"Art et Liberté" at Reina Sofia

"Surrealism is not a purely French movement" and "art has no country" were two of the defining slogans of Art et Liberté, the anti-nationalist group of Surrealist artists that emerged in Cairo in 1938. A fascinating exhibition on this lesser-known analogue to European Surrealism, "Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)," curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, debuted at the Centre Pompidou last year. It then traveled to an even more felicitous setting at Madrid's Reina Sofia, the museum that's home to "Guernica," 1937, Picasso's epic painting of the Basque town bombed by fascists. It was that painting that the Art et Liberté members chose to appear on the cover of their 1938 manifesto, "Long Live Degenerate Art!," published in French and Arabic and written, it is thought, by Egyptian author Georges Henein.

The manifesto is a rallying cry against the fascist regimes strengthening their grip across Europe and in Egypt, as well as the state-sanctioned art that had become their propaganda, such as the Nazi-sponsored "Great German Art Exhibition" and Egypt's own Salon du Caire. The text also defined the urgent political agenda that largely distinguished the Surrealism of Ramses Younan, Kamel El-Telmissany, Amy Nimr, and Fouad Kamel from that of René Magritte and Salvador Dalí. Another difference is that the Egyptian artists preferred the term Subjective Realism—defined as the process of painting by instinct and emotion, and later inserting recognizable cultural symbols, like the Eye of Horus—to the label Surrealism.

But there are striking similarities in terms of appearances: desert landscapes; clocks; fractured, dripping, and stretched-out bodies. At the center of the exhibition is the Egyptian artist Mayo's mural-sized painting "Coups de Bâtons"—perhaps the "Guernica" of the Art et Liberté movement—an abstracted scene of police brutality set in a Cairo

plaza. Stick figures are impaled by batons and left dangling from them, chairs fly through the air, all entangled in a harmonious chaos, and linked collectively in violence.

Political divisions ultimately broke up the artistic unity in the mid 1940s. Many of the Art et Liberté artists left Egypt in exile or wound up in prison. Others went on to form the Contemporary Art Group, which rejected Surrealism in favor of a more national Egyptian art—blasphemous to many of the original founders. Henein's last words to his wife before his death in 1973 have come to be seen as a metaphor for the brief but extraordinary movement, and served as the title of the Pompidou show: "Baby elephants die alone."

By BLOUIN ARTINFO
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