By His Will,
We Teach Birds
How to Fly

Ibrahim El-Salahi
in Black and White
By His Will, We Teach Birds How to Fly

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Vigo Gallery
19 September – 26 October 2018
curated by Toby Clarke and Salah Hassan
It is that moment in prayer
In silence we feel
We were there
Where things begin in His name
To make real sense
No more no less

Ibrahim El-Salahi
2016

This exhibition is a celebration of important black and white works spanning the career of Ibrahim El-Salahi, the Sudanese Oxford-based artist. El-Salahi is a visionary modernist who created a unique visual vocabulary and aesthetic that have come to define the modernist experience in Africa and the Arab world. This show travels on in part from his exhibition at the Prince Claus Fund Gallery last year and will be the most comprehensive exhibition of black and white works to date, spanning the last seventy years.

Beginning with El-Salahi’s seminal series *By His Will, We Teach Birds How to Fly* (1969), the exhibition evolves spatially and chronologically, covering a range of the artist’s works from early calligraphic book illustrations, to his more recent notebook drawings. Sourced from the artist’s private collection, many of these will be shown for the first time whilst others were exhibited in his major retrospective show at Tate Modern, in 2013 and more recently in his 2018 solo exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum in his home town of Oxford.
By His Will is an early, landmark series embodying a mode of work, ideas and an aesthetic that underlie his larger œuvre. It is testimony to his spirituality and passion for freedom and human dignity. Inspiration for this series came from a habit his father (like Ibrahim a devout Sufi) had of praying with his index fingers pointing outwards from his entwined hands, forming a shape that resembled the beak of the bird prevalent in El-Salahi’s dreams. The bird is a classic motif that recurs in El-Salahi’s work from the early sixties to the present, representing freedom, justice and also the artist himself.

In the late sixties El-Salahi talked of having ‘cut myself loose from all ties to any style I had embraced in the past, or to any current school in the art of the period. At the same time, I was unembarrassed about staying open to the fleeting inspiration of vision and spirit.’ It is these fleeting moments, apparent in this series and throughout his career, where visual images intermingle with visions and dreams that have inspired El-Salahi’s visual dramas and given vent to his artistic passions and emotions. In this El-Salahi shares a surrealist’s tendency to explore the unconsciousness and tap into a world of dreams and fantasies.

Earlier this year MoMA acquired El-Salahi’s Prison Notebook, one of the artist’s masterpieces and a pivotal work in the development of his creative process. The book, included in the show, has just been published in facsimile by MoMA and Sharjah Art Foundation. For six months and eight days during 1976–77, El-Salahi was unjustly jailed on political grounds and during this time of suffering and self-reflection we see the black and white works move towards an organic unfolding of dreamlike imagery, a flow of consciousness with him channeling a higher force. By necessity he could only use scraps of paper from cement bags used to wrap food and a small four-inch pencil he would hide in the sand. Only when the guards were not looking would he put them together to make the whole. This was an evolution, albeit initially forced, in the artist’s practice that has stayed with him to this day.
Many of El-Salahi’s most important works have emerged from similarly organic processes; either from a method of spatial growth where pieces of paper are added as the composition expands, or completed in notebooks where one drawing flows into the next. His latest black and white works, the *Pain Relief* series, some of which were exhibited at the Ashmolean, are created on the backs of his used medicine packets, functioning as drawings in their own right, as well as templates for larger monoprint paintings on canvas. In this way they serve to realise an impact he still wishes to achieve but cannot through physical constraint. Working from his armchair, El-Salahi says he ceases to feel his pain when immersed in making these drawings and is, instead, free in the dreamlike realm of imagination and creation.

For El-Salahi, the act of drawing in pencil, pen and ink (his preferred medium) relates to his interest in calligraphy and communication but also more importantly to the immediate, meditative and spiritual rendering of his ideas.

When asked recently what were his best works, El-Salahi said, without hesitation ‘the black and white’, and when pressed as to which one of them, he said ‘all of them’ and smiled.
By His Will,
We Teach Birds
How to Fly
1969
By His Will

1969  ink on paper  21 × 16 cm  8¼ × 6¼ in  framed: 25 × 19 cm  9¾ × 7¾ in
Do they not look at the birds, held poised
in the midst of [the air and] the sky?
Nothing holds them up but [the power of] Allah.
Verily in this are signs for those who believe.

