Asharq Al-Awsat, August 29, 2013

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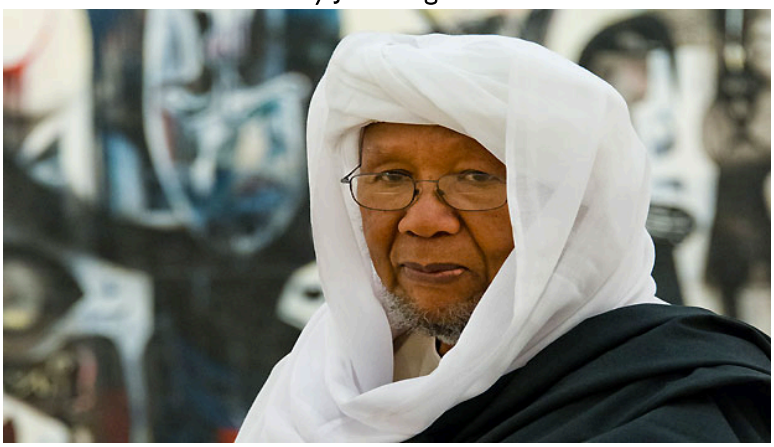
Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist

by Juliet Highet



Ibrahim El-Salahi. (Courtesy of the Tate, London)

London, Asharq Al-Awsat—This summer, the Tate Modern has broken new ground by giving a number of Arab, Islamic and African artists solo exhibitions in one of London's most prestigious contemporary art spaces. One of the most eagerly anticipated exhibitions belongs to Ibrahim El-Salahi, one of Sudan's most important artists. This major retrospective places him in a global Modernist art context; the Sudanese artist's vision crystallized in his ability to blend Islamic, African and Western elements into a transnational, cosmopolitan whole. The show traces his personal journey across five decades of sustained creativity, his international studies, detention as a political prisoner, self-imposed exile to Qatar and current life in Oxford.

Salahi was born in 1930 in Ondurman, Sudan. Speaking to Asharq Al-Awsat, Salahi reveals his own genesis as an artist.

"My father taught at the Islamic Institute and at a khalwa [Qu'ranic school], which I entered at the age of two, learning to read and write. My father was a fine transcriber of the Holy Quran, using a distinct Sudanese script. I used to watch him drawing on a whitewashed surface with date-palm kernels, some lines faultlessly straight, others fine, interlacing geometric forms in an Africanized arabesque style. I learned to design and paint sharafa, tablets used for transcribing verses of the Qu'ran. I would ornament my tablets by drawing a frame of intersecting lines, making triangles filled in with contrasting colours."

"It must have been at this early stage of my life that I began to be interested in art, in aesthetic possibilities inherent in both the abstract lettering of Arabic, as drawn by Sudanese hands, and in the rhythm of African ornament, abundant everywhere around me. After that I began my formal education, where art was not on the curriculum. We had the kind of teacher who said, 'Drawing is a sin.' But my father encouraged me in a quiet sort of way. I colored in all the black-and-white illustrations in my schoolbooks and made my own drawings. too. In secondary school, we did have art teachers and I got my first knowledge of the Western approach to painting there."

In 1949, Salahi went to the School of Design at Gordon Memorial College, to which he later returned as a teacher. In 1954, he received a government scholarship to go to London University's Slade School of Art. He majored in painting and did calligraphy as a subsidiary subject. Later, he studied black-and-white photography at Columbia University, New York, a foundation for nearly two decades of pen and ink work with shades of grey in between.

Asharq Al-Awsat, August 29, 2013

While in London, Salahi delved into the British Museum's archive of antique Arab calligraphic manuscripts. "I spent a lot of time there, studying the origin of the written letters, their structure and meaning. I even studied ancient hieroglyphics," he told Asharq Al-Awsat.

'The Tree' (2003) by Ibrahim El-Salahi. (Courtesy of the Tate, London)

But a period of questioning had started. At that time in Western art schools, there was an insistence on realist art to which Salahi had to conform. "On the one hand, I wanted to learn European techniques, about the Renaissance, and so on. But at the same time, something in me wanted to come out." Salahi knew that this method of teaching would not permit that. "I was needing a kind of liberation from within, and I knew that for that to happen, I would have to return to Khartoum, to find the origin of my thoughts, my roots. I decided to open my mind fully to my heritage. Even the techniques I had learned, I felt I had to freeze," he said.

