

Zeitungsartikel

Romano della Chiesa
08.01.2006 – 04.02.2006

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Sylvan scenes

Nigel Ryan finds solace at the Mashrabiya

30.06.2004
Al Ahram Weekly
Nigel Ryan

There is a piece of tapestry in one of Romano della Chiesa's paintings, currently on show at the Mashrabiya Gallery alongside a video installation and some textile pieces by Ayman El-Semary. It is a crude bit of needlepoint, one of those commercial products that purports to be craft but is really the result of debased industry: two deers cavort against a blue background amid strands of greenery. It is an ugly thing, but it provides the starting point for a diptych that takes the kitsch object, reduces then replicates the motif, and turns it in something altogether different. The reference is stuck on the surface of the left hand canvas, unapologetic. Miniaturised and repeated, it becomes sinuous as whimsy is transformed into a far more appealing image.

It is a technique repeated in several of the pieces in the current exhibition. A small domed tomb receives similar treatment: a lino-cut is made, the image repeated, with the result used as both background and foreground for reworked found images. The actual prints look like surprisingly elegant wrapping paper, the sort of thing William Morris might have been up to should he have staggered into the 20th century. The blunt, foresquare tomb, reduced and repeated, frames one third of a woodland scene, a watery take on the kind of glossy posters that for some inexplicable reason became popular items of home decoration sometime in the 1970s and which are sometimes still encountered on walls at the lower end of the rental market. Only the artist here appears to have rubbed off the gloss and knocked everything back, turning the image into a kind of pastoral watercolour and then, for good measure, adds some text: TRAUM, DUERSTEN, EINSCHIFFUNG, EROS, LA MUERTE. The words are white, set in black, horizontal bands.

GRENZEN – borders – drips vertically down yet another painting, or rather patchwork, for like the other works this too pieces together the found and the repeated. The found here is another crude landscape, the kind of thing you find nicotine stained, framed and flapping, torn in its frame at the flea market. The colours are garish, the painting a poor imitation of the landscapes celebrated in mid-19th century French art. It is Corot, as Corot would have painted had he not been able to paint. The greens are wrong, the blues are wrong. The sky is wrong, the bridge wrong, the river wrong. This occupies two thirds of the bottom half of the work. Across the bottom of the incorporated painting – the painting within the painting – strolls the repeated motif, this time a figure, in pith helmet, blazer and shorts. It is the get-up of the coloniser, or rather eleven colonisers, equally spaced. They walk across the water. They don't need to use the bridge. For all its whimsy it is a neat conceit. The European is marching across a locally produced version – a coarse caricature – of his own landscape. For all the reversals, it cries out for a literal reading.



The incorporated elements, the paintings and posters and pieces of needle point, however reworked, however knocked back, remain irredeemably themselves. They serve as foil to the artists own, heavily textured backgrounds. And these are very Cairene: worked, then worked again, they are layered, as the city is layered. And it is here that the memories – the title of this show – reside. For like Cairo's walls these backdrops are repositories of evidence: it is simply waiting to be read, to be excavated, to be pieced together.

Cairo's galleries all too frequently show the half-baked, the unfinished, the underworked. Romano della Chiesa works his surfaces: that this should be refreshing is an alarming reflection on the slap dash, hands off approach of too many artists.

Swim, fly, stay, walk: the words repeat across three canvases. The same figure sits in all three, though viewed from different angles. He is wearing spectacles, and these are picked out in chalk-like white paint. Each canvas has an additional detail similarly highlighted: the chair in one, a callis lilly in another, an architectural drawing in the third. It is a superfluous detailing: there are details and no details. You can read the architectural drawing but you can't read the model's features. The glasses shout at you, but you can't see the eyes. Unlike the landscapes and legends – swim, fly, stay, walk are deliberately contradictory – the referents here remain ambiguous.

Della Chiesa is that increasingly rare thing on the Cairo scene, an artist who refuses to ossify, and who is willing to develop. He is also happy to use the city, the experience of the city, as subject. It is an urbane art. And it is thought out.

Ayman El-Semary hangs a sidiri from the ceiling of the gallery. It is coated in something to stiffen the fabric and lit from within, a waistcoat lampshade. Beneath is a neat rectangle of earth on which are placed pebbles wrapped in silver foil. It is accompanied by a looped video of the kind of person who might wear the waistcoat. It appears almost boastful in its intimation of portent, though what is being portended remained a mystery. Elsewhere fabric pieces hang, a kind of thick calico or canvas, unbleached, with the occasional addition of metal studs and pleating.

At the Townhouse Doaa Aly indulges in similarly impenetrable surfaces, utilising industrial paints – is it enamel? – for her dissections of limbs. The female body as subject is endlessly claimed and reclaimed, and in the process it begins to look increasingly moribund. This is a discourse that now verges on didacticism, a strategy led astray by simple repetition. The works are exhibited under the title Grey Matter.

Meanwhile, and also at Townhouse, Emmanuel Barra's show, *The Womb*, comprises several large canvases, inhabited by smudged figures in a largely muddy palette. They might provide a counterpoint to the show at the Mashrabiya. Both venues are, after all, Downtown. I know which show I preferred.

