

Ibrahim El-Salahi and the Making of African and Transnational Modernism

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A picture is no more than a mirror, a vehicle that takes one back to one's self, to turn one's sight inwards to find the Self within and begin to meditate.

—Ibrahim El-Salahi, 2005¹

Over more than fifty years of sustained productivity and intellectual engagement, the Sudanese painter Ibrahim El-Salahi has been one of the most prominent figures of African modernism. Through both his extraordinary legacy as a writer and critic and the remarkable breadth of his artwork, in which he has deeply explored all kinds of painterly strategies, he has made foundational contributions to the modernist movement in African visual arts. Yet to understand those contributions requires a rigorous effort to transcend traditional Eurocentric dichotomies rampant in art historical discourse, dividing West and non-West and giving primacy to one and derivative status to the other. El-Salahi's work must be located within local, national, and transnational spaces in ways that would unravel the fallacies inherent in binary articulations of modernity. This approach will open up an interpretive and critical space in which to resituate African modernity and modernism's inscriptions in local and global pasts, presents, and futures.

El-Salahi's accomplishments offer profound possibilities for both interrogating and repositioning African modernism in the context of modernity as a universal idea, one in which African history is part and parcel of world history. El-Salahi has been remarkable for his creative and intellectual thought, and his rare body of work, innovative visual vocabulary, and spectacular style have combined to shape African modernism in the visual arts in a powerful way (fig. TK [107]). His contributions, while distinctive and unique, show striking resemblances to those of pioneer African modernists such as Skunder Boghossian, Dumile Feni, Ernest Mancoba, Gerard Sokoto, Malangatana Ngwenya, and other important figures whose decades-long journeys have transformed visual art in Africa. Like several of those artists, he has also had his share of an itinerant life, which has significantly molded his career.

The motifs and images, styles and forms of El-Salahi's work have drawn from a great array of classical and traditional African, Arab, and Islamic visual sources as well as from European ones. His unique painterly language and praxis have left indelible marks on the arts scene today, acting as a formative influence on the work of a generation of artists in Sudan and elsewhere in Africa. His experiments have also invited comparison with those of his contemporaries on the African literary scene—Chinua Achebe, Tayeb Salih, and Naguib Mahfouz, among others. El-Salahi's connections to these figures proved fruitful in the late 1950s and early '60s when he participated in the Mbari Artists and Writers Club, an experimental arts and drama workshop in Ibadan, Nigeria, initiated by the German expatriate Ulli Beier and his British wife, the painter Georgina Beier. Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Gérald Félix-Tchicaya, Jacob Lawrence, Denis Williams, and others who were integral to the Mbari club early in their careers have since emerged as artists and writers whose work has made a profound impact on modern African arts and literature.²

The development of the Mbari club's interdisciplinary orientation was among the most productive and provocative episodes in the history of modern African art. This emphasis obviously appealed to El-Salahi, whose characteristic modernist vision crystallized in his ability to interpolate Islamic, African, and Western expressions inherent in twentieth-century

1. Ibrahim El-Salahi, Memoirs, unpublished manuscript, 2005. (in Arabic) but translated by Mustafa Adam.

2. El-Salahi illustrated the first edition of Brush Fire, a collection by the Congolese poet Gérald Félix-Tchicaya (a.k.a. Tchicaya U Tam'si, 1931–1988), published by Black Orpheus, a press established by Ulli Beier in Nigeria in 1957.

African modernism, a modernism at once transnational and cosmopolitan. The provision of new tropes of self-expression and self-representation that traversed frontiers of environment and geography was one of this visionary artist's major achievements.

El-Salahi shares with many African artists of his generation a lack of recognition for his achievements. In historical texts on twentieth- and twenty-first-century art, both systematic and systemic exclusionary practices have sidelined and ghettoized these artists' work.³ As Edward Said poignantly argued, the dominant history of Western modernism leaves out the massive infusions of non-Western art and culture into the metropolitan heartlands throughout the twentieth century.⁴ These glaring omissions have contributed to persistent patterns of effacement of the paramount influences these artists have exerted on Western modernist art practices, as well as of their contributions to the host societies they adopted as their home. As Said also argued, their intellectual production, as it overlaps with that of their European counterparts, is essential to any consideration of what constitutes global modernity. It is no random act of kindness or charity to recognize their powerful intellectual and cultural production, which can in no way be analyzed "as merely reactive assertions of separate native or colonized subjectivity."⁵

The question remains: how can we account for and theorize the contribution of an artist such as El-Salahi within the largely exclusive narrative of modernity and modernism etched in mainstream art historical scholarship? As I argued in a recent essay, postcolonial theory offers useful critiques of the dominant discourse on modernity by showing how the very terms of the debate are necessarily Eurocentric.⁶ Postcolonial theorists have shown how mainstream scholarship continues to emphasize Western social transformations and artistic experiments, relegating the social and artistic developments of other regions to secondary status.⁷ Most hopeful among their ideas is Stuart Hall's call to abandon the binary center/periphery model altogether in favor of a consideration of patterns of continuity and interconnection in modernism everywhere. Arguing for the inseparability of modernisms globally, Hall emphasizes that "the world is moving outwards and can no longer be structured in terms of the center/periphery relation. It has to be defined in terms of a set of interesting [centers], which are both different from and related to one another." He also points out, "If you think about where important movements are being made, sometimes they happen in the centre, but the most exciting artists are those who live simultaneously in the [center] and at the periphery."⁸

3. See, e.g., Rasheed Araeen, "Modernity, Modernism, and Africa's Place in the History of Art of Our Age," *Third Text* 19, no. 4 (July 2005): 416–17, and Olu Oguibe, "The True Location of Ernest Mancoba's Modernism," *Third Text* 19, no. 4 (July 2005): 419.

4. See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993), p. 242. See also my and Iftikhar Dadi's "Introduction: Unpacking Europe," in Salah M. Hassan and Dadi, eds., *Unpacking Europe: A Critical Reader* (Rotterdam: NAi and Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2001), pp. 12–25.

5. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 242. Said also noted that an exploration of the history and sociology of the Western metropolis in the twentieth century reveals the strong presence of students, writers, and artists from previously colonized territories, including Africa, in Paris, London, Rome, and other European capitals.

6. Salah M. Hassan, "African Modernism: Beyond Alternative Modernities Discourse," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 451–73. For an excellent discussion of Eurocentrism and its intellectual limitations see Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).

7. In working to counter these exclusionary narratives, I have found interventions by scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Stuart Hall, Timothy Mitchell, Said, and Naoki Sakai helpful in theorizing African modernity and repositioning African modernism within larger debates on global modernism. See Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Hall, "Museums of Modern Art and the End of History," in Hall and Sarat Maharaj, eds., *Modernity and Difference* (London: INIVA, 2001), pp. 21–22; Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," in Mitchell, ed., *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Said, *Culture and Imperialism*; and Sakai, "Dislocation of the West and the Status of the Humanities," in Hassan and Dadi, *Unpacking Europe*.