So in 1957 he returned to Sudan. Salahi told Asharq Al-Awsat that he felt that he was "armed with experience and ideas that I initially expected would help in my teaching and my own work. But this attitude of a conceited young artist fresh from London actually just hemmed me in. Before leaving I had shipped home the work I had done there, and I felt a riveting desire to show it." And so he did. But his own people rejected it.

"Although a lot of them came to the opening, they quickly vanished. I repeated the exhibition twice, but no one came. The shock was a revelation—I was astounded to find that the artistic tastes entrenched in the Sudanese personality offered no possibility of appreciating the expertise I had acquired abroad. I had to examine the Sudanese environment [and] assess its potential as an artistic resource," he said.

At this time, Salahi also experienced an identity conflict. "In the Sudan we have this duality in our nature, because our fathers came from Arabia long ago, but our mothers are African." Perhaps as an antidote to questions of cultural and ethnic characteristics, he says: "I find myself much more Muslim than Arab, because the Arab thing can have all kinds of racial overtones: it is from Islam that I get my values. Your values make you a better person and they help you create a better society."

Salahi stopped painting for two years and traveled all over the Sudan, including into the desert to meditate. "I needed peace of mind, to see with the inner eye. I was often quite ill in those days. I decided I would try to cure myself just by looking inside, which I did, by sitting there very quietly," he told Asharq Al-Awsat.

While travelling, Salahi began to see aesthetic alternatives always available to Sudanese artists, particularly the craftspeople who were preserving their people's legacy.

"I could see this mainly in decorated goods made of leather, wood and palm leaves, as well as in tattoos on

Asharq Al-Awsat, August 29, 2013

the skin. What captivated me most, though, were the khalwa practices of drawing on tablets of acacia wood, carved as an abstract representation of the human body."

'They always appear' (1966-1968), oil on canvas. (Courtesy of the Tate, London)

As a child, he had been taught this skill, going on to beautify the tablets using designs called sharafa that resemble the chapter openings in the Qu'ran. But Salahi realized that these designs had changed since his childhood, moving away from typical Qu'ranic decoration towards a more intuitive and more decoratively Sudanese art form, a local perspective, which he began to use in his work—and which also began to appeal to his local audience.

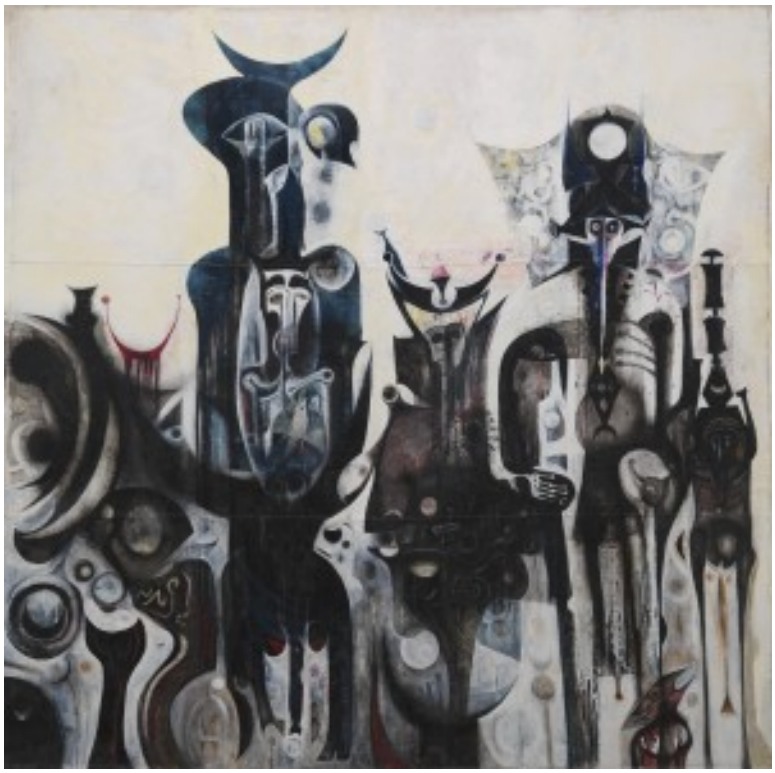
What later became known as the famous 'Khartoum School' evolved as a result of Salahi's experiments with the abstract and also representational symbolic potential of the Arabic letter, already present in Sudanese script and enriched by African ornamentation. "I was fascinated by finding what would appeal to the Sudanese people," he acknowledged.

