

# 'Prison Notebook': How Sudanese artist Ibrahim El Salahi transformed his suffering into seminal works

The modernist's incredibly important series of works has been translated into English by Sharjah Art Foundation



One of the 39 ink drawings by Ibrahim El Salahi, made during house arrest after he was released from Kober prison in 1976. His drawings are compiled in 'Prison Notebook', published by Sharjah Art Foundation and The Museum of Modern Art, New York. All images of 'Prison Notebook' courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation and The Museum of Modern Art, New York



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On a sweltering day in September 1975, without charge or explanation, renowned modernist artist Ibrahim El Salahi was arrested and taken to prison.

He recounts details from that day clearly, from the puffy cheeks of one of the security officers who detained him to the bare floor of the room in Khartoum's Kober (Cooper) prison, where he would spend the next six months and eight days without trial.

At the time of his detention, El Salahi – who turns 90 next month – was working as an undersecretary in Sudan's Ministry of Culture but was accused by the Jaafar Nimeiri regime of being involved in a coup attempt.

After his release, El Salahi was placed under house arrest. During this period, he began creating a series of 39 pen-and-ink drawings – his first group of works in black and white – to record his prison experience. These works, compiled in the 1976 publication *Prison Notebook*, contain haunting and surreal self-portraits alongside Arabic poetry and prose written by El Salahi as well as Quranic verses.

Sharjah Art Foundation and the Museum of Modern Art republished these drawings in 2018, translating his writing and commentary into English for the first time. The slim volume documents how transformative this period was for El Salahi, personally and artistically. Years earlier, in 1957, he had returned to Sudan after studying at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, completing a scholarship programme in the US and touring the world to represent his country at cultural festivals.



Ibrahim El-Salahi is co-founder of the Khartoum School

Intent on making his name in Sudan, El Salahi turned to styles that would resonate with his countrymen. In 1960, he co-founded the Khartoum School, a group of artists whose works melded traditional Islamic calligraphy and motifs with modernist abstraction.

Born in 1930, he was in his forties when imprisonment disrupted his life and career. The works in *Prison Notebook* illustrate the anguish and pain of El Salahi's experience in Kober. He recounts not only physical hardship – sleeping in a cell with 10 people “packed like sardines” with no beds – but also the emotional turmoil of hearing prisoners being hanged in the early hours of the morning and the fear of being next.

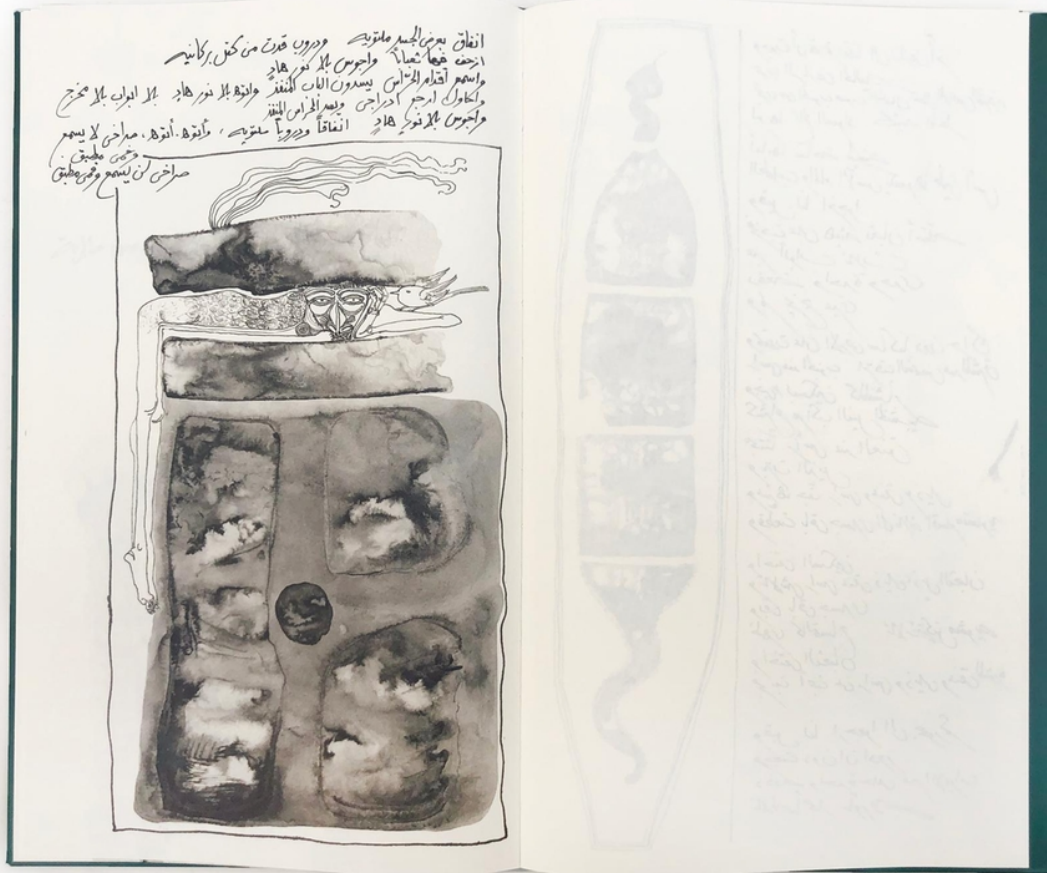
In one drawing, he depicts prison guards lining up inmates for body searches at dawn. “Lucky is the one who would be brought back to jail,” he writes in a poem.

