

## Why Not Have a Generation-less Exhibition?

By Dominique Ellis



The exhibition *Why Not?*, which opened last month at the Palace of Arts on the grounds of Cairo's Opera House, raises many more questions than perhaps it intended to. Most notably, those of the curatorial choices of the Director of the Palace, also the curator of the show: How he chose both the pieces and the artists, why he used the space in the way he did, and what the link is between one piece and another?

*Why Not?*, sponsored by Egypt's Ministry of Culture and featuring 44 Egyptian artists, set its starting point as breaking bounds. Curated by the Director of the Palace of Arts, Mohamed Talaat, his one objective was "individual artistic investigation" by exploring one's voice in different mediums than normal. The second objective was the ability to have an exhibition, fusing the older and younger Egyptian generations together - something not the norm in Ministry of Culture spaces. The challenge was great, as Talaat attempted to curate not based on an artist's age or status in society - as is the norm in Egyptian art circles - but rather based on the content of one's artwork.

To those unfamiliar with Talaat, the youngest director/curator of the Palace of Arts, he is a charismatic and eager curator who wants to shake off the dust of previous

decades of curatorial practice at the Palace of Arts. His call, or statement, for change began with the exhibition, *What's Happening Now?* in 2007 at the same venue, where he first introduced his approach to curating within a government gallery space by incorporating multi-generational artists. His statement was also one made in the use of a rhetorical exhibition title, like *What's Happening Now?*, and more recently, *Why Not?* - noteworthy as a method of creating dialogue in a culture where the dialogue of debate is not the norm. So, *Why Not?*

For the artist Adel El-Siwi, why not push is his artistic repertoire into new forays? Well, thanks to Talaat, he did - using ceramic vessels as a new surface to paint on. The personal dialogue and response to surface was challenged by working in a new medium. The piece both responds to an individual pursuit and the curatorial question posed. Surely, a measure of success on Talaat's part? There are, however, still certainly more questions than answers resulting from this exhibition, but perhaps that is the point. What *Why Not?* alludes to or how this open-ended question manifested itself visually and conceptually is subjective. However, in a contemporary dialogue, it is essential to ask questions like, why not have an exhibition rooted in individual exploration? or why not have generation-less exhibitions? Yet, asking the question is not enough. Although this exhibition pushes the boundaries of who is included or excluded, does it matter what generation the artist is from? In a generation-less exhibition, emerging and established artists are held to the same standard of criteria for evaluation of the content of their work. And *Why Not?*

*Dominique Ellis is a visual artist and researcher. She was awarded a U.S. Fulbright student scholarship for Egypt from 2009-2010 and is based in Cairo, Egypt. Dominique is conducting research on "The Relationship between Printmaking and Arabic Calligraphy." As a practicing printmaker, she is currently teaching a SAWA monoprinting workshop called, "Printing without a Press," in the Townhouse Gallery factory space. She earned her BFA, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, with a dual-emphasis in ceramics and printmaking. Prior to arrival in Cairo, she served as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco, from 2006-2008, working for the Moroccan Ministry of Handicrafts.*