

Still Valid, Against Current Odds

An insider's review by Nagla Samir - Photography by Mohamed Ardash



Sabah Naim, Untitled 2010, mixed media (Photo based painting on canvas), 275x185 cm - Courtesy of Sharjah Gallery.

April 6th, 2011, a few days after the announcement that the Still Valid show had gone public, the following post was shared via Facebook, “When I receive an invitation by Hazem El Mestikawy to a collective show, featuring his work, alongside Mohamed Abla, Adel El Siwi, Amal Kenawy, Essam Maarouf, Hany Rashed, Sabah Naim, Haytham Nawar, Adam Henein, and Sobhi Guergues, among others, curated by Ehab El Labban, for a gallery Based in the United Arab Emirates, then know for sure that the revolution did not succeed yet.”

As shocking as this accusation was, and as agonizing were the disputes that followed, for me it was just another brick in the wall of obstacles that the show had to contend with. Aside from professional prejudice, a large dispute had arisen between a colleague in the gallery committee and myself concerning the show. His argument was that Still Valid was “not a curated show, not conceptual, and not featuring contemporary art!” Such claims call to mind the eternal discourse surrounding

questions such as: What’s a curated show? How is the concept to be defined? What’s to be considered contemporary art? And what are the criteria which enable the labeling of art as pro or anti revolution? As director of a Gallery - an academic gallery, part of the Center of Arts of the Department of Performance and Visual Arts at the American University in Cairo - I saw the gallery’s main mission as focusing on achieving a great pedagogical value of our shows to our intended audience. After “A Survival Guide” (our first show, a parallel events to the 12th Cairo International Biennial), I thought it was time to raise the bar. “Still Valid” came as an initiative to showcase a collective of art works and projects by high profile Egyptian artists, some pieces of which could be described as milestones in the Egyptian contemporary art scene. The fact that my colleague denied that the “selection” process can lead to a successful show, raised the following questions: What are the criteria for a “successfully” curated exhibition? Who is in

the position to decide whether a particular collective attains maturity and value? Could these criteria be objectified or is it dependent on the subjective judgment of the curator vs. critics? And again, where do the audience stand in terms of the curating process of this art project?

Bearing all the above in mind, besides the complexity of subjective selection from such a vast and diverse art scene, curator Ehab El Labban (curator of the 11th and 12th Cairo International Biennial) was commissioned for the show. Still Valid, in the curators words, attained the concept of “bringing to focus the diversity of creative practices that exist today in Egypt. The invited artists represent the complexity of process of a trans-generational selection, from the established to the newly emerging states. Each artist addresses local issues in a personal language that is also legible to an international audience. The praxis of each artist delves into sophisticated yet accessible concepts.” Ironically, the same approach was adopted by Vittorio Sgarbi, the controversial art critic and curator of the Italian Pavilion at the 54th Venice Art Biennale, when he announced a committee of personal friends: intellectuals, writers, poets, directors, scientists and designers to “select” artists to be featured in this year’s pavilion. The collective he curated was described by several critics as the pleasant experience of canvassing a “souq”, where visitors came in, walked around and got engaged and inspired by very different and diverse works. Likewise, our audience’s reaction to the collective was a delightful one, which received various preference recommendations and inquiries concerning different art work and different artists and affirmed the achievement of the show’s main objective.

Returning to my colleague’s argument concerning the conceptual nature of the exhibition, and whether it featured contemporary art work. As fashionable as it may still sound, the ongoing discourse surrounding the use of “conceptual” for defining the main characteristic of contemporary art is quite outdated. The term was in fact raised in the 1960s, radically labeling existing praxis as “traditional” and questioning what art was. Excessive consideration was given to define the expression through essays by Sol LeWitt: “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1967) and “Sentences on Conceptual Art” (1969). Yet, by the end of that decade, artist Joseph Kosuth declared, “All art –after Duchamp- is conceptual –in nature- because art only exists conceptually.” A declaration I find quite sensible.

Finally then, why was Still Valid considered by some as a show to defy the success of the revolution? As Egypt revolted and the voice of protest was aroused, massive feverish cultural activities took place during weeks of sit-ins, and afterwards. Photographs, posters, graffiti, murals, and mixed media installations occupied the premises of Tahrir Square



Hazem El Mestikawy, Foreground- “Black Box” 2010, Hard board and paper, 86x36x25cm. Background- “Red Line, 2, 3,& 4” 2006, Paper on wood - Courtesy of Sharjah Gallery.

and Egyptian galleries. The events have caught artists in a collective trance, while the highly emotion-packed twists and turns of this incredible experience reflected on and reshaped creative practice in Egypt, unfortunately resulting sometimes in immature and inferior quality projects.

Ehab and I had a different perception of contributing to the cause. Aware of the change that we had all encountered, the idea of Still Valid came as an initiative to document aspects of the original, pre-revolution, Egyptian art scene in a collective show that sustains Egypt’s legacy over decades of diverse art practice.

Still Valid, A selection of Contemporary Egyptian Art was planned and announced as a trans-generational, multi-disciplinary collective showcasing work by sixteen Egyptian artists, who are respectively living and working in Egypt. The show was inaugurated on April 11th at the Sharjah Art Gallery, Center of the Arts, AUC New Cairo campus, Egypt

and ran until May 12th, 2011.