Quran
Chapter 16
Sūrat al-ñaḥl
[The Bees]
Verse 79

Yusuf Ali

By His Will, We Teach Birds How to Fly No.4
1969   pen, ink and wash on paper   38 × 56 cm   15 × 22in framed: 41 × 59 cm   16¼ × 23¼ in
By His Will, We Teach Birds How to Fly No.1
1969 pen, ink and wash on paper 38 × 56 cm 15 × 22 in framed: 41 × 59 cm 161⁄8 × 233⁄4 in

By His Will, We Teach Birds How to Fly No.10
1969 pen, ink and wash on paper 38 × 56 cm 15 × 22 in framed: 44 × 62 cm 171⁄8 × 243⁄4 in
By His Will, We Teach Birds How to Fly No.1
1969  pen, ink and wash on paper  38 × 56 cm  15 × 22 in  framed:  41 × 59 cm  161⁄8 × 231⁄4 in

By His Will, We Teach Birds How to Fly No.3
1969  pen, ink and wash on paper  38 × 56 cm  15 × 22 in  framed:  41 × 59 cm  161⁄8 × 231⁄4 in

By His Will, We Teach Birds How to Fly No.11
1969  pen, ink and wash on paper  38 × 56 cm  15 × 22 in  framed:  41 × 59 cm  161⁄8 × 231⁄4 in
"By His Will stands as an early landmark in El-Salahi’s career, embodying his mode of work, his ideas, and the aesthetic that binds his larger œuvre. It is a testimony to El-Salahi’s earlier rigorous investigation of the best ways to move away from his academic training, and explore the creation of a new work of art, that speaks to his personal aspiration as an artist. It is also a testimony to his spirituality and passion for freedom, not only in artistic expression, but as essential to human dignity and the will to survive. This is symbolised by the ‘bird’, which has since continued to recur as a motif in El-Salahi’s work through the years, often symbolising the artist’s own conscience and alter-ego, as it features in several of his self-portraits, and masterpieces such as *The Woman, the Bird, and the Pomegranate* (1968)."

Salah Hassan
Curator, *Three Crossings*
Prince Claus Fund Gallery
Amsterdam
2018
By His Will, We Teach Birds How to Fly No.5
1969 pen, ink and wash on paper 38 × 56 cm 15 × 22¼ in  framed: 41 × 59 cm 16¼ × 23¼ in

By His Will, We Teach Birds How to Fly No.9
1969 pen, ink and wash on paper 38 × 56 cm 15 × 22¼ in  framed: 41 × 59 cm 16¼ × 23¼ in
By His Will, We Teach Birds How to Fly No.13
1969   pen, ink and wash on paper   38 × 56 cm   15 × 22\(\frac{1}{8}\) in
framed: 41 × 59 cm   16\(\frac{1}{4}\) × 23\(\frac{1}{4}\) in
Museum of Modern Art, New York
In Black and White

1950s–80s
Thoraya
1950 pencil on paper 38 × 28 cm 15 × 11 3⁄8 in framed: 41 5⁄8 × 31 cm 16 3⁄8 × 12 1⁄8 in

Abdul Aziz Mohammed Ali (Young Bank Official)
1950 pencil on paper 26 5⁄8 × 19 cm 10 3⁄8 × 7 3⁄8 in framed: 29 5⁄8 × 22 cm 11 3⁄8 × 8 3⁄8 in
There is no doubt that El-Salahi belongs to that moment in art history as much as Pablo Picasso, Wifredo Lam, Germaine Richier, Karel Appel, and others.

Elvira Dyangani Ose
Co-curator
A Visionary Modernist
Tate Modern
2013
Untitled
1957 zincographic print 22 × 18.5 cm 8 1/8 × 7 3/8 in Framed: 25.5 × 22 cm 10 1/8 × 8 3/8 in

Untitled
1959–60 work on paper 22.5 × 9.5 cm 8 1/8 × 3 3/4 in Framed: 26 × 14 cm 10 1/4 × 5 5/8 in
Untitled
1965 crayon rubbing from an etching plate on paper 57 × 30 cm  22¼ × 11¾ in  framed: 60 × 34½ cm  23¼ × 13¼ in
Recollections
1969  pen and coloured inks on paper  56 × 76 cm  22⅞ × 29⅞ in  framed: 60 × 81 cm  23⅞ × 31⅞ in
I am very much obsessed with my work. I am a painter and have no other profession. I go to bed dreaming of figures, forms, and colours and wake up to translate my visions and dreams into works of art.

Ibrahim El-Salahi

quoted in
Salah Hassan
Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist
[EXHIBITION CATALOGUE]
Museum of African Art, New York, 2012
Tate Modern, London, 2013
Sunset Boat
1972  pen and ink on paper  THREE PARTS EACH 38 × 38 cm  15 × 15 in
Untitled
1972   pen, ink and wash on paper   18 × 18 cm   7½ × 7½ in   framed: 22 × 22 cm   8½ × 8½ in

Illustration No.1 for Tayeb Salih's novel Maryud
1977   pen, ink and wash on paper   34 × 24 cm   13¼ × 9½ in   framed: 37½ × 27 cm   14½ × 10¼ in
please note
This work is currently in the collection of MoMA
and has been replaced by a facsimile for the purposes of the exhibition.

