

Mirror of the Times

[India Stoughton](#) Posted [5 April, 2017](#)

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Egyptian artist Ibrahim El Dessouki creates detailed paintings of his native

Egypt that reflect the changing zeitgeist

Egyptian artist Ibrahim El Dessouki has mastered the art of patience. His incredibly detailed paintings and charcoal drawings can take up to a month to complete, each demonstrating painstaking attention to every tiny mark and line. As a result, he produces only 12 or 13 paintings a year, leaving his work in tantalisingly short supply.

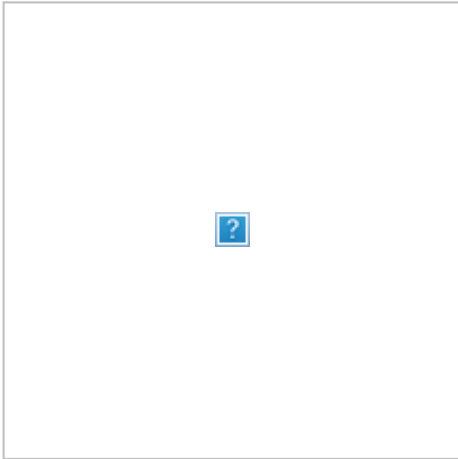
Dubbed “the architect” for his paintings of the columns of the temples of Luxor and Karnak, El Dessouki was born in Cairo in 1969. His parents, Fahmi El Dessouki and Atyat Sayed, were both celebrated expressionist painters and free-thinking intellectuals, and their liberal influence can be seen in El Dessouki’s work, which captures day-to-day life in contemporary Egypt, reflecting on political and social issues, as well as the diversity and beauty of Egypt’s desert landscapes and the lush surroundings of the Nile.

Whether working on portraiture, landscapes or still life, his work is characterised by his unique ability to orchestrate minute changes in the texture of his paintings and his deft grasp of light and shadow. These distinctive traits reflect his painstaking working process – El Dessouki spends hours building up layers of paint, only to scratch away at them with a razor blade or knife and then paint over them again.

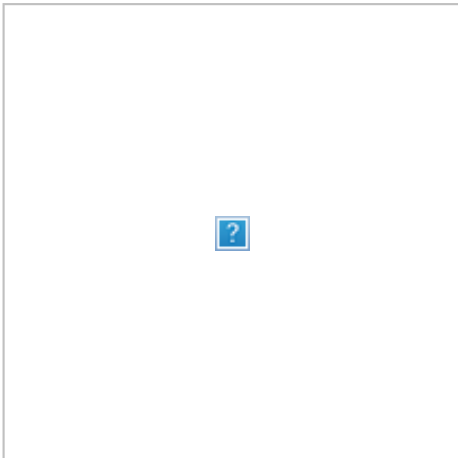


Ibrahim ElDessouki, Landscape

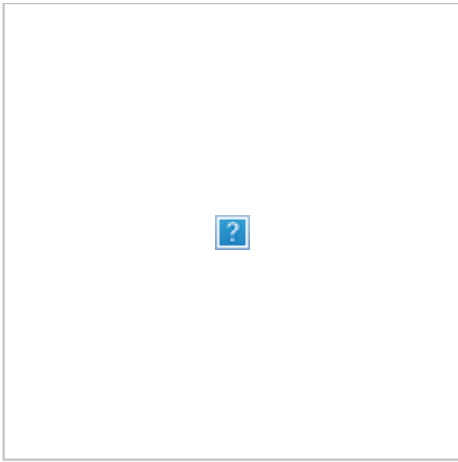
11, 2015, 95 × 140 cm, pigments,
charcoal and pastel on paper
copy



Ibrahim ElDessouki, Landscape
10, 2015, 95 × 140 cm, pigments,
charcoal and pastel on paper



Ibrahim ElDessouki, Landscape
9, 2015, 95 × 140 cm, pigments,
charcoal and pastel on paper



Ibrahim ElDessouki, Building n2,
2015, 200 × 100 cm, oil on
canvas

“My work is related to what is happening in Egypt,” El Dessouki explains. “I try to paint reflections of my time. I painted newspapers in a period in 2004 when everybody was expecting a change and trying to find it between the lines in the newspapers... We’d go out after midnight every night to buy the next morning’s newspapers, expecting something new to happen. So I painted stacks of newspapers, reflecting the reality of what was happening in Egypt, when everyone was expecting a change that never came.”

In his compelling portraits – most of them featuring women – El Dessouki moves away from his trademark detail and realism to create more stylised, atmospheric representations of his subjects. His figures are captured with serious expressions, as though unaware of the painter’s gaze, their eyes shadowed. It is here that the influence of his Egyptian background comes into play, as he builds on the legacies of both Egyptian and Western art history.

“You have to look back at the Egyptian legacy of painting women,” El Dessouki says, “from the Pharaonic era, to the Coptic era, where there are very famous portraits of women called the Fayum portraits, which they did on the coffins of everyone who died... I studied the work of Western portraiture and was especially impressed by Lucien Freud, Frank Auerbach and Francis

Bacon. But I have a tendency not to sympathise with the model. I don't do eyes, which is the part that reflects all of the personality."