IBRAHIM EL-SALahi
A SUDANESE ARTIST IN OXFORD
Ibrahim El-Salahi
A Sudanese Artist in Oxford

Lena Fritsch
Celebrated as a pioneer of African and Arab Modernism, Ibrahim El-Salahi (b.1930) is one of the most influential figures in Sudanese art today. His paintings and drawings combine inventive forms of calligraphy, African abstraction and a profound knowledge of European art history in a unique language. Widely exhibited and collected internationally, the artist has lived and worked in Oxford since 1998.

The Ashmolean Museum is proud to present the first solo exhibition of Ibrahim El-Salahi’s works in Oxford. Featuring a wide range of works from over 60 years, the exhibition will provide an opportunity for some of our visitors to engage with his art for the first time. It will also present a new understanding to those familiar with his practice by setting it into dialogue with ancient Sudanese objects from the Ashmolean’s collection. Works of pottery, decorated with Sudanese flora and fauna motifs, were selected together with the artist.

Our deepest gratitude goes to Ibrahim El-Salahi and Katherine El-Salahi. It has been an honour working with them, and without their support this exhibition would not have been possible. Special thanks are also due to Toby Clarke and Pia Austin-Little from Vigo Gallery, for all the help, time and energy they have dedicated to this show.

Exhibitions always depend upon the generosity of lenders and we are, as ever, greatly indebted to the institutions and individuals who have agreed to part with much treasured works from their collections. To all of them we express our deepest appreciation. The exhibition and catalogue were generously supported by Christian Levett, to whom we also extend heartfelt thanks.

This catalogue accompanies the first loan exhibition at the Ashmolean in our new temporary exhibition space in Gallery 8. It is also the first exhibition curated by Lena Fritsch, our new Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art – a post generously supported by the Andrew J. and Christine C. Hall Foundation and the Park Charitable Trust. It is a truly auspicious beginning. We can, I believe, look forward to a developing and ambitious contemporary programme that will continue to present the works of significant contemporary artists in ways that draw strength from, shed light on, suggest connections with and challenge perceptions of our great historic collections.

Alexander Sturgis
Director, Ashmolean Museum
Introduction

I'm very much obsessed with my work. I am a painter ... I go to bed dreaming of figures, forms, and colours and wake up to translate my visions and dreams into works of art.1

Ibrahim El-Salahi

Ibrahim El-Salahi is a pioneer of African and Arab Modernism and a world-renowned artist. His paintings, drawings and book illustrations draw from a vivid imagination rooted in the traditions of his homeland, which he fuses with inventive forms of calligraphy, African abstraction and a profound knowledge of European art history.

The story of the artist’s life reads like a novel. Born in Omdurman, Sudan in 1930 to a family with a long history of Islamic scholarship, El-Salahi became fascinated with calligraphy as a child. After attending the School of Design at Gordon Memorial College in Khartoum, he received a scholarship to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London between 1954 and 1957. Here he encountered European tradition, ranging from Giotto to Cézanne to Mondrian, and contemporary art, as well as historic manuscripts in the British Museum. Returning to Khartoum, he began teaching at the Painting Department at the College of Fine and Applied Art and, together with fellow painters Ahmed M. Shibrain (b. 1931) and Kamala Ibrahim Ishag (b. 1939), became a key member of the renowned ‘Khartoum School’ which actively contributed to the growth of modern art in Africa.2 El-Salahi established a new artistic vocabulary by uniting Islamic, African and European elements in a unique surreal style. From 1969 to 1972 he worked as Assistant Cultural Attaché at the Sudanese Embassy in London, following which he returned to Khartoum as Director General of Culture and then Undersecretary at the Ministry of Culture and Information.

In 1975, when Sudan was ruled by the dictator Gaafar Nimeiry, El-Salahi was falsely accused of participating in a failed anti-government coup and imprisoned in the notorious Kober prison for over six months. Sharing a cell with ten other prisoners, he secretly continued drawing on small paper scraps. Two years later El-Salahi chose to move to Qatar, where he worked in different expert roles for the Ministry of Information and Culture and then as a translator and biographer at the Diwan Amiri. Since 1998 El-Salahi has lived and worked in Oxford. His memories of
Sudan, its culture, folklore and landscape remain an important inspiration for his artistic practice.

This exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum is the first solo exhibition of Ibrahim El-Salahi’s works in Oxford. It presents early works on paper never before exhibited, as well as the distinctive multi-panel paintings for which he is best known. The project places a particular emphasis on the Tree series, which represents the artist’s interest in the abstracted motif of the tree, using it as a metaphorical link between heaven and earth, creator and created. It also features new work, such as the meditative, small-scale drawings that El-Salahi has made on envelopes and medicine packets since last summer, and his first sculptural work, The Tree, 2018. The show provides an opportunity for some visitors to engage with his art for the first time; it also presents a new understanding to those familiar with his practice by setting it into dialogue with specially selected ancient Sudanese objects from the collection of the Ashmolean Museum. Examples of ancient Sudanese pottery, ranging in date from 2250 BC to AD 350 and decorated with images of the people, plants and animals of the region, were chosen together with the artist for inclusion in the exhibition. In El-Salahi’s words, ‘the past is linked with the present.’