Prison Notebook
1976   pen and ink on paper   32 drawings   28.6 × 17.8 cm   11 1/4 × 7 1/8 in
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Alphabet No. 5
1988  pen and ink on paper  39 × 39 cm  15 1/4 × 15 1/4 in  framed: 71 × 71 cm  28 × 28 in
Nar Al-Magazeeb’
Illustration for Mohammed El-Mahdi El-Majzoub’s Nar Al-Magazeel
1959  pen and ink, watercolour on paper  26 × 20 cm  10% × 7% in  framed: 29.5 × 24 cm  11% × 9% in
Illustrations for Musa Elnour’s *Nas Al-Magazeeb* 1959  pen and ink, watercolour on paper

opposite: 26 × 20 cm  10 × 7 1/4 in  framed: 29 5/8 × 24 cm  11 5/8 × 9 1/2 in

above left: 26 × 15 3/4 cm  10 × 6 1/2 in  framed: 29 5/8 × 19 5/8 cm  11 5/8 × 7 5/8 in

above right: 26 × 20 cm  10 × 7 1/4 in  framed: 29 5/8 × 24 cm  11 5/8 × 9 1/2 in
Illustrations for Mohammed El-Mahdi El-Majzoub's Nar Al-Magzeeb'
1959  pen and ink, watercolour on paper

Above left: 26 × 16 cm  10 1/4 × 6 1/4 in  framed: 29 5/8 × 19 11/16 in
Above right and opposite: 26 × 20 cm  10 1/4 × 7 7/8 in  framed: 29 5/8 × 24 cm  11 1/4 × 9 1/2 in
Illustrations for Mohammed El-Mahdi El-Majzoub's Nar Al-Magzeeb
1959 pen and ink, watercolour on paper

Above and opposite: 26 × 20 cm 10⅞ × 7⅝ in framed: 29⅜ × 24 cm 11⅜ × 9⅜ in
Illustrations for Mohammed El-Mahdi El-Majzoub’s *Nar Al-Magazeeb*  
1959 pen and ink, watercolour on paper

preceding pages and opposite: 26 × 20 cm 10 1/4 × 7 7/8 in  
framed: 29 1/2 × 24 cm 11 5/8 × 9 in
Trees
It has been some time now, since I think the year 2000, that the idea came to me about this tree called Haraz... it’s a huge tree with a very, very soft pulp — and there is a legend around it. They say that the Haraz tree fought against the rain. Because during the rainy season and the flooding of the Nile, it is completely dry, with dry leaves, nothing at all... then during the drought it comes out with blooms and with fruit and everything. This is the definitive statement. Like saying, ‘I am me! I am an individual! I do not follow what everyone is doing! ... When everyone is going to be green let them be green, I am not.’

Ibrahim El-Salahi
quoted in
Salah Hassan
Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist
[exhibition catalogue]
Museum of African Art, New York, 2012
Tate Modern, London, 2013
The Tree

2002  pen and ink on watercolour paper  55 × 55 cm  21 3/8 × 21 3/8 in  framed: 110 × 110 cm  43 1/4 × 43 1/4 in
Untitled

2009 pen and ink on paper 31 × 31 cm 12¼ × 12¼ in framed: 47.5 × 47.5 cm 18¾ × 18¾ in
72

**Male Tree**
1989   pen and ink on paper  four panels each 45 × 45 cm  17 × 17 in  framed: 48 × 48 cm  18 × 18 in  installed: 96 × 96 cm  37 × 37 in

**Female Tree**
1989   pen and ink on paper  four panels each 45 × 45 cm  17 × 17 in  framed: 48 × 48 cm  18 × 18 in  installed: 96 × 96 cm  37 × 37 in

73
Untitled
1977 pen and ink on paper 34.5 × 24.4 cm 13⅝ × 9⅞ in
framed: 37.7 × 28.9 cm 14⅜ × 11⅜ in
Black and White
Notebook

2012–13
All works in this section

Pages from *Black and White Notebook, 2012–13*

2012–13  pen and ink on paper  27.5 × 18.5 cm  10⅞ × 7¼ in  framed: 31 × 22 cm  12⅞ × 8¾ in
عنقى يا طائرًا وادي المسك العربي،
عنقى يا طائرًا،
نها يا بديك النفس
من حم من الزمن
هبط عن نفسك
بكي الله في نスキル

