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Two Pioneers of Arab Abstraction, Side by Side

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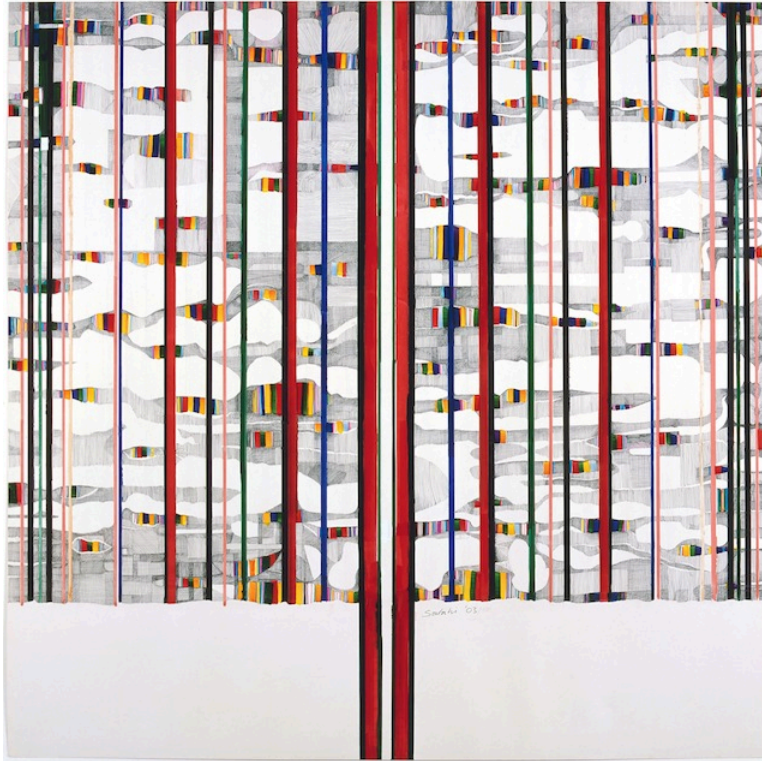
Ibrahim El-Salahi, "Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams I" (1962-3) (© Ibrahim El-Salahi)

LONDON — In a time of acute upheaval, there is something comforting about the concurrent retrospectives currently on view at the Tate Modern for two seminal Arab modernists, Saloua Raouda Choucair and Ibrahim El-Salahi. The Sudanese El-Salahi has been more widely shown in the Western world — the artist currently resides in Oxfordshire — and this is further evidenced by the relative size of his show, which runs seven rooms to Choucair's four. Yet they are both significant figures in their own right, and these highly biographical treatments afford their work a rich historical context that illuminates how their artistic practices intersected with the realities of their epoch.

Among Ibrahim El-Salahi's many biographical artifacts presented are notable collaborations with his friend the novelist Tayeb Salih, for whom he designed several book covers. His fondness for the written word permeates his work, which frequently includes Arabic script, and can be traced to his promise in calligraphy as a child. This prowess earned him a government scholarship to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, though upon returning to Khartoum he found his highly academic work spurned by the Sudanese public.

Seeking a greater fidelity to the native aesthetic, El-Salahi's artistic syncretism was a foundation of the Khartoum School, giving rise to a new lexicon of organically-inflected abstraction. The exhibition traces his eventual alienation from his ancestral homeland, when a post he had taken in the Culture Ministry led to a souring of his relationship with the regime, and in 1975 he found himself summarily jailed and tortured for six months in the wake of a failed coup. The prison notebook is exhibited featuring his sketches from this period, and it is a deeply affecting work. Escaping first to Doha, Qatar, El-Salahi settled eventually in Oxford in 1998.

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Ibrahim El-Salahi, "The Tree" (2003) (Private collection; image © Ibrahim El-Salahi)

Barely two decades El-Salahi's senior, the Lebanese Saloua Raouda Choucair's Khartoum and London were Beirut and Paris, where she studied under Fernand Léger at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts. She is credited with exhibiting the first show of abstract painting in the Arab world, in Beirut in 1947, though her greatest triumphs in the context of this show seem to be in her sculptural work and representational painting, with her charismatic self-portrait deftly breaching what the catalogue refers to as the traditions of "non-representational Middle Eastern art." Other such standouts include "Paris-Beirut" (1948), with its lyrical juxtaposition of landmarks and signifiers, and "Les Peintres Célèbres" (1948), a bold depiction of four female figures, the titular "famous artists," nude and at work. Her delicately cerebral acrylic and nylon wire sculptures from the late 1960s and 70s, exhibited in the final room, offer an intriguing departure from the rest of the work shown, and recall Naum Gabo's 1942 Linear Construction series over at the Tate Britain.

In that final room, the wall text suggests that her eponymous foundation continues to advocate on behalf of her work, which they claim remains under-recognized. Though the fact of such dedicated advocacy surely places her in the company of a distinguished few, the historical significance of her achievements does make it surprising that the Tate show is her first major museum exhibition. Curiously enough, Choucair's show is never directly called a retrospective in the official literature from the Tate, though El-Salahi's is — but they are both described as such in reviews. And though the two shows are never explicitly brought into dialogue, their proximity makes the pairing inevitable — and more than welcome.

Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist, and Saloua Raouda Choucair continue through September 22 and October 20, respectively, at the Tate Modern (Bankside, London).