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Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist



by delacybrown on August 10, 2013



Following hot on the heels of Tate's superb mini-exhibition of Saloua Raouda Choucair, an artist previously unknown to so many art-buffs in the UK (but whose work completely revolutionised my approach to my work, and got me thinking about how I can use gouache in my paintings) comes another retrospective exhibition of a relative unknown as far as big art names go: **Ibrahim El-Salahi**, whose significant 7-room solo show has recently opened at Tate Modern in London. And what a success it is.

Coming from Sudan (born 1930), El-Salahi's retrospective is Tate Modern's first retrospective

dedicated to an African modernist. It will also most likely be the first many visitors to the show will have heard of this Modernist artist. Yet El-Salahi's work is nothing short of stunning – a visual delight of painting, drawing and calligraphy which comes together in a retrospective which exhibits a level of imaginative expression the likes of which I have not seen since discovering the works of Dali. The complexity of some of his drawn black and white images is nothing short of stunning – a mix of figurative and more expressive forms, but culminating to form a visual assault on the viewer whose eyes simply do not know where to begin in the appreciation of these works.

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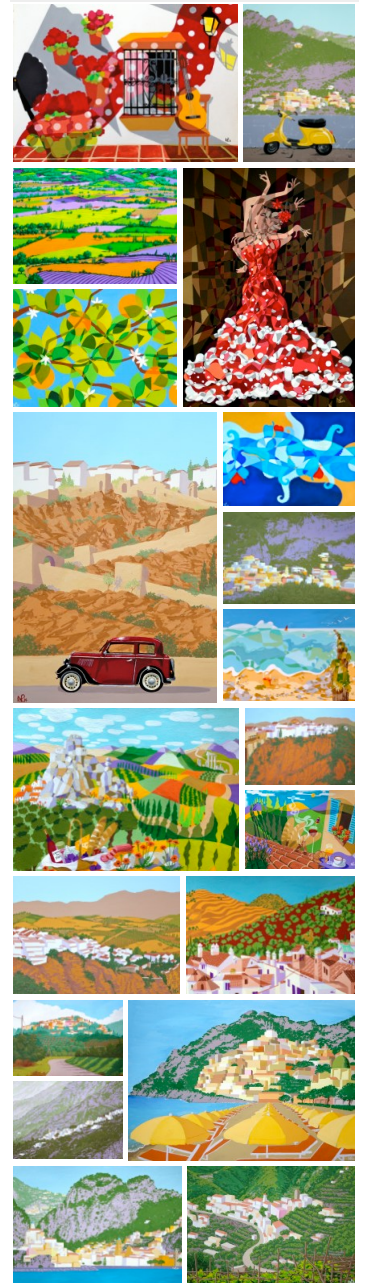
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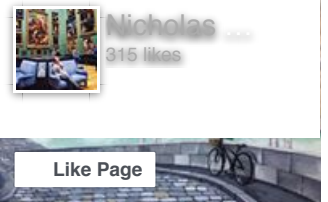


Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams I (1962-3) © Ibrahim El-Salahi

Centred on the recent acquisition of Tate Modern, the significant piece entitled *Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams* (1961-5), the exhibition starts off with the artist's most recent works before delving backing in time to paintings loaded with African earthy brown tones, burnt umbers and yellow ochres representing, as El-Salahi himself says, the African foundations which pervade his work. But asides from the African earthy colours and the occasional tribal mask, El-Salahi's early work exhibits a complexity of imagery which extends way beyond the continent which has so characterised his work. Islamic imagery, for example, is featured strongly, with Islamic lettering and the crescent moon prominent throughout the show, while perhaps the strongest influence comes from a surprisingly significant immersion in Western culture, an exposure encountered when El-Salahi won a scholarship to London's Slade School of Art in the 1950s, with particular references to Picasso's jarred cubist figures showing through from then onwards.

GOUACHE GALLERY





Vision of the Tomb (1965) © Ibrahim El-Salahi

The exhibition moves to the 1970s, a difficult time for El-Salahi when he was compelled to return from London to Sudan to take up the role of Deputy Undersecretary of Culture at the Sudanese Ministry of Information, under the military dictatorship of General Gaafar Nimeiry. However, his tenure ended abruptly in the mid-70s when, in the aftermath of a failed military coup, El-Salahi was accused of anti-governmental activities and imprisoned for 6 months. The art works which follow are abruptly different from the warm earthy umber works of the previous room. Stripped of colour, these black and white works, generally drawn in ink on paper, appear to reject the warm colours of El-Salahi's African heritage, but are nevertheless some of the most powerful works in the show, demonstrating incredibly skilled draughtsmanship and imagination which is beyond what most of us are capable of. Apparently El-Salahi would begin these works by drawing a small image, the likes of which would gradually expand outwards as he would add paper to allow the image to spread.