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Deprived of the materials needed to create, El Salahi cut up cement bags and drew on them with a pencil. He would bury these drawings in the sand, knowing that punishment would come if they were discovered. This process of piecing together scraps of sketches forged a new approach to his work.

“That gave me an idea, which I used later in my work: the organic growth of a picture,” El Salahi writes. “I worked on a nucleus, something in the middle. Then I added one piece to the right, the one piece to the left, one piece above, one piece below, until the picture grew into another image.”

The most striking element of the artist's prison drawings is his use of metaphorical motifs and his recollections of the nightmares that plagued him after his release. *The Onset of the Nightmare* shows a “bird of evil” hanging over his head, representing trauma and the lingering fear of returning to prison. “When I was released at last, every night I woke up from these horrible dreams,” the artist writes. It was from this point, he says, that he began making small abstract works in full colour.



In this drawing, El Salahi recalls a nightmare where he tries to escape prison through underground tunnels, only to find that the guards had closed them off

In the pages of *Prison Notebook*, El Salahi documents an existential reckoning, an encounter with his spirit that became integral to his survival. “Jail is what is accepted by oneself. There are different ways that a person can accept what is happening to him or to her. If you accept it for yourself, you are imprisoning yourself. But you can be free,” he writes.

In one of his final poems in *Prison Notebook*, he refers to his experience as “The Third Birth”, spurring a renewed sense of life, marked also by a new phase in his artistic development. Several lines in the accompanying poem express this: “With my own hands, I shall open the future’s curtains / With my own hands, I shall write my poems / With my own hands, I shall write the pronouncement for my last day / I shall illustrate the shape of words / With my own hands.”

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From a broader view, the book's editor Salah Hassan, a curator and art historian, says El Salahi's ordeal also demonstrates the significance of prison resistance culture in postcolonial Sudan. Political prisoners, specifically intellectuals and activists, made the prison "a place of knowledge, community and solidarity in the struggle for democracy". Hassan says the work is a reminder of an artist's capacity to transform suffering into empowerment and to fight for social justice.

When his house arrest ended, El Salahi left Sudan and essentially lived in self-imposed exile, initially spending more than two decades in Qatar before moving to Oxford, England, where he lives to this day.

His pioneering role in Arab and African modernist art was recognised in a retrospective curated by Hassan in 2012. It was shown at the Sharjah Art Museum with the support of Sharjah Art Foundation president Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi before travelling to the Tate Modern in 2013, making El Salahi the first African artist to stage a retrospective in the UK institution.

*'Prison Notebook' is available at Sharjah Art Foundation. More information is at [sharjahart.org](http://sharjahart.org)*

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