The show featured two veteran sculptors, whose careers exceed five decades. In the main hallway leading to the gallery space, stood majestically one of Adam Henein's timeless sculptures, "Thirsty" (1965), and centered in the Gallery's entrance lay a "Mother Bird" (1974) in serene contemplation. Both pieces reflected Henein's confident skill, deep vision and perceptive insight.

The show also featured one of the large scale brass sculptures by Sobhi Guerques, "Perplexed", an example of his unique reconstruction of human bodies into friendly, almost familiar, alien-like creatures, projecting deep indulgence into folk heritage mixed with African primitive art.

Besides the work by veterans Adam Henein and Sobhi Guerques, the show featured Nagy Fareed's fragmented portraits, skillfully executed with mixed surface treatment bronze, elevated and floating in space on a subtle acrylic base, which was certainly a show stopper for audiences for its accessible concept and stunning production technique. Again, exclusive expression, skillful production and amazing balance were projected in Armen Agoup's minimal abstract stone sculptures. In addition to this was the work of rising star Mohamed Radwan, with his distinctive vertical elevations into space.

Expanding the limits of sculpture from traditional media, the show featured two of Hazem El Mestikawy's minimalist paper sculptures and art objects, "Black box" (2010), and "Red Line" series (2006), which define borders separating east and west via spatial and time maps. This was a work that triggered a lot of discussions among the audience in attempts at interpretation, reflecting the work's true manifestation of balanced skill and detail consciousness.

Taking sculpture to an even broader scope of installation was Amal Kenawy's "The Journey" (2004) which, reduced to a new presentation, focused on the wax legs with pinned butterflies, dangling in a glass display. For some of us it was a pleasant reunion with one amazing project, but for the newly introduced audience, it was a fully intense experience. Amal also showed fragile drawings pinned to the wall behind glass sheets, floating yet trapped within the limited space between the wall and glass.

On a different scale, drawings by Haytham Nawar were bold and fully loaded with vivid strokes, occupying massively large spaces in his "Hands" series.

The exhibition also featured three of Egypt's most esteemed contemporary painters, Adel El Siwi, Essam Maarouf, and Mohamed Abla. Bound by the political scene and involvement in counter-culture, triggered by the local scenery and his belief in the vitality of the community, Adel El Siwi presented an everlasting and impressive painterly experiment.



Amal Kenawy, "The Journey" 2004-2011, Media installation (wax sculpture, glass display, metal frame, and life butterflies) - courtesy of Sharjah Gallery.

Featuring three of his most recent paintings that combine contradicting values, they were sensual yet intellectual, vague yet narrative and iconic.

Essam Maarouf's featured paintings –from the recently exhibited collective *Muse* (2010)- projected high sophistication in execution. By merging flat bold colored backgrounds with highly sensitive translucent overlapping layers for his renaissance inspired figures and portraits, his work was visually intriguing and narratively accessible to audiences.

With numerous successful shows and many awards, Mohamed Abla has established himself as one of Egypt's most prominent contemporary artists. His continuous state of experimentation prevents his work from being concisely confined to a restrained theme, style or technique. His featured "Houses" paintings reflected the local in expressionist vivid compositions of vibrant colors.

The show also features rising stars Kareem Al Qurity, showcasing a portrait series of (2009), and Hany Rashed's "Cartoon War" series (2010), which students connected with instantly for its vivid colorful compositions and accessible pop symbols.

Photography based digital image and mixed media were well represented in the exhibition. Well established media artist Sabah Naim showed a visually stunning photographic composition of common Egyptian people sitting and waiting, reframed by a dark border in the foreground confining them regardless of their original shapes. Rising star Marwa Adel displayed her digitally manipulated photographs representing feminist themes. Her "Floral Sensation" series and "Thoughts" (2010) grabbed the attention and compassion of a broad audience. The show also featuring Atef Ahmed's hand painted photographs of Egyptian figures.

Khaled Hafez's description of the photo-based artworks included in the collective nicely summarize the work, he said, "I can confidently describe that as Egyptian Hyper-real Pop, as the imagery is much reminiscent of Pop Art on the technical level only, while the content is massively different from what happened in the sixties of America, on the contrary, the works of those Egyptian artists all take the photographic image, whether self-taken or media propagated, and extract certain visual elements and create—with digital altering sometimes—an alternative reality, perceived as hyper-real as the final art production has a reality of its own."

To conclude my review, Still Valid was a show that raised disputes both up front and backstage by tackling the eternal questions of what's contemporary and what's conceptual, alongside a new element which considers the added value of what's revolutionary? Presenting cutting edge premium art by veterans alongside rising stars, I consider the show a VALID one indeed!

References:

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Nagy Fareed, "Portrait" 2009, Bronze Sculpture, 24x27x53cm - Courtesy of Sharjah Gallery.

About the Writer

Nagla Samir is Contemporary Egyptian artist and culture operator, based in Cairo. Her work falls within diverse disciplines; photography, digital image, video and installation. Her work explores with social norms versus spiritual aspects.

She held several solos and participated in group national and international exhibitions. Her work was awarded prizes, among which is the Award of the 24th Alexandria Biennial for Mediterranean Countries. Her most recent project entitled "Lost in Transmission" is currently exhibited in Lulea Art Biennial, Sweden.

She holds a Ph.D. in visual communication. Works as a part time Assistant Professor of Art and Design at The American University in Cairo.

Her curatorial projects include IMAFY (the 1st International forum for media art for youth in Egypt), and "A Survival Guide". She founded Passage 35 Center for contemporary art, and worked as Director of the Sharjah Art Gallery.