8. Hall, "Museums of Modern Art and the End of History," pp. 21–22.

This understanding of representation is reinforced by Timothy Mitchell's emphasis on the ways in which modernity reinscribes itself outside the metropole through a translation that performatively incorporates difference. Like Hall, Mitchell urges us to attend to the modern not simply as a series of singular events but as it is staged through repetition. In this view, the modernity of the margin, through repetitions produced by successive acts of translation, attempts to stabilize the idea of the modern, yet simultaneously undermines it by constantly demonstrating its contingency.⁹ Hall and Mitchell agree on the need to extend the understanding of modernity without falling prey to simplified, prescriptive oppositional categories. This task is vital not only for capturing the historicity of representation but for expanding the production of knowledge of African modernism, a subject I tackle briefly below in the context of El-Salahi's art.

At this juncture it would be useful to mention the characteristics that have come to define our understanding of African modernism. This contextualization, albeit abbreviated, is fundamental to examining how El-Salahi's contributions have been effectively integrated within a specific genre of representational practices. To start, and for the sake of comparability, a word must be uttered with respect to the question of periodization. The period we refer to as modern in Africa is a markedly more recent and uneven phenomenon than it is in Europe. In Egypt and other parts of North Africa and in former settler colonies such as South Africa, spatial proximity to Europe or different kinds of traffic with it resulted in signs of modernism in art and society as early as the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Egypt for example the modernist project started in early to mid-nineteenth century with the radical reforms of the Europhile Muhammad Ali Pasha, the Governor of Egypt during the Ottoman Rule who, though not a modernist in the nationalist sense of the word, was known for the transformation of Egyptian society in all spheres—economic, cultural, and social. These reforms led to establishment of industrial, agricultural, and educational bases which were credited as the foundation of modernism in Egyptian arts and cultural production. A stark contrast emerged in other parts of West and Central Africa, where modernism was a mid-twentieth-century phenomenon born out of colonial and postcolonial processes. There, the conscious claim to modernity implies a sense of the social, cultural, and artistic transformations related to colonialism and of the myriad struggles associated with decolonization.

In this complex context, the intersection of the visual arts and decolonization constitutes an important defining moment of modernism in Africa as a whole. Integral to this moment is the rise of national consciousness and the project of nation-building. As a cautionary note, however, one must emphasize that the African modernist experience is by definition transnational in that it epitomizes a particular sense of universality, especially when the nature of the political ideologies, and related programs and strategies, of the independence and liberation movements in Africa are taken into account—ideologies like Marxism and socialism or liberalism, which, despite their deployment within a nationalist framework, were mostly Pan-Africanist and internationalist in orientation. This dynamic becomes even clearer when we dissect the roles of the European expatriates, colonial administrators, liberal colonial educators, and missionaries who for various reasons contributed to the rise of the modern art movements in Africa.¹⁰ African modernity and its manifestations should be positioned within this historical milieu. Most relevant to the case of El-Salahi and the Khartoum School has been the creation of new movements in all facets of the arts and in social life, an effort primarily geared toward new imaginings and concomitant constructions of modern tropes of self-representation. It is an effort worth unfolding in the pages to follow.

9. See Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," p. 24.

10. See Salah M. Hassan, "The Modernist Experience in African Art: Visual Expression of the Self and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics," in Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, eds., Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace (London: INIVA, and Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999), pp. 214–35.

The Khartoum School and the Making of Sudanese Modernism

Born in 1930 in the historic city of Omdurman (the Arab Umdurman), Sudan, El-Salahi studied from 1949 to 1951 at the School of Design at Gordon Memorial College, where he majored in painting. Between 1954 and 1957 he studied painting and calligraphy at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London. Later, in 1964–65, he studied black-and-white photography in the Department of Journalism, School of General Studies, Columbia University, New York. In addition to his participation in the Mbari Artists and Writers Club in Ibadan, Nigeria, in the early 1960s, he led the delegation of Sudanese artists to the first World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar in 1966 and was part of the Sudanese delegation to the First Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers in 1969. Both events contributed significantly to the formation of pan-African art movements, as well as to the evolution of a trans-African aesthetic among artists of Africa and the African diaspora.¹¹ In a string of extraordinary events in which he was an active participant, El-Salahi attended the International Youth Festival in Warsaw in 1955, which evidenced his cosmopolitanism and openness during the period of ideological polarization that led to the rise of the Iron Curtain, which survived between West and East for more than fifty years. In the early 1960s, he traveled to the United States on UNESCO and Rockefeller Foundation fellowships; he has lived in New York and has traveled across the United States, Mexico, and Brazil (fig. TK [with Alfred Barr 178]). In the 1970s, he taught and served as external examiner in the art department at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda.

El-Salahi's art has been exhibited widely. Major museums in Africa, the Arab world, and the West—including The Museum of Modern Art in New York; the Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., which later became part of the Smithsonian Institutions; and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar—have acquired his work. Throughout his career he has held influential positions, advising the Sudanese and other governments on cultural policies in Africa and the Arab world. Most significant in Sudan was the role he played in expanding the government's Ministry of Information into the Ministry of Culture and Information, of which he served as undersecretary between 1973 and 1976. The establishment of this department was a cardinal event in modern Sudanese history. Though his tenure as undersecretary ended when he was unjustly incarcerated for six months in the aftermath of a failed military coup in 1975, El-Salahi's accomplishments were remarkably multifarious. His advocacy of a supportive infrastructure for artistic and cultural production in Sudan has left an indisputable legacy, conservative contemporary politics notwithstanding.

While El-Salahi's tireless advocacy of Sudanese and African artists remains staunch, it is to his work as an artist that many remain most indebted. After graduating from the Slade, El-Salahi returned to Sudan in the late 1950s and taught for many years at the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum, one of the most active centers of creative talent in Africa at the time. At the college, Sudanese artists were exposed to Western artistic traditions in terms of techniques, materials, and forms. Here El-Salahi became a guiding light for the major art movement we now know as the Khartoum School, recognized for its distinct aesthetics and innovative artistic style (cat. no. TK [030,011,013,017,018,032,036,037,040,041,045,135]).

Modernist Sudanese art is multifaceted and complex, but its history is deeply embedded in the British colonial educational system and specifically in the rise of higher education in that country.¹² It is therefore worth emphasizing that a group of self-taught artists had worked diligently in the modern genre since the 1920s, preparing the ground for the academically trained Khartoum artists who followed. Unfortunately, since they are viewed as nonacademic, "naive" painters, their history and contributions are scarcely studied and little documented. But certainly the expansion of urban living during the colonial period,

11. An example of such movements is AfriCobra, led by African artists in the United States. See Jeff Donaldson, "AfriCobra and TransAtlantic Connections," in Clementine Deliss, ed., *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, and Paris: Flammarion, 1995), pp. 249–51.