While teaching at the Khartoum College of Fine and Applied Art, he painted murals inspired by the decorated walls of houses in Omdurman, where he was born, and also by the social realism of the Mexican murals that he visited in the 1960's. A new, distinctive Sudanese aesthetic emerged, enriched for Salahi by his immersion in Western art, joining with the intellectual and socio-political commitment of other artists of the 'Khartoum School.'

The formative influence of African motifs in Salahi's work was emphasised by his subdued, earthy palette. From the late 1950s into the 1970s, he said, "I limited myself to sombre tones, using black, white, burnt sienna and yellow ochre, which resembled the colours of our earth and skin shades of people in our part of Sudan. Technically, it added depth to the picture."

He also began to include hieratic symbols from the region's archaeological monuments and architecture; Northern Sudan has a rich ancient Kushite and Meroitic heritage. He fused plant and animal forms with non-Islamic motifs such as mask-like faces and human figures. These were combined with spiritually loaded voices and visions, along with specific Arab/Islamic imagery, such as crescent moons and arabesques. In Funeral & the Crescent, he painted a procession of mourners with mask-like facial expressions carrying a corpse under a crescent moon.

Asharq Al-Awsat, August 29, 2013



'They always appear' (1966-1968), oil on canvas. (Courtesy of the Tate, London)

Ibrahim El-Salahi has retained a life-long interest in Arab calligraphy, which gradually evolved into abstraction of its symbolism, focusing on iconic aspects rather than meaning.

"I began squeezing letters and decorative units together into a narrow space within the painting. The letter was legible, yet abstract. Next, gradually I expanded the area, and later, I separated the calligraphic symbol from its verbal representation. It was a pleasant surprise to find that my Sudanese audience responded positively to these works," he told Asharq Al-Awsat.

Salahi served as undersecretary to the Ministry of Information between 1973 and 1976, transforming it into the Ministry of Culture and Information. His tenure and artistic career abruptly ended when he was falsely accused of anti-government activities, and was imprisoned for over six months in the notorious Kober (Cooper) Prison without trial. Characteristically, he puts a positive slant on it: "The ordeal became a blessing in the dark of the prison. I experienced a rare revelation, unattainable in the hectic pace of everyday life. There and then, I was awakened."

However, for a long while, the art he created as a result of his incarceration was often stark and sombre. He left Sudan and has since lived in voluntary exile, first in Qatar, and then the UK, where he created works like The Inevitable (1984-1985), a monumental response to the turmoil and chaos of the civil war taking place in Sudan. During this time he proved his ability to reinvent himself, remaining at the forefront of creativity, with numerous international exhibitions and represented in important global collections.

After a break of thirty years, he had a solo show in Sudan in 2000. "I was delighted when over 1,000 people from all walks of life, Sudanese and foreigners alike, attended the opening. For me, it was like seeing green leaves blossoming on a dried-up branch. The bridge we had labored to build since the late 1950s had finally become concrete," he said.

Asharq Al-Awsat, August 29, 2013

Salahi always washes and prays before he starts work. These practices are essential to his creative process. As for the reason behind this, he told Asharq Al-Awsat: "I realize the work comes through me. I draw on an unwavering spiritual origin—relying on and submitting to the metaphysical to gain access to my innermost self, my essential being."

A man of great integrity—morally and ideologically—Salahi's contribution reconciles the spiritual and the material, remaining true to his vision of a world free of injustice and limitation.

Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist was inaugurated in 2012 by the Sharjah Art Museum, and travelled to the Katara Arts Centre in Dohar. It is on display at Tate Modern until September 22, 2013.