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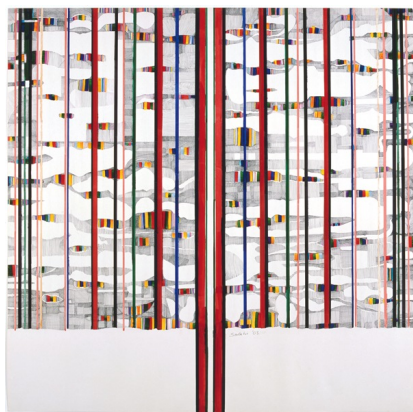
Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist at Tate Modern

African Art, to many, is considered limited to artefacts and cultural motifs such as masks and jewellery. Though this has its own appeal showing the long history of a fascinating civilisation, African modernists, such as Ibrahim El-Salahi, show a side to Africa that is very much up to date – and challenging ideas and attitudes in the West.

Born in 1930, El-Salahi has been involved in the Arts since the 1940's employing techniques and methods as diverse as calligraphy, painting, drawing and writing. The retrospective at *Tate Modern* shows how varied his work is – and yet, how incredible adept he is when altering his skills to suit a different outcome. Though 'A Visionary Modernist' primarily focuses on his more abstract work, within Room 2, you gain a chance to see the paintings produced during his government scholarship at the Slade School of Fine Art. These portraits are observational and textured and could easily be amongst the portraits currently on display at The National Portrait Gallery's *BP Portrait Award*. Considering El-Salahi turned away from representational study, the foundations of such traditional ideas surely enhances the later works that he is celebrated for.

His breakdown of calligraphic lettering, and his rearrangement within paintings, became core to the image of the Khartoum School and this retrospective shows the building blocks that led to El-Salahi's language. *Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams I* from 1961-65, is akin to a city-scape whereby the colours resemble bones and skeletons rising up from the ground; mighty like skyscrapers; organic in their shapes.

His later works become more conceptual as he produces multiple, smaller pieces, named *The Tree*. They all grow in an organic fashion as he built up the lines steadily, like the growth of plant. Many pieces remain connected through straight, defined lines – anything but natural – and remain clearly organised and structured. The ideas are conflicted – as you look at a conceptual, flat, straight-lined image named *The Tree*.



Such a diverse range of techniques show a deep respect for Art History – but also for his own cultural roots. A video interviewing El-Salahi describes who he produces art for – himself and his "ego"; his own culture and, finally, everyone else. His art aims to reach all and as someone far removed from the Sudanese and Islamic background El-Salahi is from, it is a testament to his skill that I am so inspired by his work.

His Art can effortlessly imitate cross-hatching techniques of Renaissance figure-drawing, distort bodies and stretch them out like Giacometti (*Funeral and the Crescent*, 1963) and then show a clear connection with African masks (*Self-Portrait of Suffering*, 1961) – and yet something remains the same; his love, passion and appreciation of what Art is. There is no arrogance or ignorance; no pretence and assumed intelligence; just a desire for understanding. This is what speaks loud and clear, and what draws you in – a man on a quest to create beauty and in 'A Visionary Modernist', Ibrahim El-Salahi has achieved that.

Exhibition is running 3rd July – 22nd September 2013 at the Tate Modern. Review by [Simon Columb](#), [follow him on Twitter](#).



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