12. See M. O. Beshir, *Educational Policy in the Sudan: 1898–1959* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 23–24.

particularly in the 1920s and '30s, introduced new aesthetic needs and hence new genres in music, literature, and visual art.¹³

In the formal educational arena, the rise of the College of Fine and Applied Art can be traced to the early 1930s, when the Department of Art was established within Gordon Memorial College (now the University of Khartoum). In 1946, the Department of Art evolved to become the School of Design, and here British and other Western expatriates such as the late Jean-Pierre Greenlaw played a great role in establishing and developing a curriculum within which students could learn practical skills in carpentry, architectural drawing, surveying, and design.¹⁴ In 1951, the Department of Art moved from Gordon Memorial College to a building within the Khartoum Technical Institute (which later became the Khartoum Polytechnic). In 1971, the Department morphed into the College of Fine and Applied Art. Today it is a semi-independent college affiliated with the Sudan University of Technology. Since its early inception, the college's curriculum, fashioned after Western artistic traditions, offered basic courses including painting, sculpture, Arabic calligraphy, graphic design, ceramics, and textiles. Theoretical courses in art history, aesthetics, and the history of design were added in the late 1970s and early '80s.¹⁵

Artworks produced by the pioneering generation of graduates of the Department of Art, many of whom traveled to study in the United Kingdom in 1944 and 1945, formed the seed of the modern art movement in Sudan. In form, style, and aesthetic sensibility, their art reflects a strict adherence to the Western academic schooling that they received in Europe. Although their subject matter was Sudanese, being largely drawn from their own environment and experiential knowledge, this European influence seemed inescapable. A unique exception was Osman Waqialla, whose early explorations of Arabic calligraphy led to the evolution of an exceptional style within the Sudanese modern art movement.¹⁶ Waqialla understood the aesthetic value of classical Arabic calligraphic forms and their balancing masses of light and dark. His mastery of the traditional skills and styles is indisputable, as is abundantly clear in such works as his engraved calligraphic designs in marble on a tomb dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad in Medina, Saudi Arabia.

13. In several major cities, including Khartoum, Wad Medani, and Al Obayid, self-taught artists exposed to Western traditions of painting and other art forms began to produce new types of artwork—mostly landscape paintings representing rural or urban modern life, or portraits of important Sudanese historical figures or of stereotypical rural or urban women with folkloric costumes or hairstyles. These pioneers included Ali Osman, who was active in the 1930s and '40s; Uyun Kadis, nicknamed “Cat’s Eyes” in recognition of his ability to copy portraits and draw figures; and Jiha, a skilled painter, sign designer, and magician. Most memorable was Ahmad Salim, who was active into the 1960s and who developed a style very close to those of the academically trained artists who followed him. Bought and sometimes commissioned by prosperous urban families, the works of these artists could be seen in private houses and in restaurants and cafés. Some of the artists also exhibited in public spaces, introducing a new culture of art and aesthetic appreciation directly to the public.

14. As I learned in interviews with El-Salahi (Oxford, England, 2003) and the Sudanese artist Osman Waqialla (London, July 1993), Jean-Pierre Greenlaw, the British founder of the College of Fine and Applied Art, was a liberal humanist greatly influenced by the ideas of William Morris, John Ruskin, and the British arts and crafts movement. A skilled painter, he was also a musician who played several instruments and became famous for singing and playing Sudanese songs. He was fluent in colloquial Sudanese Arabic and was very much admired by his students. Greenlaw’s role in Sudan was similar to those played by Kenneth Murray in Nigeria, Margaret Trowell in Uganda, and Frank McEwen in Zimbabwe.

15. With the rise of the Islamist military government since 1989, the facilities of the College of Fine and Applied Art, and its standards of instruction, have deteriorated considerably. Many of the best artists and teachers were forced into exile or left the country, while others were terribly harassed and intimidated. The Department of Culture is now headed by elements close to the ruling National Congress Party.

16. Osman Waqialla was a poet, journalist, and broadcaster as well as a visual artist. After studying at the Camberwell School of Art, London, in 1946–49, he went to the School of Arabic Calligraphy and College of Applied Arts in Cairo. Returning to Sudan in 1951, he taught at the College of Fine and Applied Art until 1954, when he formed Studio Osman in the center of Khartoum. After Sudan won independence, in 1956, Studio Osman produced major art assignments, such as the calligraphic design on the first Sudanese currency, and served until 1964 as a meeting place for artists and others concerned with the arts.

Waqialla's critical contribution lay in liberating Arabic calligraphy from its traditional association with sacred text through daring treatments of nontraditional, secular Arabic poetry and prose. This revolutionary experimentation proved highly influential among Waqialla's students, including not only El-Salahi but also Ahmed Shibrain, both men prominent figures in what had evolved by the late 1950s into the influential Khartoum School.¹⁷ Indeed the real breakthrough in this new movement came under their leadership, in the late 1950s and early '60s. Later, these pioneers paved the way for a younger generation of artists including Magdoub Rabbah, Amir Nour, and Taj Elsir Ahmed, who forged their own distinctive achievements.

The name "Khartoum School" has been a subject of dispute in the emerging literature on modern art in Sudan. The artists' early patrons and publicists were expatriate Western art critics and collectors.¹⁸ Today, several of the school's founding members consider it simply a transient phase in their evolution as artists; others have dissociated themselves from it as a movement altogether, and several never wanted to be part of it as a "school," even though they were connected with it as a movement. The Khartoum School artists neither formed any formal association nor practiced together in a workshop. Its members issued no manifesto and felt no need to generate a critical literature to buttress their aesthetic claims. It is perhaps most fruitful to understand the Khartoum School as one manifestation of a complex, multifaceted, fluid modernist movement in Sudan. The school should be situated within the context of the discourse on modernity, and within the larger milieu of the postcolonial intellectual tradition in Sudan.

Nor can this discussion of art and modernity be isolated from a deeper knowledge of the cultural topography of Sudan, a culturally diverse country within which almost every major African ethnic or linguistic group is represented.¹⁹ For political and ideological reasons, this diversity has been polarized to two major cultural groups: in northern and central Sudan, highly Islamized and relatively Arabized cultures, fused with local pre-Islamic elements; and stretching south and into the peripheries of the northern region, strongly "African" cultural elements, represented by traditional religions as well as by a visible presence of Christianity. In July 2011, this polarization became official, with the secession of South Sudan as an independent country. Along with such milieus, a rich diversity of art forms has long coexisted with an artistic tradition that traces its beginnings to the ancient Kushitic and Meroitic traditions in today's Northern Sudan (approximately between 1000 BC and 600 AD). In the modern period, the search for a common denominator—for a Sudanese national culture that

17. Outside Waqialla's work, this early chapter in the history of African modern art produced no clear philosophical orientation or definitive aesthetic inclination, nor did it reflect any sociopolitical or intellectual issues. Perhaps his generation of pioneers felt the challenge of mastering academic skills; perhaps they were influenced by rather rigid, uninspiring British teachers who advocated "art for art's sake." Waqialla's noncanonical, creative treatment of sacred text, however, is clear in calligraphic variations on Qur'anic themes such as his "Prophets Series" ("Al Anbiyaa," 1982).. His secular explorations are best exemplified in his series on Sudanese modern poetry. Until his death, in January 2007, he continued his explorations of these two themes, which he called the "third dimension" and the "fourth dimension."

