

## YEAREND SPECIAL: Cairo art scene embraces new trends



Former First Lady Jehan Sadat wanted her first exhibition to be in Egypt.

By **Mariam Hamdy/ Special to Daily News Egypt** **December 24, 2010, 3:00 am**

This year has been a relatively intriguing one for the arts in Cairo. Despite the fact that most of the exhibitions didn't resonate significantly with viewers or critics, there appears to be new trends in Cairo's art scene that are worth some attention.

New gallery spaces are being introduced and artists of all ages who have never exhibited before gathered enough confidence to finally display their work. Not only does this present a heightened interest in the visual arts, but it also portrays galleries as more encouraging to beginner emerging artists. And, to make an economic inference, it may be an indication that there are a lot more art collectors and buyers in the market nowadays.

The artists worth noting this year are new, but that is not to imply that they lack experience. Many older talents who have been painting for years finally mustered up the courage to exhibit their works in 2010 — such as Egypt's former First Lady Jehan Sadat, who presented pieces at her self-titled show at the American University in Cairo, which she'd painted as a pastime over the course of 10 years.

Despite the work being largely canonic, Sadat's show had resonance due to her personal decision to present it: She was adamant that her first ever show would be in Egypt, in the hopes that it would draw the world's attention to the country's modern art to supplement the widespread interest in its ancient art.

Another experienced-yet-new persona in this category is Danish artist Lise Allam, who held her very first large solo show "Dolls" at the Gezira Art Center. Allam decided to finally exhibit her scarring collection of paintings depicting reassembled dolls after many years. Once again, it was the ultimate decision to exhibit the work that made the collection exciting: The art portrayed a confidence and lack of fear that manifested itself in the reception it received from the exhibition's attendees.

Younger talents have also presented themselves, though referring more in terms of exhibition space than in the manner in which the artists created their art — the latter was not particularly memorable. With new exhibition spaces popping up in the least likely of locations, the dilemma of art galleries is becoming less of the actual availability of space and more of the intentions behind exhibiting the art in the first place.

Although the biggest grievance of most artists is that there aren't enough galleries to house their work (and despite this still holding true), the selection of art work and the space to exhibit that work is becoming a much bigger problem.

Dalia Sabet, a young hopeful artist attempting to break into the scene, exhibited her first solo show at a small space — a room, in fact — at a boutique called Ghazl El-Banat in Zamalek. This was not the first time artwork was displayed at a commercial venue; it has been done in bars, restaurants and eateries all over the city — downtown Cairo restaurant Arabesque being a prime example of this concept.

However, Sabet's latest experience may represent the first time an exhibition has been held at a commercial venue so forcefully; the boutique held a formal opening for the exhibition, complete with price lists and artist statements.

At first glance, exhibition concepts such as these are savvy ventures that allow artists to widen their audiences and find more public spaces to display their works. However, some would beg to differ when the phenomenon starts to take on a much



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more official existence. Case in point: Articulate Baboon, a young gallery in Designopolis, has introduced its new 'branch' at the high end store "Amuse" in Zamalek. Although the space displayed almost the same sense of professionalism, understanding of curation, and ultimate freshness of the original gallery at Designopolis, there's an uneasy feeling of commercialism behind the art on display.

Immediately, the inherent awareness of all the prices of the paintings upstairs and the merchandise on the store's floor below is inescapable, making the overall experience of viewing the art as comparable to the viewing of fashion: a form of art with a seasonal and perishable shelf life.

This continues to be an ongoing discussion, one with pros and cons regarding the ultimate purpose and merit behind the art displayed and the gallery displaying it. A perfect example of the antithesis of this particular dispute was this year's best exhibition by far: Gamal Al-Sagini's self-titled retrospective at the Zamalek Art Gallery. The late artist, who passed away in 1977 at the age of 60, left his only son Maged Al-Sagini with a remarkable collection of sculptures, all of which can easily be described as museum pieces.

The work is awe-inspiring. Rarely has there been a show with so many pieces that take your breath away, making it difficult to fully digest the high caliber of the art presented in just one walkthrough. The show showed the very best of Al-Sagini's sculptures, with work sculpted with such passion and care that each piece had its own heartbeat.

The beauty of Al-Sagini's exhibition is its purpose: With a vitrine showcasing the tools and hand molds of the late artist, the show was about the labor and love the artist had for his work, and the need for it to be appreciated in the way he felt it should be. It felt as though the gallery space took it upon itself to become an extension of the artist — to not function as merely a dealer, but rather as a vitrine itself. There was obvious potential to sell each piece, but the focus was first and foremost on the exhibition's display.

This year's increase in small, studio-like exhibition spaces that ultimately lack genuine art may not be indicative of a lack of talent. Perhaps instead the problem lies with the intentions behind the gallery spaces in their choices.

Unlike 2009's art review, this year's does not just condemn the artists' efforts. The overall hope spurred by 2010 is that both the new and more established gallery spaces focus on hunting down the talent that is concealed within this dense city. It's become more apparent than ever that the main obstacle to improving Cairo's art scene is not a lack of talent, of galleries or of art lovers. The main obstacle is a lack of guidance as to how to effectively bring them all together.



Lise Allam held her first large solo show "Dolls" at the Gezira Art Center.



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