

Modernist Women of Egypt

July 13, 2017



Untitled works by Inji Efflatoun both from 1958, oil on canvas here installed as part of Modernist Women of Egypt exhibition. Courtesy of Green Art Gallery.

Distributing daily bread or working in the fields, the women in Inji Efflatoun's paintings have dignity. The Nubian figures represent the Egyptian working class, whom Efflatoun portrayed throughout the 1950s and 1960s even during the time she was jailed for opposing Gamal Abdul Nasser's regime.

She was a feminist in the true sense of the word. She championed women who were struggling by making them the subjects of her paintings and captured their spirit in her sweeping brushstrokes. From an upper-class family of landowners, Efflatoun was an activist who advocated for rights of the underprivileged in the public sphere as well as in her paintings.

She was one of a handful of powerful women who took part in a female emancipation movement in Egypt during the mid 20th century that took place alongside the nation's aspirations for sovereignty. Not only were they striving for their own voice but they also had in mind the Nubians who lived in Upper Egypt and were being marginalised under Nasser. Political activists and revolutionaries, they brought a sense of hope to women all over Egypt.

This movement is charted through an exhibition at Green Art Gallery in Dubai and written about in depth by Farah Zeynep Aksoy in the concise but thorough accompanying catalogue.

Entering the salon-style exhibition is like taking a step back through time but the paintings have lost none of their power. Efflatoun's every day scenes of the peasant classes – or fellahin as they are known in Egyptian dialect – hang next to more intimate portraits such as Vesela Farid's delicate work on paper showing a woman in her wardrobe, changing her clothes.

Gazbia Sirry takes this intimacy one step further by showing a nude couple reclining. Far from being erotica, conditioned through the male gaze, this is a scene that humanises the female subject and gives her legitimacy. She is not just a worker or a lower-class person from Nubia, she is a woman, an equal and deserves a place in the social order.



Installation view. Modernist Women of Egypt at Green Art Gallery, May - July 2017. Courtesy of Green Art Gallery

Effat Naghi is also included. She collected archaeological pieces and folk artefacts from Nubian culture and collaged it into mixed media works. Like her peers, she was interested in preserving traditional culture. Although many of them travelled abroad to study art (something that in itself was revolutionary at the time) they were also keen on establishing a new culture that broke away from the Western influence so heralded by the Egyptian modernist and mostly male pioneers of the early part of the century.

A special element to this well researched and impeccably presented exhibition is the inclusion of several lesser known painters alongside already familiar names.

Works by Margo Veillon a Swiss-Austrian artist who lived most of her life in Cairo and who is greatly celebrated there, are rarely exhibited yet they

are stunning and certainly deserve an elevated platform.

This exhibition, quietly presents a collection of works that should be hanging in a museum. With the addition of a handful of original copies of L'Egyptienne – the magazine founded by the pioneering Egyptian feminist Huda Sha'arawi – it takes audiences beyond the visual dimension and helps them to understand an important era in the history of Modern art from the Arab world.

- Modernist Women of Egypt ran from May 22 – July 27, 2017 at [Green Art Gallery](#), Dubai