18. The term "Khartoum School," was coined primarily by the late Guyanese painter, archaeologist, and art critic Denis Williams, who taught in Khartoum's College of Fine and Applied Art in the late 1950s and early '60s. It has since been echoed by other art critics and historians.

19. The cultural diversity of Sudan and the relationship of its two major components—"Africa" and Islam—have drawn the interest of social anthropologists, historians, and political scientists, who have often tried to stress one element over the other or to reconcile them by claiming their synthesis. See Abdal Magid Abdin, Tarikh Al Thaqafa Al Arabia fi Al Sudan (Beirut: Dar Al Thaqafa, 1967); Muhammad Abdul-Hai, Conflict and Identity: The Cultural Poetics of Contemporary Sudanese Poetry (Khartoum: IAAS Publications, Khartoum University Press, 1976); Mohammed Omar al-Bashir, Cultural Diversity and National Unity in Sudan (Khartoum: IAAS Publications, Khartoum University Press, 1980); Muhammad al-Makki Ibrahim, Al Fikr Al Sudani Usuluh Wa Tatawurhu (Khartoum: Ministry of Culture and Communication, 1976); Ali A. Mazrui, "The Multiple Marginality of the Sudan," in Yusuf Fadl Hasan, ed., Sudan in Africa (Khartoum: IAAS Publications, Khartoum University Press, 1971), pp. 240–55; Mudathir Abdal Rahim, "Arabism, Africanism and Self-Identification in the Sudan," in Hasan, Sudan in Africa, pp. 244–39; and R. C. Stevenson, "The Significance of the Sudan in Linguistic Research," in Hasan, Sudan in Africa, pp. 11–25.

would cut through this ethnic, religious, and cultural pluralism—became a focal point for a new national consciousness, expressed mainly in literature and art. In most cases, such efforts transcended social and political reality, stressing the creativity of hybridity and ethnic intermixture. Totalizing terms such as “Sudanese culture,” “Sudanese identity,” “Sudanese literature,” and “Sudanese art” became central to such discourses, forming the basis for the vocabulary of a new social consciousness.²⁰ In the 1930s, Hamza al-Malik Tambal, the influential Sudanese literary critic and editor of *Al-Fajr*, proclaimed that “Sudanese identity is an ideal to which we should all aspire, it must be reflected in all our work.”²¹ This ideal has evolved into intellectual movements characterized by conflict and by attempts at reconciliation of identities.²²

The roots of the Khartoum School were intricately related to this larger quest for a shared Sudanese identity. Most germane to our understanding of the School’s intellectual tenets is its relationship to the literary group *Madrasat al-Ghaba wa al-Sahra*, the “Jungle and the Desert School,” which included major poets, literary critics, and intellectuals such as Muhammad al-Makki Ibrahim, Muhammad Abdul-Hai, and Salah Ahmad Ibrahim. The main ideological and intellectual concern articulated by this group was the creation of a true “Sudanese” literature, art, and aesthetic.²³ Their literary production clearly reinforces the symbolism behind the name: the goal of representing not only the geographical landscape of the country but its hybrid cultural framing of Islamic and African elements.²⁴ As Muhammad al-Makki Ibrahim proclaimed in his landmark poetry collection *Ummati* (My nation), from 1969,

(both) the Water Buffalo of the forest and Onyx of the oasis are
(the symbols of) our nations . . .²⁵

Salah Ahmad Ibrahim had earlier expressed the idea of hybridity and racial intermixture in his collection *Ghabat Al Abanus* (The forest of ebony) of 1958:

Liar is he who proclaims: I am the unmixed, the pure pedigree.
The only. Yes!, a liar.²⁶

Another poet, Al Nur 'Uthman Abbakar, stresses the “return to roots” in his memorable collection *Sah wu Al Kalimat Al Mansiyah* (The awakening of the forgotten words), from 1972:

This is the deliverance of fire
collect the roots of the sources
in the rock
in the depth of the nights of the forest
and in the cellar of early legends.²⁷

20. See Abdul-Hai, *Conflict and Identity*, pp. 6–7. For a more recent survey of the development of Sudanese literature, including the formative years of the 1930s and the rise of literary clubs and groups, see Eiman El-Nour, “Nationalism and the Rise of the Sudanese Novel,” in Ali Jimale Ahmed and Tadesse Adera, eds., *The Road Less Traveled: Reflections on the Literatures of the Horn of Africa* (Trenton, N.J.: The Red Sea Press, 2008), pp. 369–404.

21. Hamza al-Malik Tambal, “Maqalah hawl al Adab al-Sudani,” *Al-Fajr* 3, no. 1 (March 1937): 3.

22. Abdul-Hai, *Conflict and Identity*, p. 13.

23. For an excellent recent autobiographical reflection on the history of the Jungle and the Desert School see Muhammad al-Makki Ibrahim, *Fi Zikra al-Ghaba wa al-Sahra* (Omdurman: Abdul Karim Mirghani Center, 2007).

24. The poetry of Muhammad al-Fayturi is a good example of the address of identity crisis by stressing the African element within the Arabic component. See his poetry collection *Ashiq min Efriga* (Bayreuth, 1970).

25. Muhammad al-Makki Ibrahim, from *Ummati* (Khartoum: Ministry of Culture, 1969), p. 123, trans. in Abdul-Hai, *Conflict and Identity*, pp. 50–53.

26. Salah Ahmad Ibrahim, from *Ghabat Al Abanus* (Beirut, 1958), p. 45, trans. in Abdul-Hai, *Conflict and Identity*, p. 55.

Another group of left-leaning Sudanese writers and artists, loosely associated with the Jungle and the Desert School, named itself after Apedemak, a lion-headed god in the ancient Sudanese kingdom of Meroe, believed to be the god of war, fertility, and art.²⁸ In doing so they referred to an articulation of Sudanese culture and identity predating the preeminence of Islam and Arabism by hundreds of years. The overall ideology that guided such intellectual movements evolved into what Ahmed El Tayib Zein El Abdein has called “Sudanism” (*al-Sudanawiyya*), a long-term cultural process through which Sudan has developed a unique ethos based on principles of hybridity and cultural continuities within the Nile Valley. This process is the culmination of many layers of religious and sociopolitical realities and artifacts, accumulated over thousands of years in Sudan. Zein El Abdein understands these multiple layerings as the common denominator that distinguishes Sudanese cultures, despite their internal variations and differences, from neighboring localities in Africa and the Arab world.²⁹

To return then to the Khartoum School: these artists, like the members of the Jungle and the Desert School, were members of a new elite class that rose out of the ashes of colonialism and found itself squeezed between, on the one hand, the masses of rural and urban workers whose culture and identity were intact and hardly assimilated, and on the other, their own modernist aspirations, embedded in a colonial system of education and a process of acculturation typical of the colonial condition.³⁰ In other words, as Amilcar Cabral argued, they were “prisoners of the contradictions of their social and cultural reality.”³¹