This illustrated book introduces works in the exhibition and themes with which El-Salahi has been concerned. A conversation between El-Salahi and myself draws attention to the artist’s voice, vividly describing his experiences and the concepts behind his work. Liam McNamara’s text provides a brief introduction to the Ashmolean’s archaeological collections from ancient Sudan, among the most significant outside Khartoum. Nazar Eltahir pays homage to El-Salahi as a member of the Sudanese community in Oxford. Federica Gigante’s illustrated artist’s chronology lists important dates in El-Salahi’s biography.

What we traditionally understood in Western Europe as the canon of twentieth-century art is intertwined with Western imperialism. It neglects artistic developments occurring beyond North America and Western Europe and it has been exported to the rest of the world. In the words of Edward Said in Culture and Imperialism, ‘most histories of European aesthetic modernism leave out the massive infusions of non-European cultures into the metropolitan heartland during the early years of this century, despite the patently important influence they had on modernist artists like Picasso, Stravinsky, and Matisse ... A huge and remarkable adjustment in perspective and understanding is required.’ This adjustment has begun: since Said wrote this text in 1993, great progress has been made in art museums and art historical scholarship. However, to understand truly the contributions by non-European artists such as El-Salahi to Modernism and to create more inclusive narratives of twentieth-century art history, much work still needs to be done. I agree with art historian and curator Salah M. Hassan that it 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.’ This exhibition at the Ashmolean views El-Salahi’s art as a major contribution to Sudanese art and to African and Arab Modernism, whilst strongly suggesting that we should also include it more prominently in the global art historical canon of the twentieth century.

From Omdurman to Oxford – El-Salahi has come a long way. His art transcends geographical as well as cultural barriers. El-Salahi’s recent solo exhibitions include a major touring retrospective, opening at the Sharjah Art Museum before travelling to the Katara Arts Center, Doha and Tate Modern, London in 2012–13. His works receive enthusiastic attention in the global art market and are included in the permanent collections and displays of a growing number of international museums, ranging from the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha to the Museum of Modern Art, New York and Tate Modern, London. However, there will be many local visitors in Oxford for whom this exhibition is the first opportunity to view El-Salahi’s work. The artist settled in Oxford in 1998 – 20 years ago. What better time and place could there be for celebrating El-Salahi’s distinctive practice and for reflecting on its role in global art history?

Lena Fritsch
Curator, Modern and Contemporary Art

NOTES
3 Ibrahim El-Salahi in conversation with the author in his home in Oxford, 2 December 2017.
The earliest work by Ibrahim El-Salahi in this exhibition is an expressive painting of an elongated face from 1957 that the artist created in his twenties, at the end of his studies at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. His most recent work is a sculpture, *The Tree*, 2018, finished just in time for this show. El-Salahi is now 87 years old; he has created works in different countries and during different phases of his rich life, extending over a period of more than 60 years. Thematically and aesthetically they are diverse, and it goes beyond the scope of this exhibition to examine all aspects of El-Salahi’s art. This project thus focuses on selected themes and concepts that have been important in his artistic practice.

**The Human and the Spiritual**

One motif that appears repeatedly in El-Salahi’s work is the human. He is shown in different forms, ranging from dynamic, full-body figures to surreal fantasy faces. The earliest example in this exhibition is *Untitled*, a work on paper from 1957. Here an abstracted, elongated face, painted in black ink on a white background, dominates the composition of the work (p.12). On the right side three snail-shaped curls seem to represent hair. The nose is long, with ornamental, snail-shaped nostrils and the mouth is wide open, displaying large teeth. The black contours of the face are complemented by yellow, blue and red brush strokes and colour drips, suggesting a rapid application of the gouache. The clear lines offer no illusion of depth, but proudly present the two-dimensional nature of the image. The complementary colours and dynamic brush strokes, the power of the face in the composition and the facial expression all create a highly charged atmosphere. The elongated shape and abstracted form of the face are reminiscent of African masks, while the two-dimensionality and the ornamental style of the nostrils and hair suggest calligraphic influences. The strong colours and dynamic gesture may recall Expressionist or Neo-Expressionist portraits.

When El-Salahi left Sudan in 1954 to study at the Slade School in London, he had already learnt to paint in a naturalistic style, using oil paint in a technically highly competent way. As Chika Okeke-Agulu has pointed out, El-Salahi had ‘already demonstrated a mastery of mimetic representation’ despite still searching for his own ‘formal style’ and ‘thematic focus.’ At the Slade he first studied traditional European
techniques and realist painting before making a deliberate shift in his final year; he then decided to focus on ideas of two-dimensional representation and abstraction, partly inspired by studies of manuscripts in the British Museum. The artist recollects the context of *Untitled*, 1957: ‘At the time, I was thinking about my personal identity and how I see things ... I wanted a sense of the two-dimensional. I think this face was supposed to be my long face.’ This ‘self-portrait’ is a key early work that visualises a turning point in El-Salahi’s approach to painting. The artist represents his own face in a unique language that links influences of abstract writing with African and European visual culture, showing that he has developed his own artistic identity.

