
ASHMOLEAN

PRESS RELEASE

14 March 2018, for immediate release:

IBRAHIM EL-SALAH
A SUDANESE ARTIST IN OXFORD
19 April–2 September 2018

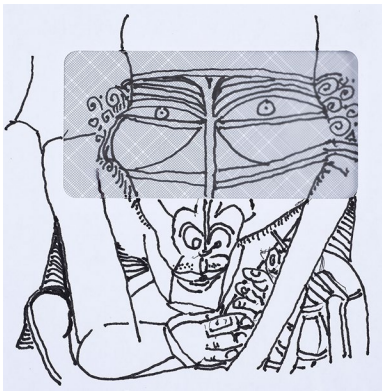


Flamenco Dancers, 2012 | Oil on canvas | Courtesy of the artist and Vigo Gallery | © Ibrahim El-Salahi

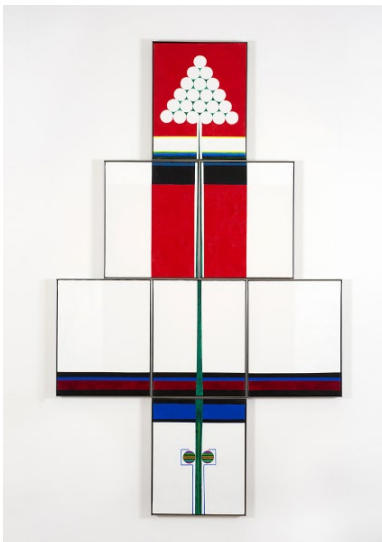
The Ashmolean presents a solo exhibition of the work of Ibrahim El-Salahi, pioneer of African and Arab Modernism. It is the first exhibition of the artist's work in Oxford, the city which has been his home for the past twenty years.

Ibrahim El-Salahi (b. 1930) is a world-renowned artist whose work is held in international museum collections including MoMA, New York, the Guggenheim, Abu Dhabi and Tate Modern, London which showed a major retrospective in 2013 – the first devoted to an African artist. The Ashmolean's exhibition offers a new perspective on the artist's work, setting it into dialogue with objects from the Museum's ancient Sudanese collection. El-Salahi has selected examples of pottery ranging in date from 2250 BC to AD350, decorated with images of the people, plants and animals of the region, emphasizing, in his own words, 'how the past is linked with the present'. In his own work, the artist often uses earthy reds and warm shades of brown that can be seen in ancient objects and are reminiscent of the colours of Sudan.

The exhibition spans El-Salahi's career and includes important early paintings such as *No Shade but His Shade* (1968), and the distinctive multi-panel paintings for which he is best known such as *The Tree* (2008) and *Flamenco Dancers* (2012). It also displays early works on paper which have never been shown before in public; and El-Salahi's first sculptural work, *The Tree* (2018). Other highlights are the meditative *Pain Relief Drawings* (2017–18). Over the past couple of years the artist has been suffering from chronic pain for which he is taking prescription medication. During this time he has made drawings on envelopes and medicine packets. **El-Salahi says:** 'to concentrate on it is like a form of meditation; I don't feel the pain at all. It is a kind of medicine itself.' These intricate, concentrated drawings exemplify the spiritual background of El-Salahi's work: to the Muslim artist, creating a work of art is intertwined with his religious faith.



Pain Relief Drawing, 2017
Pen and ink on paper
Courtesy of the artist and Vigo Gallery
© Ibrahim El-Salahi



The Tree, 2008
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection
© Ibrahim El-Salahi

El-Salahi's paintings, drawings and book illustrations draw on a vivid imagination rooted in the traditions of his homeland which he fuses with inventive forms of calligraphy, abstraction and a profound knowledge of art history. He was born in Omdurman, the second largest city in Sudan, to a family with a long history of Islamic scholarship. His father was a teacher at the Omdurman Institute of Religious Studies and at a Quranic school for children. El-Salahi was thus 'born into calligraphy' and always drew as a child. Encouraged in his art by a secondary school teacher, he went to art college in Khartoum and then received a scholarship to study at the Slade School in London from 1954–57. Here he encountered European artists from Giotto to Cézanne to contemporary art, as well as historic manuscripts in the British Museum. On returning to Khartoum, he taught in the Painting Department at the College of Fine and Applied Art and became a key member of the renowned 'Khartoum School' which actively contributed to the growth of modern art in Africa. In his work El-Salahi established a new artistic vocabulary – uniting Islamic, African and European elements in a unique, surreal style.

As an established figure in Sudanese art, he was appointed Assistant Cultural Attaché at the Sudanese Embassy in London (1969–72), after which he returned to Khartoum as Director General of Culture and then Undersecretary at the Ministry of Culture and Information. In 1975, when Sudan was ruled by the dictator Gaafar Nimeiry, El-Salahi was falsely accused of participating in a failed anti-government coup and imprisoned for over six months. Sharing a cell with ten other prisoners, he secretly continued to draw on small paper scraps. **El-Salahi says:** 'I'm in the habit of jotting down every experience I go through. It is my response to what is happening around me: to things I understand or even things I don't understand.' Following his release from prison, El-Salahi moved to Qatar. Since 1998 he has lived in Oxford with his family.

Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Sudanese Artist in Oxford is the first exhibition curated by **Dr Lena Fritsch, the Ashmolean's first Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.** **She says:** 'We are proud to present the first solo exhibition of Ibrahim El-Salahi's works in Oxford. I view El-Salahi's art as a major contribution to African and Arab Modernism, and believe that we should also include it more prominently in the global art historical canon of the twentieth century. The artist settled in Oxford twenty years ago. What better time and place could there be for celebrating his distinctive practice and for reflecting on its role in global art history?'

ENDS

▪ FURTHER INFORMATION:

Claire Parris, Press Officer
claire.parris@ashmus.ox.ac.uk | T+44 (0)1865 278 178 | M+44 (0)7833 384 512
www.ashmolean.org/press | @AshmoleanPress

▪ NOTES TO EDITORS

Exhibition: Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Sudanese Artist in Oxford
Dates: 19 April–2 September 2018
Venue: Gallery 8, Lower-Ground Floor
Admission: Free

▪ PRESS IMAGES:

Images for editorial use are available to download at: <http://bit.ly/2tHeWew>

▪ CREDITS

The exhibition has been made possible by loans of Ibrahim El-Salahi's work from the artist's own collection; Vigo Gallery, London; and international private collections.