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Koppelman Gallery's 'Contrapuntal Lines' brings together seemingly opposing images

Gallery Review

Adam Kulewicz

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It's easy to be presumptuous about the works in "Contrapuntal Lines: Rania Matar and Buthina Abu Milhem" when they are viewed through a political prism. The exhibit, originally intended to be a companion piece to The Tisch Gallery's "Empire and Its Discontents," which closed Nov. 23, is comprised of images, faces and objects representing cooperation and coexistence in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. It is important, however, to view the pieces, particularly the photographs, as the artist intended. According to the exhibit's Web site, "Rania Matar's series ... focuses on what she describes as 'ordinary people caught up in extraordinary circumstances.'" Her photos, as well as the fabric sculptures by Buthina Abu Milhem, achieve this goal.

"Contrapuntal Lines" runs through Dec. 21 in the Koppelman Gallery in the Aidekman Arts Center. It features photographs by Rania Matar from a series entitled "The Forgotten People" (2002-2006), as well as fabric sculptures by Abu Milhem. As the title suggests, the pairing is decidedly unusual. It references, according to the pamphlet available in the exhibition, the musical term "contrapuntal" or "counterpoint" in which "two or more independent melodies [are combined] into a single harmonic texture in which each retains its linear character."

The physical setup of the gallery, which combines various media, and also the individual pieces themselves, purport a theme of harmonious differences. Some of the photographs link to the title particularly well, especially those with multiple figures. One piece, "Offering Tea, Bourj El Barajneh Camp, Beirut" (2005) demonstrates the principle of two ideas intertwining particularly well.

The photograph depicts three females — one middle-aged woman and two young girls — gathered around a doorway. The middle-aged woman emerges from the doorway with a tray holding several cups of tea. Her facial expression is one of clear aggravation, but the two young girls seem almost unbothered by the state of affairs. Their differing reactions highlight a generational gap but are, in the end, united into a clear image that gives fascinating insight into their extraordinary lives.

Another photograph, "Generations Across the Alley, Nahr El Bared Camp, Tripoli Lebanon" (2004) also references the theme of the exhibition. It depicts two figures, separated not only by a physical street but also, as the title suggests, by a multi-generation gap. An older woman sits on a stoop and motions across to a young boy on the

other side of an alley. While the older woman's expression is one of frustration, the young boy's is one of fear. Again, however, the two aesthetically intertwine to give interesting insight into their lives and their common ability to address hardship. On the other side of the gallery, the fabric sculptures by Buthina Abu Milhem also embody the "counterpoint" concept of the exhibit; each of the fabric sculptures is clearly divided into segments. But, in keeping with the exhibit's theme, these segments effortlessly combine to form a single sculpture.

In "The Needle Vanquishes the Sewer #1" (2005), and in all of her pieces in the exhibit, the artist innovatively uses ordinary objects (fabric, needles, thread, etc.) to produce works of great intricacy and aesthetic interest. In their intricacy and innovation, however, they subtly link themselves to the photography in the exhibit. There are many sections of varied decoration, each, according to the exhibit's Web site, with cultural significance, that come together seamlessly to form works of a unified nature.

Accompanying the exhibition is an audio guide that can be accessed by cell phone free of additional charge by following the instructions in the gallery. These innovative commentaries present interesting overviews of the exhibition from the Director of Galleries and Collections. They also offer in-depth explanations of the two parts (photography and sculpture) of the exhibition by a journalist and the Director of Galleries and Collections, respectively.

"Contrapuntal Lines," mixes two mediums of art in an unusual way. After closer inspection, however, the reason for pairing these two becomes clearer. The two artists' pieces possess a subtle degree of similarity, but the exhibit forces the viewer to think about them both separately and in unity, in order to understand the purpose of the show and bring to light important human rights issues. Indeed, the unusual title to this unique exhibit enhances the works and the viewing experience.