Elongated facial shapes can be found in numerous other works of the late 1950s and 1960s, for example *They Always Appear*, 1958–60 (p.15). This small piece is part of a series of drawings and paintings with the same title. It depicts a group of faces in black ink on white ground, and is based on a vision that El-Salahi used to have in which three tall figures appeared before him. He remembers: ‘The first time I saw them was when I was with my older brother. ... The donkey saw them and I saw them. I said to my brother that we couldn’t move because of the three figures in front of us – I saw their silhouettes, but he couldn’t see them.’ The faces in *They Always Appear* are inspired by human ones, but their elongation also conveys a dream-like atmosphere. The artist has referred to the elongated facial shapes in his work in different ways, comparing them to animals, humans, or ‘humans’ animal souls’, to Nubians, to Sudanese women who cover their faces, to donkeys and also to his own long face. Such observations show that El-Salahi finds inspiration in the people, animals and works of art that he sees and lives with. However, these inspirations are only starting points. The figures in his works come into existence through an intuitive artistic process; they relate to the artist’s inner self rather than to the outside world.

The motif of the human, and human-like, has continued to play an important role in El-Salahi’s work. This is apparent in both his large paintings and drawings, such as *Meditation Tree*, 2008 (p.37), and in small works on paper, including the most recent *Pain Relief Drawings*, 2017–18 (pp.144–47). Deeply colourful paintings, such as *Untitled*, 1976, *Untitled, 1999* or *Head of the Undersecretary*, 2000, complement black and white diary drawings to present a surreal language that draws attention to the inner mind (pp.17–20). The faces suggest a spiritual dimension: in El-Salahi’s art, human existence is linked to a world of dreams and meditations.
Untitled, 1976
Watercolour on newspaper, 37.1 × 26.4 cm
Private Collection

Untitled, 1976
Coloured ink on watercolour paper, 38 × 33 cm
Collection of the artist
Untitled, 1999
Pen and ink on watercolour paper, 32 × 24 cm
Vigo Gallery

23/3/1999, 1999
Coloured inks on watercolour paper, 24 × 32 cm
Vigo Gallery
When El-Salahi returned to Sudan in 1957, he was disappointed that the works he had created in London were of little interest to the Sudanese public. His exhibitions were not well attended. Instead he began travelling the country, examining works of calligraphy and folklore, seeking to understand what people appreciated visually.

Calligraphy became a key element to connect his art to the Sudanese audience and had a great impact on El-Salahi’s artistic development. He began to abstract calligraphic texts, breaking up Arabic letters into dynamic figural forms. *Untitled, 1965* is a work on paper that presents a lively abstract composition of calligraphy-inspired shapes, drawn in dark ink and pastel on a beige background (p.22). It oscillates between an ornamental pattern and an abstract map or desert landscape. The artist has linked the work directly to the Sudanese landscape, comparing it to ‘a sandstorm, or when the locusts swarm. Or like a group of birds flying, creating a certain pattern in the sky ... It is about nature in Sudan.’ The work exemplifies how El-Salahi explored Sudanese tradition and nature to develop a new pictorial language.

The reference to Sudan can also be found in El-Salahi’s use of Islamic motifs and images of regional flora and fauna, as well as in the colours themselves. *No Shade but his Shade, 1968* (p.23) is a good example. The work presents an abstracted, close-up portrait of a man in the left foreground of the work; a bird sits on his head and pecks about in his hair. In the background a large building is visible. The bird has been a recurring motif in El-Salahi’s work since the 1950s, representing nature and symbolising freedom. As the artist has explained, the bird is also linked to Sudanese identity: ‘the bird represents a sense of freedom. I’m thinking of the people and their nomadic lives – they reject authority and they are all by themselves.’ Combining burnt sienna and warm brown tones with black and white, the painting conveys a warm atmosphere linked with the country’s landscape and heat. I agree with El-Salahi, who has described the impact of these rich tones: ‘You can almost smell the air and the dust in it. It’s the colour of the savanna, the desert.’ The earthy colours resemble those in other works from the same year such as *Fatima, 1968* or *Allah and the Wall of Confrontation, 1968*. El-Salahi sought to use a colour scheme that ‘reflects the country’s actual colours.’ *No Shade but his Shade* is a spiritual work about the Day of Judgement and the artist’s religious faith, but it also represents his conscious attempt to create a distinct Sudanese aesthetic.
*Untitled, 1965*
Coloured ink and pastel on paper, 46 × 61 cm
Private Collection

*No Shade but his Shade, 1968*
Oil on canvas, 77 × 77 cm
Collection of the artist
THE TREE: NATURE AND MEDITATION

The tree is trying to fight, trying to assert itself: ‘Here I am, I am not a camp follower. I am myself.’

The tree has been a major motif in El-Salahi’s work, appearing in a large variety of visual forms. The Tree works range from surreal, biomorphic drawings and colourful figurative works on paper (pp.26–27, p.30) to images recalling the linear and calligraphic style used by El-Salahi in other works since the 1960s (pp.28–29) to highly abstract, minimal paintings in large size, sometimes composed of multiple panels (pp.33–36).

El-Salahi’s statement above refers to his interest in the helcy tree, an acacia indigenous to Sudan that grows in the Nile valley. The artist became interested in the tree when seeking to understand the Sudanese identity and nomadic nature. The helcy has become a symbol of the Sudanese and their resilience. It is leafless and bare during the rainy season when everything around is green. However, during the dry season it is the only plant that blossoms. The helcy remains steadfast during the seasons, silently watching over the passage of time. Since living in Oxford, El-Salahi has also become fascinated with the aesthetic of the local willow trees and the reflection of their images in the water.

