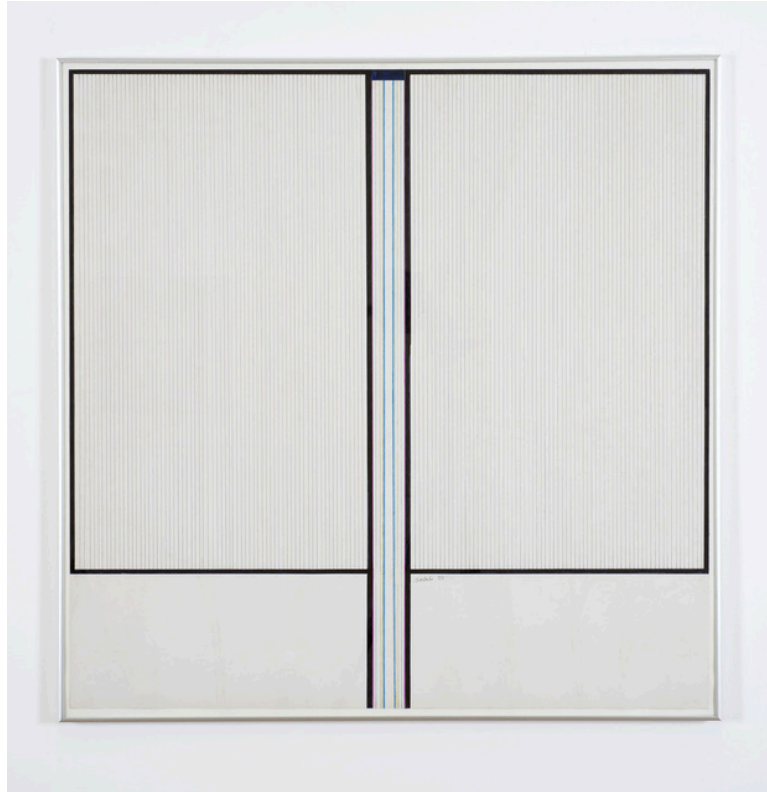


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## Branching Out: Ibrahim El-Salahi's Meditations on the Tree



Ibrahim El-Salahi, "The Tree," 2003

The Sudanese-born artist Ibrahim El-Salahi paints with a singular, almost obsessive purpose. The exhibition "The Tree" at London's Vigo Gallery explores this side of the artist through his meditations on the theme of the haraz tree, which grows along the banks of the Nile, flourishes in the drought season, and loses its leaves in the rainy season. In its idiosyncrasies, the tree "is very near the Sudanese character," the artist has said.

Many of the works on display are part of a series of 2003 acrylics each titled *The Tree*, in which El-Salahi reworks the theme on square canvases. In one piece the form is suggested by sparse and angular lines, in another it's embellished with horizontal bands of color, while in a third it looks like the pages of an open book. He often prays before beginning a piece and then works without a plan, seeing what forms and styles develop directly on the canvas.

"My work is that of an individual. That's the most important thing," El-Salahi has said, and his personal history is deeply embedded in his art-making practice. As a student at London's prestigious Slade School of Fine Art in the 1950s, he first encountered the work of modernists like Pablo Picasso and Piet Mondrian, to whom he has often been compared. But the genesis of his art is more personal than that. El-Salahi's artistic breakthrough came after university, when he began to dissect the curving forms of Arabic script and decoration, and imbue them with the earthy colors of the Sudanese soil—interests that he would share with other members of the so-called Khartoum School of African Modernism. He also found inspiration in a darker period of his life, during a six-month political imprisonment when he could not stop drawing despite the threats of solitary confinement for doing so. To avoid the guards' attention he worked on small squares of paper which he buried in the sand, a



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fragmented approach to creating work that would resurface decades later in pieces like the multi-paneled work *The Tree* from 2008, which grow organically as new canvases are joined together.

—Heather Corcoran

“Ibrahim El-Salahi, *The Tree*” is on view at Vigo Gallery, London, July 4 – September 4, 2014.