

# Ibrahim El-Salahi

One of the most significant artists in the collection, **Ibrahim El-Salahi** is one of the world's most important, living artists and widely acknowledged as a 'godfather' of African and Arabic modernism.

Here we present an hour long video interview we conducted with El-Salahi and an introductory essay to his work.

## Sorry

Because of its privacy settings, this video cannot be played here.

## Ibrahim El-Salahi: The Father of African Modernism

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"To come in from the cold after all this time is a wonderful thing," Ibrahim El-Salahi said of the level of international recognition recently afforded his work. Having just celebrated his 86th birthday, El-Salahi is now widely seen by curators and museums around the world as one of the world's most important, living artists and a godfather of African and Arabic

modernism. It's a judgment that was underscored by depth and range of his work at his retrospective at the Tate Modern in 2013, the first retrospective given by the Tate to an African born artist.

The Tate show was the last stop of the travelling retrospective that had previously visited Sharjah and Doha. Curated by Professor Salah Hassan, it was the first major, survey exhibition dedicated to El-Salahi's work and, in critical terms, forcefully argued the importance of El-Salahi as an exemplar of Modernism in general and contextualized his "foundational contribution to the modernist movement in African visual arts" – a long overdue and highly successful act of revisionism necessary after decades of Eurocentric narratives about modernity. Since then the spike of attention on El-Salahi's work from both the critical and commercial communities of art world has been intense. The Tate, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the Sharjah Foundation have all added major works to their collections with a number of other museums pursuing the few major works still available. This December London's Vigo Gallery will present El-Salahi at Art Basel Miami Beach, which will be the first time his work has shown at a Basel art fair, indicative of the depth of market interest in his work.

From his early paintings influenced by his studies in London, to the elegance works from his 'Khartoum School' period inspired by the aesthetics of Arabic calligraphy, to the austere Minimal beauty of The Tree series, El-Salahi's complex and nuanced practice has drawn upon and spoken to multiple cultural traditions, perspectives and identities; Sudanese, African, Arabic, Islamic (El-Salahi is a practicing Muslim), Western, Modernist and traditional. It is, perhaps, the self-consciousness with which El Salahi has navigated these meanings whilst allied to a commitment to formal experimentation, that characterises El Salahi as a paradigmatic Modernist.

The origin myth of El-Salahi's practice, however, begins in a

communication failure. Born in 1930 in Omdurman, Sudan, to an Islamic teacher, El-Salahi became fascinated with art whilst studying at Khartoum's Gordon Memorial College, before winning a scholarship to The Slade School of Art in London in the 1950's. On returning to Sudan after graduation he organized an exhibition at Khartoum's Grand Hotel, displaying a body of paintings, landscapes, still-lives, nudes and portraits all articulating styles learnt in London. El Salahi recalls, "The viewers I had in mind for the exhibition were my Sudanese compatriots, but although a lot of them came to the opening out of courtesy, they quickly vanished," The works appealed to the Western audience in the city, several of whom bought works, but not to his compatriots. "I was astounded to find that the artistic tastes and concepts entrenched in the Sudanese personality offered no possibility of really appreciating the expertise I has acquired abroad and was so proud to show off. The shock was a revelation." The communication gap presented itself to El-Salahi as a problem to be solved. He had returned, in his own words, as a "conceited young artist fresh from London" but, "Over time I came to see that conditions in Sudan required a very different approach on the part of the artist... If I was to have a relationship with an audience, I had to examine the Sudanese environment, identify what it offered.... As an artistic resource...". Accordingly El-Salahi stopped painting for two years embarked on a long and open ended exploration of "what kinds of art were shown, and therefore appreciated, in typical Sudanese homes and public places... I was amazed to rediscover the riches I had seen all around me during my childhood, and whose value and rich meanings I had for years abysmally failed to grasp".

Out of that search came a movement that became known as the Khartoum School, "hoping to fill the gap between the artist and his audience, the cumulative outcome of different historical, social and political factors, I began an experiment later called "the Khartoum School". The common factor in the Khartoum School work was the abstract and representational symbolic potential of the Arabic letter".

Developed along with fellow artists such as Ahmed Shibrain and Kamala Ishag, the Khartoum school became then the foundational, visual language of Sudanese Modernism. El-Salahi carried this spirit of intellectual enquiry in a series of critical cultural engagements across Africa. In the early 1960's he participated in the legendary Mbari Artists and Writers Club in Ibadan and, then working for the Sudanese government as a cultural advisor, led the Sudanese delegation to the first World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar in 1966 and subsequently to the First Pan African Cultural Festival in Algiers, 1969, both of which helped catalyze pan-African art movement, of which El-Salahi has remained a key figure.

Amidst all his interactions with these different identities and traditions, El-Salahi works have always been intensely personal and, being a devout Muslim, also spiritual. "I know I draw on an unwavering spiritual origin in which I resolutely believe. I rely on and submit to the metaphysical and the invisible as ways to gain access to the hidden chambers of my innermost self". It has been El-Salahi's ability to make work that is radically and authentically personal, whilst engaging in a nuanced and generous fashion with wider cultural contexts that has marked him out as one of the most significant artists of his generation.