The Tree, 2008 is a large work that consists of seven equally sized panels, presented close together: one panel at the top, two panels below, followed by three below, and a single panel at the bottom (p.36). The composition recreates the shape of a tree in an abstract form. The top panel features a geometric, triangular-shaped image of a white tree, set on a contrasting, bright red background. The tree is composed of white circles with small green parts in between. The other panels form a symmetrical, geometric composition of red, green, blue and white colour fields, divided by a clear line in the centre. This line comes into existence through the tree trunk of the top image, the line where the side borders of the canvasses meet and a green line painted on the bottom canvas. Despite the ‘clean’ geometric forms, small, uneven details linked to the artist’s hand convey a natural feeling. The equal repetition of circles and lines, together with the balanced composition, create an impression of timeless harmony.

The Tree presents the viewer with the core idea of a tree and its significance. It represents and at the same time goes beyond nature, conveying a sense of beauty that evokes philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel’s concept of an ideal and pure beauty of art (‘das Kunstschöne’), developing freely out of the human spirit. This painting, together with the series of Oxford Trees (pp.33–35) typifies El-Salahi’s most abstract and minimal works. Like some of Piet Mondrian’s masterpieces, they convey a harmonious aesthetic, suggesting a perfection that is based in nature and yet transcends this world.

El-Salahi began to create composite images after he was falsely accused of participating in a failed anti-government coup. The artist was imprisoned for six months between 1975 and 1976 in Khartoum, in a jail where inmates discovered writing or drawing on paper were punished with solitary confinement. El-Salahi secretly created small drawings on slips of paper, hiding them in the sand. From this came his idea of the natural growth of pictures that has informed his art. He begins his multi-panel works with the ‘nucleus’, the core of the piece from which the rest gradually grows into different directions, covering additional panels on the sides, top or bottom. Often the artist does not know how the nucleus will develop when he begins the artistic process. Each panel is an individual image and yet, at the same time, part of a whole.

Art historian Sarah Adams has linked the philosophy of these composite works to the artist’s idea of prayer ‘as a way to return the particle to the whole, to unite himself, his body, with his creator and thus a greater whole.’ The intertwined relationship between the particle and the whole, the micro and the macro, and the wish to unify these are universal concepts of different philosophies and world religions. El-Salahi’s Tree and his Oxford Trees are harmonious works that use an abstract, universal language to explore nature, beauty, perfection and spirituality.

As Salah M. Hassan has noted, the Trees series has demonstrated not only El-Salahi’s ‘resilience and productivity’: it also reveals the artist’s ‘ability to reinvent himself while remaining on the forefront of exploration and creativity.’
**Untitled, 1976**  
Pen and ink, watercolour on paper, 26 × 19 cm  
Private Collection

**Untitled – Yellow Tree, 1977**  
Ink and wash on paper, 40.3 × 51.1 cm  
Modern Forms
The Tree, 1999
Ink and wash on paper, 29 × 16.3 cm
Collection of the artist

The Tree, 2000
India ink and coloured ink on Bristol board, 21 × 21 cm
Vigo Gallery
Oxford Tree, 2001
Coloured ink on watercolour paper, 34 × 34 cm
Private Collection, London

The Tree, 2002
Pen and ink on watercolour paper, 101 × 101 cm
Vigo Gallery
The Tree, 2003
Coloured ink on watercolour paper, 101 × 101 cm
Private Collection

Oxford Tree, 2001
Pen, ink and coloured ink on Bristol board, 111 × 95 cm
Modern Forms
Oxford Tree, 2003
Pen and ink on Bristol board, 121 x 95 cm
Modern Forms

Oxford Tree, 2001
Pen and ink on Bristol board, 121 x 95 cm
Modern Forms
Meditation Tree, 2008
Indian ink on paper, 36.8 × 111.3 cm
Pizzuti Collection
Flamenco Dancers, 2012 (p.39, p.70) is a large-sized oil painting consisting of six panels. It shows a vivid composition of biomorphic forms, pillar-like elements and dynamic, abstracted human figures in different shades of warm brown on a white background. A small figure in the lower middle of the composition – painted first, according to the artist – and a large figure on the right side wrap their arms around their heads, stretching their bodies energetically. The painting is dominated by curved lines and circular shapes, conveying a natural and feminine impression; it recalls dancing movements while also reflecting the influence of Islamic decorative patterns.

The composition of the work is intriguing. Its brown figures and pillar-like forms are juxtaposed with the white background through clear dark contours; different shades of brown create a sense of volume. The panels on the lower half are dominated by a large number of figures and abstract shapes, in contrast to the upper half which features more white background. This creates a dynamic impression of growth, reflecting the artist’s statement that he leaves it to the ‘nucleus’ of the painting to grow naturally. The upwards movement is emphasised by the fact that many of the forms are confined by the canvas. The dancing figure on the right seems to rise up, as does a biomorphic form in the middle, reaching outside the canvas. The viewer becomes part of the fantastical work, continuing the image in his or her mind.

Flamenco Dancers belongs to a series of paintings and drawings that the artist created after a visit to Andalusia in 2009. He was one of three artists invited to spend time in the region by the art collector Abdul Magid Breish. The group visited Cordoba, Granada, Malaga, Marbella and Toledo, observing the architecture, landscape and culture. In the evenings they dined in restaurants and attended flamenco performances. El-Salahi drew much inspiration from the Moorish influences across the region. He was particularly fascinated with the medieval Alhambra palace in Granada and the art of the flamenco dance. The artist recollects: ‘Every night we went to see the flamenco dance. I liked the music that the dancers create with their feet.’

