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WEPRESENT Salah Elmur — Paintings inspired by a childhood in Sudan

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Born in Khartoum, Sudan, in 1966, artist Salah Elmur has since moved through Kenya, and now lives and works in Cairo, Egypt, where his wife hails from. Yet, no matter where in the world he finds himself, Sudan is always at the heart of his work. Here, writer Melissa Chemam learns about the sights, sounds and stories that live in Salah's mind from his time growing up in the Northeast African nation.

“Where the Blue Nile and the White Nile merge.” That’s how artist Salah Elmur describes his hometown, Khartoum. “Sudan made me an artist,” he says. “The colors there, the multiculturalism of over 200 tribes, and the excellent music made there. Also, my mother was very good with hand-made crafts and my father, who was an engineer, drew beautiful maps by hand for his work. All of that contributed to my art,” he says.



Left: The Widow Monkey (2021) Right:
The White Dove (2021)

Salah showed a talent for painting as early as primary school, where he made a mural for the school building. "I think I chose to be an artist in my childhood," he says. He had his first professional exhibition while in high school, before going to university to study art. In 1989, he obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Graphic Design at the College of Fine and Applied Art at Sudan University. He later went to live in Kenya for four years, then Egypt, but tries to come to Sudan "three times a year at least."

Salah grew up by the Blue Nile in Khartoum, surrounded by nature, often stopping to watch the fishermen at work or to explore the wilderness of the forest. Now, he loves to paint images that relate to these childhood impressions: the people, the fruits and the animals he remembers. In his 2007 series titled "Guards," insects, items of fruit, and people are surrounded by birds of various kinds, sitting on the head of a person, rocking on a rope, or flying high. "Sudan is in 90% of my art," he says, "how people speak, eat, walk, their surroundings and culture are in all of my paintings. Because they are so full of life and beauty. I grew

up going to the forest and it was full of wild animals that have now run away because of urbanization. They used to wander through the middle of town, with acacia trees all around them.”



Left: The Neat Man (2021) Right: Art Deco Sofa (2021)

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His use of color is striking: In his 2011 series "Circus," we see a brown horse and a man with his tongue sticking out, ready to bite into a ripe slice of watermelon, a reference to the people who came to see the circus with their picnics when he was a child. "Russian or Chinese circuses used to come to Khartoum at the time," he says, "and the local people watching would always sit eating fruits or nuts. These were moments of utter happiness. I made six paintings inspired by these very vivid memories."

In "White Shoes," from 2017, a pony carries a lady in a flashy green dress and the titular white shoes, in front of a bright yellow background next to a green cactus. "I use such vibrant colors in my work because of the bright, intense sun in Sudan, and because people there love to wear colorful clothes," Salah says. He regularly paints faces and portraits, too. "All of them are inspired by people I've seen in Sudan or in Egypt, local people walking by. I take photos of them and put them on my shelf as a reminder to paint them later."

From "Circus"

“I’m a
Sudanese
artist first and
foremost, but

Salah’s dad also had a photography studio in his youth, and that influenced the way he now creates portraits. “I used to love seeing him work,” Salah says. “My dad, Kamal, started when he was an

everything in
the world
inspires me.”

engineering student, when the university started to ask for photo ID. I remember looking back years later in my parents' house and finding boxes of negatives, bottles of fixers and lots of photos that had been left behind. They became such a treasure for me, and they've always deeply inspired me. That's why a lot of the people and animals in my paintings are posing as if waiting to be photographed.”

Salah's series “Fragrances of the Forest and Photos,” including more than 70 artworks, was inspired by his early life, specifically by the forest in the center of Khartoum. “I used photographs of the view that I took from my father's studio as inspiration,” Salah says, “plus my collection of old photos, and I started painting.” It went on show at the Sharjah Art Museum, United Arab Emirates, in February 2018.

For him, all artists make use of a series of images that are constantly floating around their heads. “My mind is full of imaginary shelves with boxes that I can open and use all the time for my painting,” he says, adding that his works don't focus on major events or action, but instead always appear to have emotional stories behind them. “It's ‘figurative

abstract', that's what I call it," says Salah. "My painting is about sharing my own vision of certain figures. I'm a Sudanese artist first and foremost, but everything in the world inspires me."

White Shoes (2017)

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Eastern
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Sim —
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