

Artist draws on symbolism of the sacred and Egypt's strength

Nevine Lamei, Thursday 2 May 2013

At the Art Talks gallery, Alexandrian artist Guirguis Lotfi makes the audience ponder Egypt's current situation by juxtaposing it against the country's rich heritage in colourful, contemporary iconography



"Though Coptic art is an art in itself, it has always been strongly influenced by a number of styles - Pharaonic, Greco-Roman and Oriental - in both stylistic and iconographic concepts" says artist Guirguis Lotfi, who displays his works in ArtTalks gallery until 7 May. The exhibition carries strong Egyptian elements, along with sacred accents inspired by Coptic ancestors. Lotfi's works reflect a contemporary Egypt: changing, colourful, bright, massive and chaotic. With one foot in the past and another in the present, without being nostalgic, Lotfi insists on "the greatness of Egypt, in order to address the current regression in the times of Muslim Brotherhood." This would also help explain the exhibition's theme: Heya di Misr ya Abla (This is Egypt, Abla), a

phrase borrowed from a famous movie where an intelligence official stops a woman who is spying for Israel and says this to her to remind her that she has betrayed her country. Without crying for Egypt, the artist underscored the idea of masses to affirm the unity of society without religious discrimination. He does so through the protagonists of his works, highlighting an Egyptian features: large penetrating and almost disturbing expressive eyes and big round heads. Despite their differences, in the many quasi-animated canvases, the characters unite with great force, solidarity and coherence. Their postures are inspired by Greek statues and a halo of sanctity hovers above their head. It even seems that every protagonist knows the role they play by heart. There's a king, a bum, a Sufi, a housewife, a veiled peasant, a fortune teller, a belly dancer, a dervish, a couple and a saint. This fusion of roles spreads wonderfully from one work to another as the viewer is invited to listen to a beautiful Egyptian symphony that is drawn from the heritage of popular rituals, from an Egypt that is eternal, yesterday and today. The essence of this Egypt is symbolically marked by scenes of zar (a healing ritual), a street festival, an evening of henna (temporary tattoo imprinted before the wedding night), of soboue (celebration on the 7th day of the birth a newborn), an Alexandrian summer, images of martyrs, a pilgrimage to Mecca, the Blessed Sacrament, etc. Some of the scenes also reflect A Thousand and One Nights and the famous Fayoum Portraits. "With their captivating realism, the Fayoum Portraits are derived from Greco-Roman art. Their mummification process is a process characteristic of the Egyptian civilisation," he said. Lotfi is one of the few artists practicing the ancient technique of Fayoum portraits in his paintings. Programme: Open now until 7 May ArtTalks gallery 8 El Kamel Mohamed Street, Zamalek, Cairo

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