The Arabic name Al-Hamrā (literally ‘the red one’) refers to the natural red of the sun-dried bricks from which the fortress walls were built. Reminiscent of the colours of Sudan as well as the Alhambra, El-Salahi used earthy reds and warm shades of brown in many of the paintings. Flamenco Dancers, 2012 is a vivid celebration of the artist’s memories and dreams of Andalusia, evoking its warm colours, decorative patterns and vibrant flamenco. El-Salahi’s works are often concerned with socio-political or spiritual themes. Flamenco Dancers is representative of another important (and often overlooked) aspect of his oeuvre: it celebrates life, nature and beauty.
DIARIES AND PAIN RELIEF MEDITATION

I’m in the habit of jotting down every experience I go through. It is my response to what is happening around me: to things I understand – or even things I don’t understand.

As El-Salahi’s statement above corroborates, autobiographical drawing – oscillating between personal history, memory and fantastical allegory – has been a major part of his practice. This exhibition features two recent notebooks, Diary 2, 2012–13, from which a small selection of images is framed and displayed on the wall, and Diary 3, 2012–13, shown in its original notebook form, in a vitrine. In addition recent small drawings on medicine packets and envelopes, created by the artist since summer 2017, are exhibited here for the first time.

A large number of diary images, mostly drawn in black and white, feature abstracted and abstract calligraphy. One striking example presents two letter-like vertical forms, elegantly drawn in approximately three brush strokes. The resulting composition is reminiscent of a face from the side (p.43). Through delicate minimal strokes, the profile features a long nose, alert eyes and a slim chin. This drawing shows how El-Salahi continues to challenge ideas of abstraction and the relationship of written word and image: using a visual language based on calligraphic Arabic writing, he links the abstract word back to the figurative image. Other motifs in the diaries include the artist’s distinctive elongated faces, abstracted trees and plant shapes, ornamental patterns and biomorphic compositions. The styles of the drawings range from elegantly retained calligraphic patterns to elaborate compositions, brought into existence through a large number of small geometrical forms executed with meticulous attention to detail.

Among the predecessors to these diary notebooks is El-Salahi’s Prison Notebook, 1976, acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2017. It powerfully visualises the artist’s memories when he was imprisoned, drawing in secret on small paper scraps. El-Salahi explains why he had to make this notebook: ‘When I came out of jail, I had to write things down and draw them so I didn’t forget, hoping that other people would also get some sort of benefit from it.’ The images in the Prison Notebook often include Arabic writings as part of the visual composition. They are executed in El-Salahi’s particular style of calligraphy, linking classical Arabic with vernacular styles that he learned in Qur’anic school, reflecting his fascination with the aesthetics and rhythm of calligraphy. Salah M. Hassan has emphasised the power inherent in these drawings: ‘they miraculously turn an overwhelming sense of the prisoners’ suffering into a courageous form of agency and empowerment ... opening a space for honourable toil for social justice.’

When El-Salahi lived in exile in Qatar, he continued to draw about his experiences in notebooks, mostly in black and white. In 2011 El-Salahi created another notebook concerned with political events. Arab Spring Notebook responded to the protests in the Arab world that El-Salahi watched on television in his Oxford home. The artist has described his hope for change when seeing the revolutionary wave that began with demonstrations in Tunisia and quickly spread to other countries in North Africa, including Sudan, and the Middle East. The revolution ended in violence from authorities and demonstrators; in El-Salahi’s disappointed words, ‘it amounted to nothing.’ The Arab Spring Notebook, composed of 46 ink drawings, visualises the emotions and meanings of these events to El-Salahi, hoping for justice. The work is now part of the Modern Forms Collection. Modern Forms director and art critic Nick Hackworth has highlighted how the diary works are intertwined with the artist’s life: ‘Like life itself, the diary does not distinguish between the modest and the fantastical, the solemn and the whimsical, the beautiful and the ugly. It is through his compassionate equanimity that El-Salahi aestheticizes the chaos of modern existence.’

Suffering from physical pain, the artist began to create a new and ongoing series of small-sized works in summer 2017. These Pain Relief Drawings are mostly in black and white, but sometimes also in blue and red, on very small medicine packets and envelopes. They link with El-Salahi’s diaristic practice and feature similar motifs, patterns and biomorphic forms. The series includes abstracted scenes that reflect sociopolitical incidents and world news that concerned the artist when he created the work. For example, one small drawing features a conglomeration of countless stick figures in an ornamental composition arranged on five different levels. On second glance the drawing presents the viewer with boats and staircase-like structures that recall and symbolically reference the images of refugees arriving in crowded boats in Europe (p.45). A striking new aspect of this series is the use of deliberately mundane material such as old medicine packets and envelopes. Also interesting is the new inclusion of found imagery, text and structures. Envelope drawings incorporate the name of the sender (p.46) or a transparent window (p.47) into the artistic composition; debossed structures of medicine packets become part of an artwork’s pattern (p.44). Images from the artist’s own experience or seen on television, as well as everyday forms and materials, are inextricably intertwined and transformed into art.

El-Salahi has emphasised how the concentrated creative process is a major part of the work. Focusing on small drawings, he is able to forget the
pain. The artist has compared the act of creating the *Pain Relief Drawings* to a form of meditation: ‘to concentrate on it is like a form of meditation; I don’t feel the pain at all. It is a kind of medicine itself.’ The artistic medium of medicine packets and the creative process of drawing are linked tautologically. The drawings also exemplify the spiritual background of El-Salahi’s work: to the Muslim artist, the process of creating a painting or drawing is intertwined with his faith. Art historian Sarah Adam has interpreted prayer as ‘essential’ to El-Salahi’s creative process because the artist’s work ‘does not originate with him, it goes through him.’

