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Salah Taher's Enduring Art and Soul

Sara Elkamel, Wednesday 18 May 2011

Salah Taher, the prominent Egyptian painter, lived a wholly artful life. He would say: life is short, but art lives on. The paintings on display at the Zamalek Art Gallery, make their début on the 100th anniversary of his birth



The master Salah Taher born on 12 May 1911 (died in 2007) left an enduring mark on contemporary Egyptian art as an avant-garde painter, whose life was completely bedecked with art.

Zamalek Art Gallery is displaying an assortment of 100 selected pieces by the artist.

The exhibited artworks are mostly sketches and experimentations by the artist, emanating from a very dynamic and transitional period in his life. The prolific artist shifted from one art movement to the other throughout his career, which in retrospect emerges as an elaborately choreographed dance of form and colour.

The artist's enduring spirit

Mostly mixed-media on paper, the showcased paintings flaunt occasional rough lines and spills of colour that personify the artist's enduring spirit. Looking around, you are drawn into the inner workings of Salah Taher's art and soul.

Taher's art was organically linked to his being; he thought of art until his last breath.

According to Salah Taher's son, Ayman (also a visual artist), what makes this exhibition so dynamic is

the fact that its pieces were never meant to be exhibited.

Taher's application of colour on canvas is generous; his palette is bright, frank, and candid. Texture is palpable, as the colours twist and swirl, ebbing gently off the canvas. At other times, paint is handled carefully; washes of diluted colour spill out unevenly across the canvas.

A liberating sense of volatility

The artwork evokes a liberating sense of volatility. Despite the wholly academic roots from which he sprang, the artist's career was a truly creative journey of an artist blending his own colours and breaking his own rules.

Taher kick-started his career by studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cairo, where he lectured for two decades after earning his degree.

Deviating from the constraints of academic art, Taher experimented his way through. He shifted from realism to figurative symbolism and finally abstraction, for which he is mostly famed.

Major role in Cairo's art scene

Beyond splashing colour on canvas, the artist played a major role in Cairo's art scene. He was an art administrator as well as a philosopher in the field, inspiring his contemporaries with masterpieces and valuable conceptualisations.

Among the many positions that Taher held included the supervision of Luxor Atelier (1952), and head of the Modern Art museum (1954).

Salah Taher dedicated his life wholeheartedly to art. He cherished all arts alike and believed in the inter-relationships among different forms of art, and the need for harmony to pervade this intricate web of art. This firm belief in the dynamism of the arts justifies his appointment as director of the old Cairo Opera House in the early 1960s.

He worked as a part-time professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts, the Cinema Institute and the Faculty of Arts in Cairo. In the 1980s, Taher was appointed head of the Society of Advocates of Fine Arts in Cairo.

A mythical character

The artist was also an avid reader, leaving behind a library of 40,000 books that delve into the arts, as well as human and art psychology. Ayman Taher, who inherited this massive pile of books, reminisces about his father with a buoyant smile. "He was almost a mythical character," he says.

"He would wake up thinking of his paintings, and would put his head down to sleep with art still on his mind," his son says. "Everything he did, he did for art."

When Salah Taher would meditate, he did so in preparation for a painting. He would read extensively on human psychology, only to understand the fabric of the visage he would paint - his portraits were not a merely assembly of colours, they were a study of human life. The artist would say: I do not paint features, I paint identities.

Overwhelmed with the sheer rawness

Wandering through this intimate collection, you are overwhelmed with the sheer rawness springing from the painting left and right. Rather like pages torn from his diary, every piece carries Taher's free spirit.

Inks are spilled strategically throughout his compositions, satisfying your appetite for colour. Geometric lines disturb this sea of colour, pulling you in - and for a moment or two you are lost in Taher's maze.

A few paintings shriek with an artful randomness - black ink is twirled and splashed arbitrarily across the paper, garnished with bright red spots. The effect is erotic - the fierce movements of ink intrigues you.

Using acrylics, the artist is able to create subtle stories and overpowering texture. In contrast to his mixed-media pieces that are often drenched in colour, his petite acrylic paintings are decorated with bright tints. Figures appear amid gentle swirls of red, blue, and green, basking in Taher's intricate brushstrokes.

The sketches displayed boast a rare freedom and subtle mastery. They are also in a way, the personal doodles of a creative genius.

"Salah Taher has left us, but his art keeps him alive," Ayman says with conviction.

The exhibition runs until 15 June at the Zamalek Art Gallery, 11, Brazil Street, Zamalek.

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