

Heritage and modernity: 'Aswany' at Tache Art

Sara Elkamel, Thursday 29 Mar 2012

Aswany is a solo exhibition by sculptor Mahmoud El Dewihi currently showing at Tache Art in Designopolis. The sculptures scattered across the vast gallery space represent the artist's relationship with Aswan, his hometown



The pieces on show here combine sharp contours with soft curves, wrapped up in a shiny exterior. Representing human and bird figures in altering postures which express contrasting temperaments, the artist thus creates an entire community within the collection.

A student of the prominent Egyptian sculptor Adam Henein, Mahmoud El Dewihi, 34, has been inspired by the nature of Aswan. El Dewihi's forte is working with bronze and granite, blending razor-sharp contours with soft curves. The sculptor manipulates his stone with skill, managing to give character to the cold substance.

El Dewihi reduces figures to sharp lines and delicate curves, bringing out the subject's essence rather than its appearance. He does not render birds or humans exactly as they are; rather, he draws on their natural structure to evoke the same shape, but to an even greater extent to imitate the subject's disposition. El Dewihi's work is deductive in that it extracts the subject's quintessence, stripping it down to its very core.

Often overlooked by comparison to paintings, contemporary Egyptian sculpture draws in some of the country's most talented artists; the field has been highly experimental and inspired over the past century. Mahmoud Mokhtar, dubbed the father of Egyptian sculpture, revived the art form during the 1890s, inspiring generations to follow suit. Mokhtar introduced the principles of contemporary sculpture

to Egypt's art scene, acting as a catalyst for Egyptian artists to toy with it. But it is the ethos of Pharaonic sculpture that trickles down from one millennium to the next. The works of Mahmoud Mokhtar, Adam Henein and other renowned sculptors including Mahmoud Moussa carry the regal spirit of ancient Egyptian art infused with contemporary twists that make it modern.

And it is the trait that pervades Adam Henein's art, namely the tie between heritage and modernity, that emerges in El Dewihi's art. In Aswany, the young El Dewihi erects two jet-black granite sculptures that stand majestically like stunted obelisks, their edges unrefined.

El Dewihi's work is characterised by a loaded minimalism; the artist does not crowd his sculptures with intricate features but instead allows the graceful lines and curves to work together to create meaning. His sculptures are bestowed with a sense of freedom, giving different personas to different onlookers.

In this and other ways El Dewihi's work is infused with paradox. He represents animate subjects in an inherently dormant material. His motionless blocks are not stationary, however. They appear to be on pause, caught in a moment. He creates a sort of controlled fluidity. His manipulation of granite is remarkable for how he manages to evoke a sense of motion, or at least embeds the intention to move in otherwise still sculptures.

In Aswany, El Dewihi's geometric sculptures gain depth through multiple planes with sections of varying shapes. The pieces are multi-dimensional, which makes them fascinating to inspect from different angles. One sandstone piece provides a refreshing break from the smooth black granite. It's prickly exterior invites you to run your fingers along it (and then you look around, fearing you will be caught on camera). The unpredictability of the black and white pixels and the soft, slight glimmer of the elongated, graceful piece match the subject, 'Girl'. The sculpture captures capricious femininity, visible from all angles of the smooth surface.

An untitled sculpture in green stands under the spotlight, flaunting a graceful, shapely body. The sculpture features flat planes intertwined with curved protrusions; it has a distinct verve. You circle the sculpture once and twice, learning more about 'her' with every step.

Amid the figures of Aswany, El Dewihi places birds with contrasting figures. The young artist emulates his mentor Henein's technique as well as his subject matter; Henein has been sculpting birds since the 1960s. While El Dewihi's men and women stand tall, vertically erect with intentional twists and curves, the birds lie horizontal, gliding across the atmosphere, featherless and colourless. 'Rooster' is a deep chocolate-brown, its body protruding upward from the plaque, its small head capturing the sunlight seeping in through the windows. A few steps away is a wounded bird, this time reclining helplessly, its skin a smooth, deep brown, as if the sculpture is the shadow of the body it represents.

One of the most captivating sculptures is 'Sitting Man', a pistachio green piece that represents a man in a horizontal posture, reminiscent of the artist's representation of birds. The man has a rectangular face and a disproportional body, with his feet culminating in a big round bulge. This sculpture is extremely organic, contrasting with the drawn out, poised figures of the pieces.

In a way, this sculpture is reminiscent of the fluid, loosely formed works of Ahmed Askalany, another young contemporary sculptor, born in 1978, who exhibited at Tache Art's The Contemporaries collective exhibition in July. Askalany's polyester figures are just as fluid.

Despite El Dewihi's apparent mastery of sculpture, Adam Henein perhaps overly influences his work. At times he appears as a clone of Henein. Still, the young artist is undoubtedly talented, and experimenting with alternative styles and materials could yield more unequivocally unique work.

Programme

Aswany runs through 10 April

Tache Art Gallery

S-139 Designopolis Km 38 of the Alexandria Desert Road Sheikh Zayed City, Cairo

Sunday-Thursday: 10:00am- 8:00pm, Friday-Saturday 11:00am- 8:00pm

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/37829.aspx>