Comparable to the act of praying or meditating, drawing becomes a ritual that helps to relieve pain while establishing and maintaining the artist’s connection to Allah.

While featuring new materials and found images for the first time, the diary and *Pain Relief Drawings* also echo many elements that have characterised El-Salahi’s larger drawings and paintings over the last 60 years: the abstracted and abstract calligraphic patterns from the 1960s ‘Khartoum School’ years, the elongated faces and dynamic human figures, the metaphorical tree, the concept of the intuitive growth of pictures and the meditative focus on the inner mind. Small drawings on paper, the diary and pain relief works are powerful examples of El-Salahi’s mature practice. El-Salahi has described ‘each little one’ as ‘a nucleus’ and ‘a seed’ that he hopes to be able to work on more and develop further, ‘to its full potential.’ The options for growth seem endless: for the artist, ‘the sky is the limit.’ The same potential is within the human being. In understanding beauty, creating beauty and appreciating beauty, we find ourselves.’ Such conviction is a powerful testimony to the unique and timeless beauty of Ibrahim El-Salahi’s work.

NOTES

2 If not referenced otherwise, all quotations by the artist are from ‘In Conversation with Ibrahim El-Salahi’, ed. Lena Fritsch. Published in this book, pp.49–57.
Pain Relief Drawings, 2017–2018
Pen and ink on paper, 17 × 9 cm
Vigo Gallery

Pain Relief Drawings, 2017–2018
Pen and ink on paper, 13.6 × 6.2 cm
Vigo Gallery

Pain Relief Drawings, 2017–2018
Pen and ink on paper, 18.2 × 9.8 cm
Vigo Gallery

Pain Relief Drawings, 2017–2018
Pen and ink on paper, 16.9 × 10.8 cm
Vigo Gallery

Pain Relief Drawings, 2017–2018
Pen and ink on paper, 13 × 9.3 cm
Vigo Gallery
Pain Relief Drawings, 2017–2018
Pen and ink on paper, 15.5 × 10.5 cm
Vigo Gallery

Pain Relief Drawings, 2017–2018
Pen and ink on paper, 16.3 × 24 cm
Vigo Gallery

Pain Relief Drawings, 2017–2018
Pen and ink on paper, 16.3 × 9.2 cm
Vigo Gallery

Pain Relief Drawings, 2017–2018
Pen and ink on paper, 11.3 × 11.5 cm
Vigo Gallery

Pain Relief Drawings, 2017–2018
Pen and ink on paper, 12.2 × 12 cm
Vigo Gallery
In Conversation with Ibrahim El-Salahi

This conversation took place in Ibrahim El-Salahi’s home in Oxford on 8 February 2018.

Lena Fritsch: Let’s start at the very beginning. You were born in Omdurman in 1930 to a family with a long history of Islamic scholarship. What are your earliest memories about calligraphy and art in Sudan?

Ibrahim El-Salahi: My father was a teacher at the Omdurman Institute of Religious Studies and I was brought up religiously. He also taught at a khalwa, a Qur’anic school for children, right by our house. I was born into calligraphy. From a young age, when I was two years old, I was sent to the Qur’anic school to learn how to read and write, joining the other children. My father had very nice handwriting. I learned the discipline early on, as far as creating works of art is concerned.

Do you remember when you decided to become an artist?

This came very late. When I was in high school I was still keen on studying medicine. But I was not feeling well and had backache, which kept me from doing any sports and joining the other students in their activities. I was always keen on drawing. I had an art teacher: a Welsh painter called Mr Davis. He cared about my work and helped me a great deal. After graduating from high school I joined the School of Design at Gordon Memorial College in Khartoum. When I was at art college I realised that this was my direction in life, and gave up on the idea of studying medicine.

It is very good for us that you made that decision!

Thank you [laughs].

You received a scholarship to study at the Slade School of Fine Art between 1954 and 1957. It must have been a big change for you to move to London and study here. How do you remember these years and were you interested in any artists or works of art in particular?

I was interested in all art movements, from art history to modern times, to the present. I remember that I was excited to come to England, to learn about the British, the Christians, about people, about a different culture. I was keen on trying to learn more about how people live, what kind of houses they have and so on. I arrived in the autumn: I remember the grey
skies, the trees shedding their leaves, people being very active and moving about, faces. I was very excited about what I saw. I remember seeing the red rooftops when the plane landed at Blackbushe Airport. I also remember a feeling of excitement about art. I wanted to find out more about classic art and went to the British Museum to see the ancient Greek marbles and Egyptian works. I went to all kinds of exhibitions, museums and galleries in London. When I started at the Slade the work of Cézanne was in fashion, and us students were all excited about it. But I was not affected by a single artist in particular. I was trying to learn more about picture making, and all the tutorials I had at the Slade were interesting to me. I kept observing the world and translating it into painting. In general it was an exciting time.

