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## Townhouse's double exhibition speaks to the mind before the heart



Kenawy's video installation is melancholic and compelling.

By **Mariam Hamdy** March 12, 2008, 2:00 am

It's always gratifying to find clever social commentary that is not only coherent but also relevant to Cairo's reality.

There's perhaps no better way for a social commentary to have a worthwhile impact than through assuming the form of visual arts.

Arguably, there's no better place to reflect on the city than Townhouse, which effortlessly highlights the grave contradictions of the capital. That's why the choice of Townhouse to be the venue for Ahmed Hosni's debut solo exhibition as well as Amal Kenawy's latest video installation was spot-on.

In "Odd One Out, Hosni examines the phenomenon of ethno-tourism: the response to the tourist's desire to experience the exoticism of a Bedouin lifestyle in an "ecologically responsible environment.

His camera captures the workers of "an industry that's as much about marketing and appearance as it is about truth. Despite the fact that such a statement may give the impression that Hosni's work is some kind of hostile exposé, the photographs are more reflective than belligerent.

The photographs are rich in detail while their colors are well calculated. Most of Hosni's portraits are centrally positioned, with backgrounds reminiscent of Piet Mondrain's paintings, created by the hard lines of architecture and interiors.

Most of the subjects have the same expression: slightly confused and forced to carry out their jobs. They include a receptionist, a cook, a "local and a photographer. Hosni's subjects look as though they are not in their own skin and are distressingly aware of it.

One of the best photographs in his exhibition is a stone brick wall, built "Bedouin style, with a surveillance camera on top of it. The bizarre contradiction solidifies the concept behind the work: are these people real, or are they acting? Does the fact that the location of this environment is in the vicinity of these people's homes make it authentic or an organic "Truman Show for tourists?

Take it a step further and ask the same questions about the Townhouse gallery itself: Is it really a part of downtown, or will it always be this secluded place where artists and their intellectual peers can ruminate about the less fortunate locals?

Organizers of Townhouse should be lauded for their clever decision to curate the exhibitions of Ahmed Hosni and Amal Kenawy simultaneously.

After viewing Hosni's show, Kenway's latest video installation, entitled "Blue, enhanced the overall artistic experience.

Set in the center of the Townhouse Annex (a huge factory type space) is a large, white ceramic, shallow pool structure with a fountain in it. The sound of rushing water soothingly draws in the viewers. A large blue projection is seen behind the fountain, telling the story of a horse walking through the annex, allowing the video to look like the continuation of the space.

The sound of hoofs and a snare played in the background, while text described the fall of a unicorn lookalike horse into the



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The sound of hoofs and a piano played in the background, while text described the fall of a unicorn lookalike horse into the sea. "They tried to help by throwing ropes with hooks that, instead, tore through the horse's body, rendering his silent, dignified and ironic passing all the more painful.

The entire experience is quite melancholic. How can man bear to allow such beauty to fade without attempting to save at least a few parts of it? The question applies to everything from euthanasia to religions to the deteriorating state of the nation.

The power of Kenawy's installations lies in that they hang over your head like a dark cloud until you deliberately shake them off.



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