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## YEAREND SPECIAL: The year in art



Darb 1718's group exhibit "Bread" is arguably the most conceptually sound and most visually interesting show of this year.

By **Mariam Hamdy** / Special to Daily News Egypt      December 22, 2009, 2:00 am

2009 has been a somewhat bittersweet year for the local art scene. It was sweet in because galleries have become real powerhouses with a much stronger hold on the reins when it comes to the art business than they have ever been in Cairo. The bitter side of it is that not all the artists they presented were, to put it simply, worth presenting.

This dwindling number of talented artists can be largely pinned down to the fact that there's an overall stunt in growth when it comes to all creative arts; pop music has reached an uninspiring dead end, fashion has recycled everything from the 50s to the 80s and is now stumped for an answer, and mainstream movies have gone into a spiral of great graphics and bad scripts respectively. There are only a handful of artists that have managed to shine despite the evident lack of muses.

Yet in spite of the fact that what I'm doing here is essentially trying to color this year's highlights in a more positive tone, there's a decidedly grey cloud over the general output of this city's art. One would love to blame it on the economic recession, but the fact is, worldwide, the art business was one of the very few businesses to flourish. So why has our general creative output grown so dull?

There are many possible answers, ranging from the political and the social, to complete and utter indifference, but it seems that what encompasses all reasons for this creative vacuum are the intentions of the artists themselves. Surely this is a blatant generalization, but the vast majority of art-works displayed in Cairo this year was more concerned with how its creators are perceived than how they actually look.

The obsessive concern with concept has gravely affected the aesthetics of the produced work, and those rebelling against conceptual work haven't honed in their craft well enough to yield aesthetically intriguing results. The general sense is that artists need to focus more on the work itself and less on how it'll be perceived at the opening. This hiccup in the creative process is evident worldwide, with galleries growing stronger and more prominent than the produced art.

In an attempt to look on the bright side and remain optimistic, here are a few nods to some of the galleries and artists who have made a substantial splash this year.

First is Kunst Gallery café, a small corner coffee shop with a wall space dedicated to exhibiting art. The reason this small space emerges as one of the most pleasant discoveries of the year lies in how it managed to penetrate the popular conscious despite its decidedly atypical approach to art presentation. It managed to attract mainstream attention by forcefully elbowing its way into Cairo guides, event planners and art websites. The marketing of its shows was commendable, reaching newspapers and magazines with efficiency that some of the bigger and more established galleries haven't yet managed to achieve. Their actual shows however still need work, but if they approach their selections the way they do with their marketing, they'll surely develop into a power to be reckoned with.

A similar case is with the young group of young entrepreneurs who have founded Hanfaninha Gallery. Fresh and full of energy, this gallery could soar to new heights and become a significant art establishment in Cairo, if only for its exquisite location. Yet their exhibitions could make use of a more experienced eye; one that's more critical and less friendly than their current choice of artists. As an initiative however, the gallery takes itself seriously and aims to grow - one can only hope that they do in order to inspire others to follow suit.

A new art space that has struggled slightly at first but has scored a grand success by the end of this year is Darb 1718.



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There have been a lot of controversial reports surrounding the space and its founder, Moataz Nasr, yet he managed to stand still in the face of the storm and draw all attention to his gallery with the show "Bread, arguably the most conceptually sound and most visually interesting show of this year.

Equally interesting were El Masar exhibitions known for their large collection works. The biggest anomaly of their shows is their mundane and somewhat monotonous approach to titles and themes - so much that it's become imperative for them to 'shake it up a little' lest they fall in a repetitive cycle. Despite the fact that both the artists El Masar represent and their work are almost always first-class, there's a sense that the shows are pitched towards more commercial objectives; the themes of their exhibitions are not aimed to please the average viewer but rather catered for the average buyer.

As was the case with last year, Zamalek Art Gallery wraps up this year's events with Mohamed Abla's show "City lights. Commemorating Cairo, it seems the perfect ending to a difficult year for most, and Abla uses the same ingredients that made his previous show, "Labyrinth, during the same period last year. With an excellent collection of impressionist style paintings depicting Cairo at night, the exhibition reminds the average viewers what they love about their country, and art, the most: that it can always turn for the better.



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