*Your earliest work that we show in this exhibition at the Ashmolean is from 1957 (p.12): an untitled work on paper with an abstracted, elongated face. It’s expressive and I like it very much. It recalls a language that links with traditional African imagery, for example masks. Do you remember how this work came about?*

Yes, I was still in the UK. At the time I was thinking about my personal identity and how I see things – and how I am affected by what I see. I was in England for three years and didn’t go back to Sudan once. When I made this work, I felt relaxed. At the beginning I was keen on drawing and painting in a traditional way. But then I started seeing things differently and wanted to do them in a more relaxed way. During my last year in the UK I started changing, moving away from realist painting. I gave up the third dimension and started focusing on the two-dimensional, while still thinking about perspective. I gave up the third dimension because I found that it is an illusion which is not what I wanted. I wanted a sense of the two-dimensional. I think this face was supposed to be my long face.

*In another early work we see a group of figures with elongated faces: They Always Appear, 1958–60 (p.15). I remember that this work is linked to a vision that you used to have, seeing three tall figures appearing before you. Could you tell me more about this?*

I remember these three figures – it started when I was a very young boy. The first time I saw them was when I was with my older brother. We went to a dinner party and I stayed outside the house, with the donkey. When my brother came back, the donkey suddenly stopped and couldn’t move. I looked around and saw these three large figures: one was very tall, one was medium height and one was rather short. They were silent. The donkey saw them and I saw them. I said to my brother that we couldn’t move because of the three figures in front of us – I saw their silhouettes, but he couldn’t see them.

I made this drawing, They Always Appear, after I returned to Sudan. I had held an exhibition, which was very well attended on the day of the opening. But afterwards no visitors came. This happened repeatedly: I had other exhibitions, but people didn’t come. I exhibited the works that I had made when I was at the Slade. I was disappointed and shocked: why didn’t they appreciate what I did, which I was so keen on and enjoyed very much indeed? I tried to find out why people didn’t appreciate my work. I found out that calligraphy is the most important element in the Nile valley culture and started to make simple drawings and prints. There was a printing press at the art college. And these figures always came to me – that’s why I called this work They Always Appear. They came many times.

People often link these faces to African masks, but in my mind they refer to Nubians. The faces relate to animals, donkeys and so on – and they are like my own face because my face was long. They are also inspired by women who cover their faces and show only their eyes.

*Another work that I would be curious to hear more about is from 1968: No Shade but His Shade (p.23). I see the earthy colours as a link to the landscape; even if I didn’t know the title, it would convey an impression of heat and dryness. Were you aiming to create an aesthetic that links to the Sudanese landscape and culture?*

Yes, very much: the heat and the dust and the sandstorms. It shows the impression I have of my own country, for example with the houses in the background. The subject of this work is a religious subject: it is about the Day of Judgement. But with the colours I was trying very hard to create something that appealed to the Sudanese public. You can almost smell the air and the dust in it. It’s the colour of the savanna, the desert. Apart from the Nile, there is not much green in Sudan. I was trying to create a work that reflects the country’s actual colours. I was keen to link with people because I don’t think an artist should live in isolation from his audience. I tried to use what they appreciate: calligraphy, decorative patterns, a dark brown – which is burnt sienna – and black. I just tried to be as close as possible to nature, and to the people I live with and love.

*The painting also includes a motif that appears in many of your works: the bird. To me the bird represents a sense of freedom. I’m thinking of the people and their nomadic lives – they reject authority and they are all by themselves.*
In this exhibition we present your works together with a small selection of ancient Sudanese objects from the Ashmolean's collection. You previously said that in the 1960s you looked at objects in people's homes in Sudan, their decorative patterns and folklore. You also mentioned that you were trying to create something that is close to the people around you. How would you say traditional Sudanese folklore and culture has influenced your work?

As a result of the shock that I experienced when I had my first one-man show and people didn't come, I tried to find out what people appreciate visually. I travelled around the country as much as possible to find out what they had in their homes. I found calligraphy and Sudanese decorative patterns. That's why I began to use calligraphy and Arabic words in my work: words from poetry and the Qur'an, and sayings that people were familiar with.

The decorative patterns that I found had been preserved by local craftsmen, on goods made of leather and wood. What I found was of great value to me. It was something that had been there all the time, but I had never realised its true value aesthetically. I remember the decorative patterns on the wooden tablets with Arabic calligraphy from when I was a child in Qur'an school. We have something called the sharafic decorations, honouring the Qur'an. It was as if I discovered them for the first time although I had been seeing them all my life. This had a great impact on me.

When you move to a different country and then come back to your home country, you often see things that you didn't notice before.

Yes, as if you have never seen them before – which is quite exciting! I began to add a few Arabic words to my paintings of landscapes and compositions. Then I added even more, including things that don't mean anything at all as they are almost abstract. There came a period when I had to break down the shape of calligraphy itself. Something happened to me which was quite exciting: it was as if Pandora's box had opened. This took me back to the origin of calligraphy: the plant form, the animal form, sounds, visions. It developed into a pictorial language. Sometimes people think that it is unnecessary to go back and find the origin of things. But to me it was exciting to do this. My work keeps changing all the time – because I keep my mind open.

This links nicely to my next question because this work on paper from 1965 (p.22) shows what you just talked about: the influence of calligraphy and nature, and how you developed these into a unique abstract language. Do you remember how this work came about? To me it looks like a somewhat abstract landscape.

To me this looks like a sandstorm, or when the locusts swarm. Or like a group of birds flying, creating a certain pattern in the sky... It is about nature in Sudan.

We exhibit this work in our gallery of ancient Sudanese art, with objects that feature birds and other motifs of the landscape.

It fits in well.

