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Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist

by Sharon F. Patton

Ibrahim El-Salahi, *A Visionary Modernist* (University of Washington Press, 2012) is about an exemplar of African modernism whose pioneering works on paper and canvas (as well as writings) represent an artist who adroitly out-manuevered and persevered political ideological entrapments and societal prejudices. Sudanese Ibrahim El-Salahi (b. 1930, Omdurman, Sudan; now living in Oxford, England) is well served by this monograph edited by Africanist scholar Salah M. Hassan. This, a project that took years in the making, is well worth the wait. Hassan and the Museum for African Art, NYC commendably produced this luxe, copiously illustrated hardcover catalogue, published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title; both are a retrospective, covering works from the mid-1950s to 2010.

Ibrahim El-Salahi, A Visionary Modernist is divided into two sections. The first is *The Making of A Modernist*, which is a compilation of five essays. Extensive end-notes after each essay is logical and convenient for additional research. Salah Hassan in "Ibrahim El-Salahi and the Making of African and Transnational Modernism" provides an informative introduction to El-Salahi and his role in what may be loosely term an aesthetic popularly known as *The Khartoum School* (College of Fine & Applied Art) and his personal life of migration and artistic reinvention---through the embrace of Arabic calligraphy and African motifs--- in post-colonial Africa.

Essays by Sarah Adams, Iftikhar Dadi, Hassan Musa and Chike Okeke-Agulu vary in scope, yet collectively expand on Hassan's thesis that the "modernist movement in African visual arts transcend traditional Eurocentric dichotomies, dividing West and non-West and giving primacy to one and derivative status to the other" (p. 11). Instead African modernism evolved from myriad sources and cultural environments that defy its being defined as emulating Western aesthetics or as African naivete.



Ibrahim El-Salahi, *Vision of the Tomb*, 1965, oil on canvas, 36x36 in., Museum for African Art. Photo courtesy: Museum for African Art/Jerry L. Thompson

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Sarah Adams in "In My Garment There is Nothing but God: The Work of Ibrahim El-Salahi" and Iftikhar Dadi in "Ibrahim El-Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism in a Comparative Perspective" focus on calligraphy and religion (El-Salahi is a Muslim of Sufi sect). Chika Okeke-Agulu in "Ibrahim El-Salahi and Postcolonial Modernism in the Independence Decade" summarizes how European critiques and academic training in Khartoum, London and New York City in mid-20th century, especially filtered through the Mbari Mbayo workshop (established by Georgina and Ulli Beier in Nigeria in 1962) were a catalyst for El-Salahi's evolution as a modernist artist. Focusing on 1950s, Okeke-Agulu aptly notes that: "African artists realized a need to reimagine their work by bringing the critical sophistication acquired in the academy to bear on a questioning of both the colonial context of their earlier artistic practice and the value of Western modernist artistic forms and institutional traditions in the postcolonial situation." (p. 34) Hassan Musa provides an intimate and revealing perspective about the geopolitical environment of Sudan and El-Salahi, especially "Sudanese cultural authenticity" from the 1950s to 1990s in "El-Salahi, the Wise Enemy: Between the Artist of the Authority and the Authority of the Artist." Musa observes a dichotomy in El-Salahi: "We see a rational Muslim [for whom representation is anathema] going about in the guise of the artist" [whom many Sudanese view as an urban vagabond]. And by doing so, Musa asserts, El-Salahi comes to represent an Arab-African hybridization in Sudanese visual art that predictably runs counter to geo-political realities.

Ibrahim El-Salahi, *They Always Appear*, 1964-5, oil on canvas, 18 x 12 in., collection of the artist. Photo courtesy: Museum for African Art/Andy Keate
(Enlarge Image)

Ibrahim El-Salahi, *They Always Appear*, 1964-5, oil on canvas, 18 x 12 in., collection of the artist. Photo courtesy: Museum for African Art/Andy Keate
Ibrahim El-Salahi, *Flamenco Dancers*, 2012

In the second section *El-Salahi On El-Salahi*, the artist voices his own thoughts and remembrances about his life in "The Artist in His Own Words." A highlight of this catalogue is an edited account of his imprisonment at Kober (Cooper) Prison in 1975 -- "Prison Notebook: A Visual Memoir" that juxtapose selected pen-and-ink illustrations from the artist's *Prison Notebook* (1976). Lastly "Ibrahim El-Salahi Interviewed by Ulli Beier" are excerpts from two interviews in 1983 and 1990.



Ibrahim El-Salahi, *The Tree*, 2001, colored ink on watercolor paper; 18 1/2 x 18 in., collection of the artist. Photo courtesy: Museum for African Art/Andy Keate



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Ibrahim El-Salahi, A Visionary Modernist delivers historical and critical depth, often lacking in monographs about modern African artists. And for those unable to attend the exhibition, the catalogue of over 80 illustrations and black-and-white family photos divided into three parts: Meditation and Mastery 1957-1972, Imprisonment, Expatriation, and Exile 1972-1998, and Continued Spiritual Journey 1998-Present is an adequate substitute. This catalogue is a well deserved tribute to Ibrahim El-Salahi.

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