Facing such paradoxes of identity, the artists of the Khartoum School attempted to construct a new ethos for what constituted Sudanese identity in the visual arena. Their main ideological and intellectual concern was the making of a “Sudanese” art and aesthetic. The pioneering members of the School were closely associated with the poets, novelists, and literary critics in the Jungle and the Desert School.³² Their main question was how far the artist should be obliged to shake off Western and other influences and produce art that was uniquely “Sudanese.”³³

It is important to stress that El-Salahi’s style and aesthetic evolved within concerns he shared with colleagues in the Khartoum School such as Shibrain and Taj Elsir Ahmed. Shibrain, like Waqialla, sees letter forms as living figural elements. In his work, Arabic letters gain what he calls a plastic aesthetic value. As the vehicle of the Qur’an, the Arabic language is viewed as sacred, but considering the fundamental role calligraphy has played in the aesthetic and style of classic Islamic art, this does not necessarily forestall artistic use of it. Shibrain applies the aesthetic potential of calligraphy within an Africanized Sudanese

27. Al Nur 'Uthman Abbakar, *Sah wu Al Kalimat Al Mansiyyah* (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1972), p. 62.

28. Most members of the Apedemak group were Marxist or left leaning in their ideological orientation. Sculptural representations of Apedemak appear in temples in al-Musawwarat al-Safara' and Naq'a, built at the end of the third century B.C. east of the sixth cataract in Northern Sudan. Text found in these sites refers to Apedemak as the Godhead of Nubia.

29. Ahmed El Tayib Zein Al Abdein, “Al-Sudanawiyya,” *Majallat Al Thaqafa Al Sudaniyya* no. 15 (July 1998): 30–35.

30. This marginality, and the accompanying claim of a “return to roots” that characterizes many third world postcolonial intellectual movements, constitutes the sociocultural drama of the colonial elites or native “bourgeoisie.” See Amilcar Cabral, “The Role of Culture in the Liberation Struggle,” in Armand Mattelart, ed., *Communication and Class Struggle*, vol. 1, *Capitalism, Imperialism* (New York: International General, 1979), pp. 205–12, and Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 248.

31. Cabral, “The Role of Culture in the Liberation Struggle,” p. 206. Cabral argues that this marginality “is felt significantly only at the vertex of the social pyramid—the pyramid colonialism itself created—and specifically affects a very limited number of workers in urban centers.”

32. Examples of these close relationships between artists and writers include El-Salahi’s illustrations for the Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih’s books *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) and *Wedding of Zein* (1969).

33. See Sondra Hale, “Musa Khalifa of Sudan,” *African Arts* 6, no. 3 (April 1973): 14.

framework. His work, he has said, “is a mixture of images, African-Arabic and Islamic.”³⁴ In his innovative pen-and-ink paintings (ca. 1960; figs. TK–TK), Arabic-like characters are arranged in a Kufic style on a plain background. Individual characters are hardly decipherable and letters are shortened or elongated, compressed or expanded, to become part of a larger abstract composition. The oil painting Message 40 (1966) includes traditional Islamic decorative motifs, such as the rosette, crescent, and semifloral arabesque designs, in addition to calligraphy. Like El-Salahi, Shibrain makes symbolic use of colors as encountered in the Sudanese landscape. For him, blue and bluish-green are the hues of the Blue Nile; red, yellow and brown are those of the earth and of Sudanese traditional architecture.³⁵

While the Khartoum School dominated the Sudanese art scene in the 1970s and early '80s, it faced challenges from younger groups of artists. Among those who tried to depart from its ethos, and to offer an alternative style and praxis, were the members of the Crystalist Group (al-jama'a al-kristaliyya), headed by Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq and her students Muhammad Hamid Shaddad and Nayla El Tayib. According to their Crystalist Manifesto of 1978, “The essence of the universe is like a crystal cube, transparent and changing according to the viewer’s position. Within this cube, human beings are prisoners of an absurd destiny. The nature of the crystal is constantly changing, according to degrees of light and other physical conditions.”³⁶ In a counter-narrative to the hegemony of “Sudanism,” and to the “return to the source” ideology of the School of Khartoum, the Crystalist Group foregrounds change and the state of becoming as defining forces in art.³⁷

A more serious challenge to the early generation of Khartoum artists came from another group led by Hassan Musa (the author of chapter TK in this book) and Abdallah Bashir (Bola), two well-known artists and art critics. Both are graduates of the College of Fine and Applied Art (Bola also studied under El-Salahi), both are known for a leftist ideological orientation, and both have been influenced by the ideas of Fanon and Cabral, especially in their critiques of the roles of the third world bourgeoisie and of the postcolonial intellectual. In a series of public debates and newspaper articles in Khartoum in the mid-to-late 1970s, Bola and Musa accused the early generation of Khartoum School artists of ethnocentrism and criticized their artistic production as merely reactive to the colonial condition.³⁸ In their view, the Khartoum School should have been more proactive in response to the aesthetic demands of modernity and contemporaneity. Instead, in responding to the aesthetic demands of a Westernized gaze by borrowing from traditional Sudanese arts and crafts, it perpetuated an exotic image of Sudanese culture. For Musa, the Khartoum School artists’ borrowings of traditional Sudanese motifs and decorative elements prevented them from creating new forms. Moreover, by limiting themselves to certain color schemes and styles, they negated the diverse and dynamic sociocultural realities of Sudan. Musa and Bola were also critical of what they saw as the elitism of the Khartoum School, whose exhibitions were mostly held in places designed for Western patronage—first class hotels, for example, which were accessible only to foreigners and native elites.³⁹ Given Musa’s and Bola’s leftist praxis, the importance of catering to the artistic taste of the people has been a major concern for

34. Ahmed Shibrain, quoted in Evelyn S. Brown, Africa’s Contemporary Art and Artists (New York: Harmon Foundation, 1966), p. 109.

35. Shibrain is also a designer and interior decorator who has undertaken commissions for public spaces, including Jeddah Airport in Saudi Arabia, and for international hotels and companies in Sudan. His public works, mostly executed as low reliefs in painted wood, incorporate calligraphic designs as a basic element. See also Hale, “Musa Khalifa of Sudan,” p. 14.

36. For more on the Crystalist Group and the Crystalist Manifesto see Hassan, “Khartoum Connections: The Sudanese Story,” in Deliss, Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa, pp. 117–18, 242.

37. Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq, interview with the author, London, August 1994.

38. On criticism of the Khartoum School, see Salah Hassan Abdallah, Musahamat fi al-Adab al-Tashkili (Khartoum: Arwiqa Corporation for Publishing and Distribution, 2005).

39. See Hassan M. Musa, “Fi al-Khalfiya Al-Ijtima’iyah lil-Jamaliyah al-’Irqiya,” Majallat Al-Thaqafa Al-Sudaniyya no. 4 (August 1977): 59, 68, and Sami Salim, “Hiwar Ma’ Bola,” Majallat Al-Thaqafa Al-Sudaniyya 5, no. 19 (November 1981): 102–15.

them, as articulated in a recent essay by Musa in which he traces the Sudanese history of the idea of the art exhibition in relation to modern political action.⁴⁰ In the absence of real institutional patronage, the exhibition as a format opens up liberating opportunities for art in the service of progressive politics.