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1961 Mbari Gallery, Ibadan
1963 Murphy Gallery, Baltimore
1964 Ashmolean Museum, Oxford
1966 Tate Gallery, London
1967 Agisymba Gallery, Berlin
1969 Museum of Modern Art, New York
1970 Trinity College, Dublin
1971 Institute du Monde Arabe, Paris
1974 Art Gallery of the National Council for Arts and Letters, Kuwait
1975 Silver Order of Knowledge, Arts and Letters, Kuwait
1976 Malmö Konsthall, Malmö
1977 Barbican Art Gallery, London
1978 National Gallery, London
1979 Sculpture Biennial, Palermo, Italy
1980 Tate Modern, London
1981 Haus der Kunst, Munich
1982 University of Tübingen, Germany
1983 MASP (Museu de Arte de São Paulo), Brazil
1985 Malmö Konsthall, Malmö
1986 Art in the Schools, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA
1987 Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
1988 Haus der Kunst, Munich
1989 Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha
1990 Modern Art Oxford
1991 House of the Country, Munich
1992 Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha
1993 House of the Country, Munich
1994 Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
1995 Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, USA
1996 Haus der Kunst, Munich
1997 Centre Pompidou, Paris
1998 Centro Cultural de la Condesa, Mexico City
1999 Sharjah Biennial, Sharjah, UAE
2000 Tate Modern, London
2001 The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
2002 Centre Pompidou, Paris
2003 Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, USA
2004 Brooklyn Museum, New York
2005 Art Institute of Chicago
2006 Museum of Modern Art, New York
2007 Musuem of Contemporary Art, Chicago; MASP (Museu de Arte de São Paulo), Brazil; Haus der Kunst, Munich
2008 Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha
2009 Haus der Kunst, Munich
2010 Museum of Islamic Art, Doha
2011 Sharjah Biennial, Sharjah, UAE
2012 Museum of Modern Art, New York
2013 Tate Modern, London
2014 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York
2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
2017 Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, USA; ICA Gallery, London
2018 Museum of Modern Art, New York; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Historias Afro-Atlanticas, MASP (Museu de Arte de São Paulo), Brazil
Treasures of Islam in Africa from Timbuktu to Zanzibar, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris
The Light and Shade of Africa, Tate Modern, London
In the Light of the New World: Art from Africa, South Square Gallery, London
The Rise of the Black African, Lisbon Biennale
The Triumph of the Human Spirit, Sharjah Biennial
The Other Side of the Coin: Art from Africa, the Islamic World, and the Atlantic (1945–Present), Sharjah Art Foundation
Paradise of the New: Art from Africa
South Square Gallery, London
Ismail Shamseddin, Modern Art Oxford, Oxford
Making and Unmaking, Camden Arts Centre, London
The Short Century, Museum Villa Stuck, Munich
Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis, Tate Modern, London
L’Arbre à l’eau, Lille
Contemporary Sudanese Art, Cardiff
Bluehause in Galway, Howard Johnson Art Museum, Cornel University, Ithaca, New York
Sharjah International Art Biennale, Sharjah, UAE
Art sans Frontieres, Maison de l’UNESCO, Salle Meri, Paris

ACQUISITIONS

Australia
The National Gallery of Victoria, Sydney
The Newcastle Art Gallery, Newcastle
France
Galeries Yvon Lambert, Paris
German
The National Gallery, Berlin

Kuwait
The National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters
Lebanon
ADFA, Beirut
Nigeria
Mihari Gallery, Ibadan
Qatar
Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha
Sudan
Department of Culture, Khartoum
UAE
Dara Art Gallery, Khartoum

UK
The British Museum, London

USA
Art Institute of Chicago
Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, NH
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
New York Metropolitan Museum, New York
New Museum
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York
The Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC

FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

2005 Honorary Doctorate of Literature (DLitt), University College, London (forthcoming)
2007 Gold Medal, Festival International des Arts Plastiques de Malèze
2008 Prince Claus Fund Award
2009 Honoraty Award, Sharjah International Arts Biennale
2010 Silver Order of Knowledge, Arts and Letters
2011 Gold Order of Knowledge, Arts and Letters
2012 Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship
2014–15 UNESCO Fine Arts Fellowship

Fellowships and awards

2001–2002 Prince Claus Fund Award
2001–2002 Malmö Konsthall, Malmö
2001–2002 Tate Modern, London
2003–2004 Haus der Kunst, Munich
2004–2005 Haus der Kunst, Munich
2005–2006 Haus der Kunst, Munich
2006–2007 Haus der Kunst, Munich
2007–2008 Haus der Kunst, Munich
2008–2009 Haus der Kunst, Munich
2009–2010 Haus der Kunst, Munich
2010–2011 Haus der Kunst, Munich
2011–2012 Haus der Kunst, Munich

BORN

5 September 1930

Omdurman, Sudan
By His Will,

We Teach Birds

How to Fly