

Art gives way for better understanding



Luxor, 16. till 20. February, 2004 - Behind the Luxor temple with the mosque of Abu Haggag, in front of the mosque of Sheikh Negn with its unusual rectangular minaret, for some days a strange scene unfolded to passerby's eyes. Two young women are crouching on the ground of the parking area for tourist busses. Already with half an eye recognizable: one is Egyptian, one European. Fore sure everyone who discovers them there is going to ask himself a bit sceptical, what on earth they are doing there. Both of them are completely concentrated. Concentrated in their work. In their hands they are holding thick pieces of coloured chalk, around them something comes into being. For Egypt an entire novelty. A painting on coarse-grained asphalt. "With our work we like to give a present to the people of the town - to both Egyptians and foreigners - at the same time encourage them talk, to discuss with each other," the young ladies are answering questions of passerby of various nationality.

Also we of course are curious about what's going on. During a break we ask them, they do not hesitate to tell us about their "German-Egyptian Art Project", as you can read modestly written on a simple tape when coming closer. The two young women are the Egyptian art student Shayma Aziz, 23, and the German painter Carola Rümper, 26, who since November is living in Luxor to prepare and realise together with Sheyma their sidewalk project.

It was in March 2002 when they met for the first time. During the group exhibition "horizontal limits" shown at the "Faculty of Fine Arts" in Luxor by the KünstlerinnenForum Münsterland in which Carola participated. Since that time Shayma and Carola stay permanently in contact. "Shayma was the only woman who was looking for contacts with me. The other female students were very, very reserved. May be it was because their knowledge in English language wasn't very good," Carola remembers. One year later Carola visited Luxor a second time, and of course met again with Shayma. During many discussions in that time and later by eMail they found out a lot of personally and artistically subjects in common. Particular that in Egypt and specifically in Luxor nearly no woman will be seen working in the public, for a foreign female artist it becomes nearly impossible to make contact with Egyptian women. This was why in the heads of Shayma and Carola the idea was born to start a cooperative art project worked out in a public area. To create a way and space of art where people of different nationalities, cultures and religions can come together, can go for each other, can be open to talk and discuss with each other. Carola: "Even it meanwhile sounds like a cliché, but especially after the incidents of the last years in the countries of the Near and the Middle East with this piece of art we like to show our way to win muslims and non-muslims over to be open for more understanding."

In between eternity and transitoriness

As a second tempting aspect of the project the artists back on contrast. They form a contrast between eternity (the pharaonic art) and transitoriness (the fast-moving modern times). Because, as Carola explains the concept: "Usually foreigners travel to Luxor because the history going back thousands of years. We want to bring our small art-work face to face with it, an art-work that will be destroyed within two or three weeks. Destroyed by sun, wind and sand, destroyed by the feet of passerby, destroyed by the tires of cars and wheels of the horse-drawn carriages." These main aspects are underlined by the calculated choice of the place. Namely that is the neighbourhood of a pharaonic temple (picture below, in the back Luxor temple with Abu Haggag mosque) and two islamic mosques, as well as the mostly crowded square in the heart of the city.



Carola's artistic work on the coarse asphalt basically is inspired by the Islamic ornamentation. She alienates and abstracts these ornaments as far as the black outlines and coloured spaces do start a life of it's own. And then Shayma fills the empty spaces with creative figures and symbols. Adds her imagination as a supplementation to Carola's rich variety of forms. The puzzling punchy black lines and colourful parts are creating a completely new and different visual expression. The classical Islamic ornaments, ancient Egyptian reliefs and characters undergo a metamorphosis into contemporary art. And by choosing the colours of the region (red, blue, yellow and green tones) Shaima and Carola want to emphasize their admiration and close attachment to the city of Luxor. (Text and Fotos Antje Sliwka)



But the most important point for the two artists: their work provokes - like it was their target - gives an open invitation to the passerby to discuss, gets gripping associates going (pictures above, Egyptian and French tourist groups). People are trying to decipher the hidden riddles inside the painting, to read the lines into real figures (camels, lizards, crocodiles?), to decode the symbols (Christian, Coptic, Byzantine crosses?) and try to commit the artists to a statement. But trying that they only earn an impish smile and the challenge, to let work out some own interpretations. Because everyone has to escape into his own world of fantasy, just to see what the imagination gives him.



To the frequently asked question, why the dimension of the painting is so small, there is a very simple answer. Shayma: "In the beginning the dimension of our draft was much bigger designed. But for that we would need about four weeks of time for our work." And Carola puts in concrete terms: "Before starting we did some tests with the chalks and found out that already after one week the colours start to fade. Therefore we had to reduce the dimension to a size that makes us able to finish the painting within a very short time. Now we can do our work within four days, so our painting can survive for some days more."

Excitement - of course - is coming from all the children around, who curiously are surrounding and watching Shayma and Carola from the beginning. Some of them (like Shayma's little girl friend in the photograph below right) surely are going to protect the completed art work like a treasure, are going to "restore" it by using the gifts - the remaining pieces of chalk - and so "insh'allah" keep it a little longer alive.

There are no loose ends in the idea of the project. Carola: "I'm quite happy with it, have the feeling that for the first time I have been realized as an artist, as a working woman, particularly by Egyptian men, and not than before just as a demanded foreign female subject," she tells us content. And she likes to come back to work again in Egypt in a public place. Hopefully she will be able to realize her new idea: a cooperative action with Egyptian children. She likes it best with girls to boost their self-esteem. It is our - and me be also your wish that Carola will succeed with her idea, and also that she will find any needed support from officials and sponsors.