These critiques of the Khartoum School, and the responses they generated, opened up possibilities for rethinking Sudanese modernism. Arguing, for example, against the Khartoum School's prevalent visual forms and motifs and its use of color symbolism, Musa advocated a return to the essence of visual form (line, color, and mass or volume in space) as a vehicle of open-ended possibilities. His and Bola's assertion of the right of Sudanese artists to be open to what global art movements had to offer led younger artists to engage with the ideas of Western avant-gardes, as in the conceptualism seen in Shaddad's installations and performances.⁴¹ It also expanded the possibility of renewals of the aesthetic and ideology of the Khartoum School, as in the calligraphic abstraction work of the School of the One (*Madrasat al-Wahid*), which was genealogically related to the Letterist trend in North African art, as in the work of Ahmad Abdul 'Al.⁴²

Musa's and Bola's critiques, however, did not generate the dialogue that might have been expected in terms of published writing. The only serious critical response it elicited from the Khartoum School came from El-Salahi, who engaged in an enlightening dialogue with younger Sudanese artists on issues related to identity, art, and criticism in Sudan. One of the most interesting instances of this exchange is his correspondence with Musa, which began in mid-1993. Over a decade of this correspondence, a rich discussion of art, modernity, and cultural life in Sudan, Africa, and the world at large is meticulously documented in a forthcoming book.⁴³

Many practices of the Khartoum artists may be considered ethnocentric, or to involve some level of ideological, even nationalist romanticization of the past. This tendency, however, should not be dismissed as the kind of opportunism typical of national elites in postcolonial Africa. In art and literature, the response to colonialism, and to the identity crisis that colonialism created, was mostly expressed as a search for the common roots that might constitute a national culture, for a heritage of symbols, metaphors, and allegories that would transcend the ethnic tensions created by the arbitrary formations of Africa's postcolonial nation-states. This was a necessary and viable response to the unbridgeable, structurally determined gaps between a colonized society and a colonial power. Postcolonial realities required each "indigenous" social stratum to define its position in relation to the West and to other global realities, as non-Western peoples had been relegated to a position of ethnic and national particularity within a colonial framework in which the West had claimed universality. This analytic framework is not an apology for the Khartoum School, but offers the only way in which its claim to create a "Sudanese" art and aesthetic can be properly understood.

Discussing the earthy colors in the paintings that followed his return to Sudan in the early 1960s, El-Salahi said, "I find the color in particular looks very much like our earth, and maybe that's why I feel it's 'Sudanese.'"⁴⁴ Although he claims that it became more "Sudanese," his work is not restricted to a particular sense of nationalism. He consistently credited the formative influence of "Sudanese" motifs as the point of departure for his work,

40. Musa, "The Party of Art: When the People Entered the Gallery," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 109, no. 1 (Winter 2010):75–94.

41. See Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe, "Authentic/Ex-Centric at the Venice Biennale: African Conceptualism in Global Contexts," *African Arts* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 54–75, 96.

42. For more on the School of the One see Deliss, *Seven Stories About Art in Africa*, pp. 244–46, and Abdallah, *Musahamat fi al-Adab al-Tashkili*.

43. El-Salahi edited this forthcoming <forthcomh 2012> . *Qabdatun min Turab: Sirah Zatihah* [A handful of earth: An autobiography], which is in Arabic, during a residency at Cornell University's Africana Studies and Research Center in 2006–08.

44. *Ibid.*

but was quite at ease with the seemingly contradictory modernist and internationalist outlook. He argues, “Although I said my painting now seems Sudanese in locality, . . . I don’t deal with it in terms of locality—that it should be Sudanese art, there is no such thing as Sudanese art. But I mean as a Sudanese individual coming from the Sudan could do something.”⁴⁵

EI-Salahi was certainly at the forefront of the Khartoum School, and grew and developed within its matrix. In his search for a new aesthetic vision, he tried consistently to bring the various elements of Sudanese culture in his work in a balanced tension, and to create a visual counterpart for the literary claims of the Jungle and the Desert School. Transcribing morphologies and structures drawn from Arabic calligraphy and hieratic symbols from the region’s ancient monuments and architecture, he fused them with modern forms. Tradition and modernity thus merge in EI-Salahi’s work, whether in color or in black and white. In both content and form, the productive tension in his modernism reflects a constant articulation and transformation of ancient and contemporary African, Arabic and Islamic, Nubian and Coptic, and Western influences on Sudanese art and culture.

Although EI-Salahi was a founding and leading member of the Khartoum School, his work should not be judged by its parameters, for he outgrew the limitations of its narrow nationalist framework. His visual repertoire has never been limited to Sudan, but transcended its national boundaries to include motifs and elements of continental African origins. In other words, EI-Salahi has embraced a Pan-Africanist vision. Prescient enough to foresee the sweeping waves of globalization, and geography’s loss of significance, he focused his energy on dissolving the paradoxes that encircled art as a central element to cultural production, developing a kind of Sudanese art and aesthetics that were both modern and relevant to his own society and the world at large. It bears stressing that his aesthetic and ideological concerns did not develop in isolation from the crosscurrents of global modernism. We still need to augment the extant, inadequate narrative of global modernism with an understanding of it as a practice inflected by a variety of visual vocabularies and aesthetic languages. As I have argued throughout my effort to unpack the problematic conceptualization of modernity, the idea, embodied in EI-Salahi’s work, of an “indigenous” art that is also global and modern is centrally important to the overall scenario of artistic production in Africa today.

EI-Salahi: At Home and in the World

EI-Salahi’s work cannot be pigeonholed within a particular domain, or imprisoned within a singular, narrowly defined, or self-contained style. To restrict him to the aesthetic parameters of the early Khartoum School would scarcely do justice to his overall oeuvre. While his art and writing are certainly his foremost achievements, he has worked in other media beyond painting, for example in anchoring the TV show Bayt Al-Jak (The house of Al-Jak), a social and cultural magazine-format program on Sudan National Television in the early 1970s. Bayt Al Jak was groundbreaking in terms not only of its content but of EI-Salahi’s decision to act out the different characters associated with the theme of each episode, in spontaneous, improvised performances and role-playing that marked him as an avant-garde artist. Bayt Al Jak was a daring program, breaking codes and taboos that dominated the psyche of a conservative audience. It provided a space that allowed him to demonstrate his abilities and to take risks at a time when television was a novelty in Sudan. (It comes as no surprise that the show became a casualty of censorship under the military dictatorship of General Gaafar Nimeiry.) EI-Salahi’s acting abilities also came in handy when he played Sheikh Al-Hanin, the Sufi saint in the 1976 film version of Salih’s famous novel Wedding of Zein, directed by the Kuwaiti filmmaker Khalid Al-Siddig.

