

Written by Iman El-Ashry
 Images Courtesy of Cairo Biennale Administration

TOURING THE BIENNALE

Zena Assi - Lebanon (The Art Palace)

Between the 12th of December 2010 and that of February 2011, The 12th Cairo Biennale was held in different cultural venues around downtown; while being closed – of course – for like a week during the revolution's climax, according to what Mr. Ehab El Labban – The Cairo Biennale Director – had stated. "Visitors started coming again after Feb the 2nd," El Labban said, "but they were very few!", he clarified. The theme which El Labban had chosen for this biennale, was actually a "no theme" one! This way, El Labban presented to the artists a vast field of ideas; through providing them with only a set of questions as to "what art is today" and "what it could be in the future". So, whichever way the artists chose to present their thoughts; through canvas, video art, installations or what we could call sculptures in new forms, you could sense the freedom of artistic expression in all of the biennale's artworks.

Evelina Deicmane - Latvia (The Art Palace)



It is the abstraction of art that has made the biennale quite interesting; by enabling the involvement of the visitor and allowing his mental interference in interpreting the artworks. The artworks became eventually like interactive portions of thought brought from everywhere in the world and displayed for us here; to observe and to question...

At the entrance of The Art Palace of The Cairo Opera Grounds, I encountered the first artwork; a sculpture in white presented by Caroline Ramersdorfer from Austria. It imitated layers of ice intermingled by white-painted pipes. When I stepped inside, I encountered – atop my head – some integration of reflective polyhedrons by Gregor Kregar from New Zealand. They invited me to twist my head around, after which I met with some faceless figurines of leather collage; reflecting the Philippines' culture, by Josephine Turalba.



Gregor Kregar - New Zealand (The Art Palace)



Caroline Ramersdorfer - Austria (The Art Palace)

Sounds intermingled, that of Mounir Fatmi's movie which showed some child struggling against an aristocrat's attempts of forcing discipline, and that of Nathalie Djurberg's clay animation which was a rhythmic melody that stayed in my head for days after my visit to the biennale. Djurberg's video presented a couple in the woods; with the trees stripping them of their clothes and tar ripping them afterwards of their skin and body parts. Eventually, they seek shelter in the trunk of a tree, or say shelter for what remained of their bodies. Regardless of how involving the animation was, letting you be anxious to know what's going to happen, the physical features of the couple and the bloody stripping process was definitely stomach-turning. The rhythmic melody only emphasized the feeling that the deadly process was a renewable cycle!

Going towards science and innovation, came Patrizio Travalgì's glass polyhedrons and prisms, inside which light reflected in mirrors creating the impression of some sci-fi explosion of energies! A less technical vision, but not less creative, was in Alejandro Perez' 3D puzzle pendant; and his column of photography cubes that were arranged in puzzle-like dynamism. What was startling about Alejandro's setup, though, was a couple of cow mockups being metaphorically grilled against a live cow standing in an opposing painting; lost in windy landscapes.

In the upper floor, three artworks of sepia collage on black backgrounds, were presented by Kareem Al-Quray. There were soldiers in army boots with some classic chair in one artwork and abstract naked headless figures in another; while in between was a silent face gazing at the palms of his hands. On another political note, came one Biennale Award winner and a successfully implemented installation artwork of Annabel Daou; who is one of the seven American artists contributing to the biennale and who all carry Arabian roots. Daou's artwork included vocal recording of different answers to the artist's question: "where are you going?", whereas on the wall; the world was presented in paper; in which black holes were scattered and missile-like lines were drawn in typography that read "I'm here" in English and Arabic languages as well as in Levant dialect. ▶▶



Patrizio Travalgì - Italy (The Art Palace)



Justine Otto - Germany (Museum of Modern Art)

Alejandro Perez - Mexico (The Art Palace)



Karim Al-Quray - Egypt (The Art Palace)

