

Bahgory tackles the revolution in poignant exhibit



“The Proud Egyptian,” mixed media on canvas (2011).

By Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt

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At Al Masar Gallery, an exhibition simply titled “Bahgory on Revolution” is currently on display.

George Bahgory is one of a handful of artists who have become household names in Egypt. In a place that is often incompatible with contemporary arts, Bahgory has managed to penetrate the Egyptian psyche with a trademark style and a finger on the pulse of the local culture.

Boasting a rich 40-year career, Bahgory’s work is synonymous with modern Egyptian art; everyone from the finest collector to the average layman can recall a painting, a caricature or a sketch by the artist.

The exhibition hosts an amazing collection of the artist’s work, from small portraits to colossal mural paintings. The work is abundant with Bahgory’s trademark figures, thick paint application and skewed perspectives; but this time, the subject matter is painfully relevant.

As is always the case with Bahgory, his subject matter focuses on what Egyptians are experiencing at present. In this exhibition, he reflects on what was not supposed to be an open wound, yet with the heartbreaking current events, the paintings are no longer a reflection upon

last year — rather a threatening reminder that we are, in fact, in exactly the same place we were then.

Bahgory's paintings in this exhibition are heavily yet seamlessly collaged, so that every element in his work is actually the sum of smaller, cut-up pieces. In that way, the paintings are impressionistic, appearing whole from a distance, yet chaotic upon closer inspection. When their subject matter is in itself chaos and Cairo at its most unstable, the layering makes each piece even more interesting.

Upon entering the gallery, one is met with a sprawling canvas titled "The Battle of the Camel." A larger than life horse writhes as it tramples a crowd of unsuspecting victims. Falling from it is the criminal who rode it to Tahrir, heading down into the sea of people below.

What appears to look like a knife falling from the criminal's hand is appropriately captured mid air. The gray background, the faces of the protesters and the Egyptian flag with its falcon flying towards the horse all create an incredible memory of that horrible day.

As an unforgettable event in our modern history, this painting represents the chaos, the shock and the sheer insanity of the moment camels and horses trampled protesters in Tahrir on Feb. 2, 2011. The difference would be that the painting is in fact beautiful, or regal, even.

Like "The Raft of the Medusa" by Gericault or "The Sabine Women" by Jacques Louis David, these paintings depict gruesome moments in time by those who survived and wish for others to see those who have died so they can live.

The best thing about the exhibition, however, was the fact that Bahgory did not actually create too many pieces like "The Battle of the Camel." What makes the entire collection wholesome and a true reflection of Egypt during the revolution is his ability to capture several strata's of society during that tumultuous year. A beautiful painting titled "Tahrir Café" is self-describing, featuring Egyptian men smoking shisha, drinking tea and generally lounging about.

The timeframe is not indicated, but it might well be either before or after the revolution, depicting the segment of opinionated onlookers. Another gorgeous piece is titled "The Proud Egyptian" featuring a faceless woman with an ancient Egyptian silhouette and eye. A royal collier graces her neck, but it's made out of the local tent material. The halo juxtaposes her seductive pose, marking her as the quintessential, the divine and average laywoman all in one.

A brilliant gesture by Bahgory lies in his quotation of his own work. One of the artist's most famous themes is Om Koulthoum. His genuine love and faithfulness in celebrating the iconic singer is truly unmatched. Here he presents her singing, or in fact lamenting, the happenings of the past year from the heavens.

As we witness this year's traumatic events, the portraits of "El-Sett" are even more heart-wrenching: Her face is crumpled into a frown of pain as she sings in sadness for all the martyrs, the injustice and the difficulty her country has faced to shed its oppressors.

George Bahgory's "On Revolution," which closes on Feb. 17, is a must-see. Not because he is one of the most prominent artists of the contemporary art movement in Egypt and the region, but because this collection of works is a perfect example of how art can mirror even the harshest realities in a way that presents clarity, truth and beauty.

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"Singing from Heaven I," oil on canvas (2011)



"Tahrir Café," oil on canvas (2011).