EI-Salahi’s art has undergone a number of transformations, and can be characterized as a series of overlapping periods. Though his career spans more than five decades of constant experiment with styles, colors, and visual vocabularies, his trademark linear style

45. Ibid.

remains a unifying device. Line expresses the intuitive mixture of spirituality and critical social consciousness that thoroughly infuses his work, which is distinctive in constituting a stylistic rupture not only from Sudanese and African art but from the modernist schooling he experienced at the Slade in London in the 1950s, and during his residencies in Europe and the United States in the 1960s and '70s. He explains,

The years 1958–1961 were a period of feverish activity on my part in search of individual and cultural identities. I found myself quite restless, in spite of having a family, a wife, and three children, a secure job at the art school . . . , and a reasonable studio to work in at school and at home. Those years, as it turned out, were the years of change and transformation that I went through as far as my work was concerned.⁴⁶

Looking back, El-Salahi was struck in particular by two elements that had proven of great value to his work: Arabic calligraphy, and African motifs and decorations. He had grown up seeing these things, at home and in houses, shops, and other places, but until he returned from his studies in London, he had attached no significance to either of them as “the valid alternative that had captured the imagination of the peoples of northern Sudan and turned their minds toward a level of aesthetics that was more in line with their own culture and natural environment.”⁴⁷ Consequently, El-Salahi’s post-Slade art stands in sharp contrast to earlier works such as *Portrait of a Model* (1956; fig. TK [154]). This oil painting from his Slade period reflects his mastery of European training and is in many ways indistinguishable from the work of his European colleagues of the time. It is also exemplary of the work produced by a number of Khartoum and other African artists in the early stages of their training and development, representing the training in studio portraiture then typical of the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum, or for that matter of art schools in the United Kingdom, where most of the early generation of Sudanese artists pursued their graduate training.

El-Salahi’s works from the late 1950s into the '70s show a first phase characterized by subdued, earthy colors and by increasingly dominant elemental forms and lines. He explains, “I limited my color scheme to somber tones, using black, white, burnt sienna, and yellow ocher, which resembled the colors of earth and that of skin color shades of people in our part of the Sudan. Technically it added depth to the picture.”⁴⁸ These colors also symbolically mirror the Sudanese landscape, demonstrating his ideological and intellectual links with the Jungle and the Desert School and his conscious attempt to connect with the larger concerns of the era in the creation of a distinct Sudanese aesthetic. El-Salahi divides this period of his career into two, and in the very short but intense second phase, beginning in the early 1970s, his work grew more meditative and experimental, being characterized by warm, brilliant colors and by abstracted human- and animal-like figures rendered through geometric designs. The squares and the circles that had dominated the structures of his previous compositions were subjected to fragmentation and improvisation in pursuit of what he characterized as open-ended potentiality.⁴⁹

Throughout the period, El-Salahi resorted to the traditional patterns and decorative elements of Arabic calligraphy—an important tradition in Northern and Central Sudan—and to popular Islamic motifs such as crescents and arabesques. He was fascinated by the visual spaces created in Arabic calligraphy, whose influence on his work is inextricably interwoven with memories of his childhood and early schooling at the hands of his own father, who ran a Qur’anic school in his house for the children of the neighborhood. As El-Salahi has said, “My work has always been influenced by religious teaching and upbringing. I have always had it in the family and in me—it’s something I don’t think about because I just find it there.”⁵⁰ He

46. El-Salahi, *Memoirs*.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

49. El-Salahi, in conversation with the author.

50. El-Salahi, in “A Painter from the Sudan,” in *African Arts* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1967): pp. 20–21.

also combined these forms of Islamic derivation with non-Islamic motifs—figures, natural elements, and masklike faces. In defense of these inclusions, and in contrast to popular perceptions of Islam and Islamic art as devoted to an iconoclastic opposition to images, he states, “In a way, it is a kind of prayer, too, because you are appreciating God's creation and trying to think about it and meditate on his creativity.”⁵¹

Like the artists of the North African Letterist movement known as Al Hurufiyya, El-Salahi began by breaking down Arabic letters and abstracting their shapes, focusing on their decorative aspects rather than on their meaning and creating new and fascinating forms in the process.⁵² Through this process of experimentation, he revealed the abstracted rhythmic shapes of calligraphy, and was able to visualize in them the presence of objects, figures, and a fantastic world of imagery. The Last Sound (1964; cat. no. TK [#030]) and Allah and the Wall of Confrontation (1968; fig. TK [#177]), two representative works from the mid-to-late 1960s, show a striking predominance of Arabic-like characters, in addition to the prominent crescent motif. El-Salahi notes that his exposure to Qur’anic scripts in early childhood, as the son of a Muslim cleric, was reinforced through the study of Islamic manuscripts in the British and other museums while he was a student at the Slade.⁵³

A concern with the abstract representation of human figures and calligraphic forms is apparent in El-Salahi’s early masterpiece Funeral and the Crescent (1963; cat. no. TK [#040]). Under a crescent moon—a recurring Islamic motif in many of his paintings—a procession of mourners, with masklike facial expressions, carries a corpse. Skeletal, elongated, and emaciated, the figures cover the surface of the painting; points of articulation such as knees and elbows are emphasized and delineated in spirallike forms, and the male sexual organ is deliberately exaggerated, in a style recalling certain traditional African sculpture, including that of the Yoruba in Nigeria and of the Dogon in Mali.⁵⁴

Similar figural stylization and intensity of facial expression appear in The Donkey in My Dreams (early 1960s; fig. TK [140]), Poor Women Carry Empty Baskets (1963), and Death of a Child (1965). In addition to their innovative style and aesthetic forms, these works, being based on El-Salahi’s keen observation of daily life and his interest in his society and environment, are eloquent meta-commentaries on contemporary Sudanese culture. Fatima (1968; fig. TK [180]) is an abstract composition created out of the organic and geometric shapes of natural forms. In this painting, textural variations project forms into low relief, creating a sense of three-dimensionality.

After the sudden interruption of his career in 1975, when he was falsely accused of antigovernment activities and spent more than six months in the infamous Kober (Cooper) prison without trial or even a specific indictment, El-Salahi left Sudan and has since lived in exile, dividing his time between Qatar and the United Kingdom before settling in Oxford, England, in 1998. Not surprisingly, his self-imposed exile considerably affected his aesthetic style, as his early experimental work gave way to a more philosophically oriented, more meditative approach. Over the years, the somber colors of his earlier period, and the brighter colors of the early 1970s, have given way to a more assured exploration of aesthetic visions in black and white. This period—which El-Salahi describes as the third phase in his career, “the stage of being self-confident, satisfied, and more assured”—reflects the accumulation of a turbulent life’s experiences; he states, “I have started to see the meaning of things with more clarity than before. My thoughts are more organized and I have more mastery of the skill of painting. I am more concerned now with the internal structure of the work, which I

51. El-Salahi, in Robert Serumaga, “Conversation with Ibrahim El Salah,” Topic no. 24 (1967): 14–15.

52. See Sharbal Dagher, Al Hurufiyya al Arabiya: Fan wa Hawiya (Beirut: The Printing Company for Publishing and Distribution, 1990), and Shakir Hasan Al Said, al-Usul al Hadariya wa al Jamaliyya lil Khat al Arabi (Baghdad: al-Shu’un al-Thaqafiyah al-‘Ammah “Afaq ‘Arabiyyah, 1988.1988).