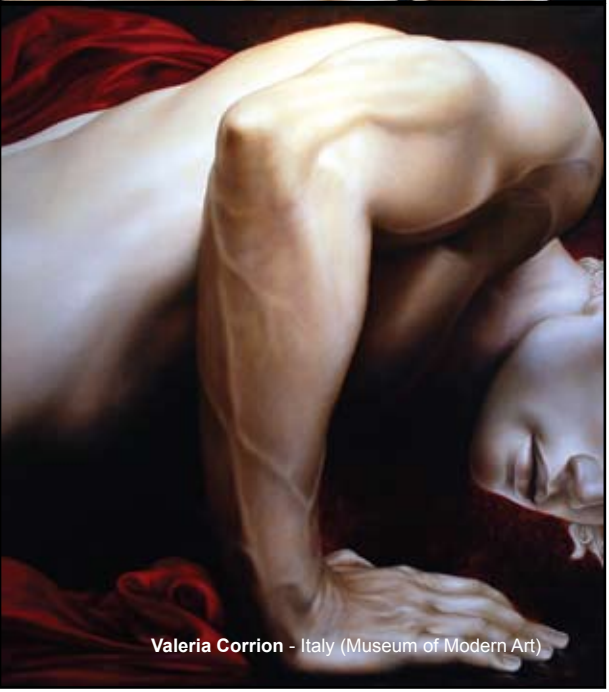


What I could not categorize was the Grand Award winner installation and video setup by Amal Kenawy; which showed, in some low-lit space, a fake depiction of some café with a small TV set playing a school chorus and a screen showing a paralyzed young man who couldn't do a thing but point at the big screen. And the big screen showed Kenawy's video of Egyptian men crawling like sheep in downtown streets. At first, I wondered what was going on and how those poor men probably volunteered to do the job for some cash, to then discover that the video continued to show the fights Kenawy faced with the people in the streets who accused her of lacking Egyptian dignity. The fight made sense, then, and if I were there, I would have joined the fight against this as well.

I left The Art Palace and headed for The Museum of Modern Art, also in The Opera Grounds. And there, I came across the artworks of Justine Otto and Hanah Van Ginkel which presented Nazi savageness and which brought me nightmares like the chiller night of MBC2 would bring!

In a more soothing context, came the perfect oil on canvas artworks of Valeria Corrión; where Roman characters appeared on royal scarlet velvets; and depicted sculptures - sometimes - or at other times, as if having souls! An artwork of Corrión would really make you feel the character would come out and touch you, or even speak! The amazing anatomical study and exact representation of skin texture as well as the study of light and shadow in these artworks made me realize that this work was definitely the biennale's best.

At the museum, specifically in Ab'ad Gallery, was an exhibition of landscape photographs that were far from abstraction and represented some distraction to the tour. However, my photographic passion was fulfilled when I entered The Gezira Art Center where the Biennale's secondary exhibition was held and where I encountered the photography/digital artworks of Ayman Lotfy and then, I was just speechless and thought this man's work really speaks for itself, he's build a reputation of talent that he keeps proving more and more! While still in the center, I met the sensual setup of Sabah Naim which was a tribute to the mother through pictures and items collected in different glass boxes. Browsing these boxes was like browsing Naim's life, and my eyes glittered.



Valeria Corrion - Italy (Museum of Modern Art)

One gallery at The Opera Grounds was dedicated for The 12th Biennale's guest of honor who this time was the Japanese artist Yoshtimo Nara. I found his dog heads sculptures and paintings or sketches of kids with animal faces; really interesting while still being spooky.

Far from that gallery, two galleries were dedicated mainly for video art in Mahmoud Mokhtar Museum; right in front of The Opera Grounds. But that experience wasn't really a success; taking it from the fact that a guard was accompanying me in every move I made, way until how some videos weren't running and we had to fetch God-knows-why hidden remote controls to get them playing! Maybe this techno stuff wasn't such a good idea, even in The Gezira Art Center when Tarek Hefny presented his vocal topography concept with two photographic scenes of El-Giza and two screens showing the change of frequency as he said the word "Al-Giza" in different notations; the headphones of one screen weren't working and then it got worse when the screens stopped showing a change of frequency altogether-despite the sound's continuity.



Ayman Lotfy - Egypt (El Gezira Art Center)

Overall, if you'll ask me, exploring the biennale was still worth it. And next year, when the Biennale is held, we should make sure not to miss it. There will definitely be some stuff you'd like, and others you wouldn't; like there'd be stuff matching with your beliefs and others in complete opposition with it, and even artworks that you believe should have gotten the awards and others that you can't believe they did! But still, you've got to see for yourself, form your own opinion, and have your say about it! ■