

The New York Times, June 5, 2014

The New York Times

Ibrahim el-Salahi: 'Selected Works, 1962-2010'

by Holland Carter



"Dry Months of the Fast," from 1962, a painting by the Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi, at Skoto Gallery. Credit Courtesy of the artist and Skoto Gallery; 2014 Ibrahim ei Salah Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Skoto Gallery

529 West 20th Street, fifth floor, Chelsea

Through June 14

A traveling retrospective of work by the Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi, one of the leading figures in African and Arab modernism, appeared, to acclaim, at the Tate Modern last summer. But despite being organized by an American institution, the Museum for African Art, now defunct, the show found no takers among New York institutions. Fortunately, Skoto Gallery has filled the information gap with a beautiful reprise in miniature of the larger survey.

Born in Sudan in 1930, Mr. Salahi has had a thoroughly cosmopolitan career from the very start. He studied art in Khartoum, then at the Slade School in London, and finally at Columbia University in New York. He was deeply networked in artist circles across Africa during the post-colonial 1960s, when a Pan-African vision was at a high point. But he repeatedly returned to Khartoum, where he taught and worked in the government's ministry of culture. Caught up in a political tangle in 1975, he was jailed for six months and then went into exile. He now lives in England.

The two dozen modestly sized works at Skoto span most of this history. The painting titled "They Always Appear" (1964-65), which was at the Tate, gives a good sense of Mr. Salahi's early work in abstraction, derived partly from Arabic calligraphy. (His father was a Muslim cleric.) A fizzy, space-agey drawing in white ink on black paper from 2002 picks up the calligraphic thread.

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Among internationally minded postwar African artists, he was a pioneer in the melding of naturalism and abstraction, mixing African, Arabic and Western sources with fascinating inventiveness. This is evident in the 1962 painting "Dry Months of the Fast," with its shrouded sand-and-earth-colored figures, as it is in a 2010 drawing of a head in profile that seems to be simultaneously radiating and absorbing waves of energy.

To get a comprehensive view of his brilliant career, I strongly recommend the catalog for the Tate retrospective, "Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist," edited by Salah M. Hassan, director of the Institute for Comparative Modernities at Cornell University. In the small Chelsea show, so absorbing from picture to picture, we can see his achievement only in fragments, though if it weren't for Skoto, we wouldn't see it at all.

A version of this review appears in print on June 6, 2014, on page C25 of the New York edition with the headline: Ibrahim El-Salahi: 'Selected Works, 1962-2010'.