53. El-Salahi, Memoirs.

54. See M. Ward Mount, African Art: The Years since 1920. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 110.

prefer to express in black and white.”⁵⁵ El-Salahi does not subscribe to the traditional distinction between painting and drawing in the Western aesthetic tradition, which associates painting with color and shape, drawing with line: “There is no painting without drawing and there is no shape without line. . . . In the end all images can be reduced to lines.” He therefore refers to his black-and-white works in pen and ink on paper as “shades in black and white.”⁵⁶

In the 1960s, El-Salahi began to spend time traveling, visiting artists, art educators and their schools, and as many places of cultural and historical interest as he could.⁵⁷ His use of black and white, and his execution of his ink-on-paper compositions on a very large scale, so that they echo the Mexican muralist tradition, seem to derive from these travels and his ensuing exposure to artistic traditions beyond his training in Sudan and the United Kingdom. Visiting Mexico in July 1962, El-Salahi traveled across the country visiting museums and meeting artists, most crucially Rufino Tamayo. His unpublished Memoirs include many reflections on the work of Mexican artists such as Tamayo, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco. In the United States, he met the Spiral Group of African-American artists, led by Romare Bearden and including such figures as Hale Woodruff, Emma Amos, Norman Lewis, and many others.⁵⁸ El-Salahi recalls his fascination with the Spiral Group’s idea of making works solely in black and white, and made canvases in black and white while he was attending the group’s meetings.⁵⁹

The marks of El-Salahi’s love of the social realism of the Mexican muralists are very visible in his large-scale 1980s paintings in black and white. These works were often made piecemeal, on medium-sized sheets of paper executed and framed as separate but structurally related. Assembled together, these units form large, unified works, monumental in scale and intensity. Described by El-Salahi as “open-ended, endless organic growth painting,” they can grow into a single mural, as in The Inevitable of 1984–85 (cat. no. TK [#080]).⁶⁰ This powerful commentary on a significant event in modern Sudanese political history is a masterpiece of skill and philosophical vision. It is important to note that such works have stylistic precedents in El-Salahi’s early art; one can easily trace in them his enduring fascination with the rhythm and structure of Arabic calligraphy and letters.

In late 1998, at his base in Oxford, El-Salahi embarked on a new body of work characterized by a return to his earlier polychromatic approach, even while he remained engaged with his monumental black-and-white works. Most important among the new works is the series “The Tree” (cat. nos. TK–TK; ch. TK, figs. TK–TK). The focus of this colorful and highly abstract work is the tree called the haraz tree, which grows in Sudan in the Nile Valley. In the rainy season, the tree sheds its leaves and stands bare. During the dry season, it

55. El-Salahi, interview with the author, Oxford, England, August 1994.

56. *Ibid.*

57. El-Salahi, Memoirs.

58. On the Spiral Group see The Catalogue of the First Spiral Group Exhibition, 1965 (New York: Spiral Collective, 1964); Jeanne Siegel, “Why Spiral?,” Artnews, 65, no. 5 (September 1966): 50–51; and Floyd Coleman, “The Changing Same: Spiral, the Sixties, and African-American Art,” in William E. Taylor and Harriet G. Warkel, eds., A Shared Heritage: Art by Four African Americans (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, with Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 149. The Spiral Group was formed on July 5, 1963, during the U.S. Civil Rights era, after Romare Bearden called a meeting in his New York studio to discuss the role of Black artists and other issues of concern. According to The Catalogue of the First Spiral Group Exhibition, the group’s name derives from the Archimedean spiral, which “moves outward embracing all directions, yet constantly upward.” This dynamic group of artists, ranging from abstract to realist, met biweekly to exchange ideas, debating aesthetics, artistic standards, and the relationship of social responsibility and artistic freedom. They sought points of intersection that would allow them to work together while preserving their individuality. They shared a concern for racial equality and the affirmation of black identity in a white-dominated art world. After two years, the artists came to feel that they had outgrown the aesthetic limitations and urgent concerns of the period, and Spiral ceased to exist.

59. El-Salahi, Memoirs.

60. *Ibid.*

blossoms. El-Salahi has recalled his fascination with this tree, and with its place in the Sudanese popular imagination: “I simply loved the story told about haraz tree. Tough and rough as it stands high by the riverbank, bare and dry where everything around is green, it is in my mind a symbolic reminder of what we always tend to forget within ourselves.”⁶¹ “The Tree” recalls El-Salahi’s signature linear style and the abstract experiment with calligraphic forms visible in his work of the 1960s and ’70s. For him, each individual work in the series starts with an image that resembles the tree, then gradually dissolves into a more simplified abstract form, sometimes in color and sometimes in black and white. Large spaces left completely white have a minimalism that recalls the artist’s earlier, linear experiments with calligraphic forms and his cognizance of the modernist languages of painting. If anything, the unfolding of the “Tree” series, a visible priority in the most recent phase of El-Salahi’s work, has demonstrated not only his resilience and productivity but also his ability to reinvent himself while remaining on the forefront of exploration and creativity.

My essay began with a call for transcending mainstream art history’s exclusionary narrative of modernity and modernism to enable a fuller account of El-Salahi’s contribution to modernism within a global perspective. This call demanded that his work be situated in the context of Sudanese modernism, with the rise of the Khartoum School one of its visual manifestations. This essay, and others in the present volume, have stressed El-Salahi’s visionary role as a modernist who introduced new aesthetic visions and vocabularies in terms of iconography, symbolism, and technique. These contributions helped to fashion the growth of the modern art movement in Sudan and in Africa.

One may speculate on the motives that led El-Salahi to play this foundational role in shaping Sudanese and African modernisms. As I ponder that question, I recall his rendering of a legend that has sprung up around the haraz tree, which he recounts in the following words:

It is said that it kept fighting the rain. A Sudanese saying, “The war of al-Haraz and the rain,” is normally reserved for an odd person. The one who stands out alone, not wanting to be counted with others or be taken for a camp follower. An obstinate one, an individual, that’s what [the tree] reminds me of.⁶²

For me El-Salahi is like the al-Haraz tree. Unlike some of his predecessors in the modernist movement in Sudan or elsewhere in Africa, he did not engage in art as an academic exercise, nor did he uncritically accept the lessons of the Western modernist tradition. A man of great integrity, morally and ideologically, he is exemplary among intellectuals of his generation for remaining true to his vision of a world free of injustice and limitation. He firmly believes in a free and a democratic society that respects artistic and individual expressions, and adamantly refuses to bow to regimes of co-optation and corruption.

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61. El-Salahi, *Memoirs*.

62. *Ibid.*