse is an interesting evolvement of the artist's style. A substantial part of her vast work is presented, taking up all of the gallery's first floor as well as the factory space. The larger collection, exhibited at the factory space, showcase the artist's characteristic subject matter using paint on printed canvas. The strength of the show lies in a few solid pieces. Many, nevertheless, feel like a repetitive production of the same idea, particularly the framed pieces.

Of the stronger paintings is an image of seated men at a gathering of sorts. The palette is mostly sepia-tinted with the exception of a splash of intense turquoise that mark the scarves and galabeyya of two of the men seated in the front. The overall effect is perfect: inescapably Egyptian in essence with decidedly un-Egyptian splashes of color.

Another notable piece depicts three girls in what appears to be a metro, pensive and aware that they are being watched. The entire canvas is covered in individual stitches of diagonal threads which look like needles from afar. The stitches may be interpreted as a purely aesthetic addition or a heavy connotation to the piece; both readings lend to the intrigue of the painting.

Most fascinating part of the exhibit is the works exhibited in Townhouse's first floor that illustrate the real progress of Naim's approach. By using embroidery, Naim venture further into the realm of three-dimensional painting, graduating from newspaper to colored thread and delicate ornaments. These embroidered pieces provide much of the texture attributed to her earlier works and lacking in the pieces featured in the factory space, resulting in a more intimate approach to her subject matter.

Another important factor lending to the success of these pieces is their composition: each photograph is a part of a larger



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collection, allowing for stories to emerge within other stories. A particularly excellent example is a collection of narrow canvases featuring full figure portraits, each blown up in a style different yet complementary to the next. The textures in this piece is exquisite, allowing for the viewer to question why each character is shown in this light and the function of these lines, colors and ornaments in terms of the characters' depiction.

Naim has exhibited an exceptional body of work for a solo show, yet it feels as though the works featured in the factory space is more of an assortment of Naim's pieces rather than a coherent collection of canvases as was the case in the first floor. Overall, however, the show is worth a visit, if only to support a local artist of well deserved international acclaim.

Sabah Naim's self-titled show is currently running at the Townhouse Gallery, 10 El Nabarawy St., Downtown Cairo. Open daily from 10 am-2 pm and from 6 pm-9 pm except Thursdays. Tel: (02) 2576 8086.



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