You have drawn and written about your memories, visions and experiences in diaries and notebooks, ranging from the Prison Notebook, 1976 to more recent diaries such as Diary 2 and Diary 3 from 2012 and 2013 that we are including in our exhibition. What do these notebooks and diaries mean to you?

Generally speaking, I'm in the habit of jotting down every experience I go through. It is my response to what is happening around me: to things I understand – or even things I don't understand.

When I came out of jail I had to write things down and draw them so I didn't forget, hoping that other people would also get some sort of benefit from it. This first diary is the Prison Notebook. Another notebook, the Arab Spring Notebook, was made in 2011 during the demonstrations in the Arab world. I wasn't feeling well at the time and was mostly in bed. I couldn't go to the studio to paint at all, and therefore started drawing into a small notebook. I saw something that at the beginning was quite exciting and full of hope. But unfortunately it amounted to nothing. I also drew in notebooks when I was in Qatar. I had been given a job as a translator, in the archive section of the palace in Doha. After sending my texts to the typist, while waiting to receive them back to proofread, I was always quite bored. To relieve myself from this boredom I used to make a large number of drawings.

It is a habit that I have: I like recording things. Most recently I have been suffering from different pain and have had to take medicine. Some of it works, some doesn't. I have been taking painkillers and created drawings on painkiller packets.

They are such beautiful small drawings.

I have done masses of them because I have realised that while I'm working and concentrating I don't feel the pain – whereas painkillers didn't help me at all. It is a series that I could make while sitting in my bedroom or...
in a comfortable chair, trying to find a position that is less painful. And I carry on.

You have previously described these works as ‘pain relief’ meditations. Is the process of concentrated drawing like a form of meditation to you?

Yes. An artwork may mean nothing in itself, but the act of creating it, of concentrating on it, is like a form of meditation; I don’t feel the pain at all. It is a kind of medicine itself. Therefore I use the medicine packaging. I open it and cut out the parts that are unnecessary. When I start work, I don’t have any idea in my mind at all. I just have a black pen or a colour pen, and then I start drawing. Whatever comes, comes.

What I like in particular about these works is that your compositions make use of what is already there – for example the name of the sender, Barclays, on an envelope (p.46) or little dots on the medicine packaging (p.44).

I try to recycle the packets or the envelopes that come from the bank or tax office [laughs]. Whatever there is, I build on it.

This inclusion of a found image or text is a new aspect in your work.

Yes, it is new. But it is also linked to an idea that I had a long time ago, when I was in jail and had no supply of materials. We were not allowed to draw or write because prisoners used to send messages to each other and to the outside. If you were found with a paper and pen, you were kept in solitary confinement for two weeks. It was a terrible situation. I used small pieces of paper bags that my family brought me food in – because the food in jail was so terrible. That gave me the idea of the organic growth of a picture, starting from something like a nucleus and then building on it. It is almost like a seed that you plant into the earth and feed. It grows. That’s why I started to create my grouped works: they grow from a nucleus and build on a larger image. And it works.

One of your series that includes a number of such multiple panel works is concerned with the tree. As an inspiration you have referred to the haraz tree, an acacia that grows on the banks of the Nile. It is a theme that you have worked on for many years: in figurative styles, in calligraphic ways and also in abstract forms. Why is the tree so important to you?

This brings me back to the beginning, when I had returned to Sudan and people didn’t appreciate my visual contributions. I was trying to understand the Sudanese and their character. I wanted to find out more about their identity and nomadic nature. What they do appreciate and what they do not. I was trying to put their identity in a plastic form. What constitutes the Sudanese nature, as far as aesthetics are concerned? I found that there is a tree – a very obstinate tree, just like the Sudanese. This tree is a legend: the haraz tree fought against the rain. It grows on the banks of the Nile and during the rainy season, when the river floods, it is completely dry. It sheds its leaves. But during the dry season it is in blossom. It is contrary to nature and to other trees. I thought about this when I was trying to understand the Sudanese and their nature, in the dry savanna desert. The tree is trying to fight, trying to assert itself: ‘Here I am, I am not a camp follower. I am myself.’

So I started making different trees. I remember that I saw myself as a tree. I have made well over 60 different forms of trees. I find the tree within myself and outside of myself. It keeps changing continuously: as I am changing, as people are changing, as the world is changing. Therefore, they sometimes look like real trees, or they grow into something half-abstract, or something completely abstract. These trees are about life itself: every day is different.

Your trees always change and in this exhibition we show your first sculptural work, The Tree, 2018 (p.37). Could you tell me more about the idea of creating a tree sculpture?

It started from a work in which this tree motif is included. I was interested in the interplay between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional. To me, there is no difference at all between the two. One of them has naturally been given its form and mass, which you refer to as a sculpture. And a drawing or painting we think of as two-dimensional. I was quite excited about the idea of having a three-dimensional tree which refers to the haraz tree.

This particular tree is based on a work on paper that is titled Meditation Tree, 2008 (p.37). Could you tell me more about the link between your art and meditation?

I think that artworks take the person to a point where a window is opened. The frame of a picture becomes like a windowsill: for a minute it opens a gap. If you catch that moment when the window is open, you start to meditate.

For a period of almost seventeen years, I used to work only in black and white. I was in Qatar. Nobody knew that I was a painter, and it gave me great relief to concentrate and experiment. I worked in black and white, trying to find the gap in between, a grey tone. Meditation is to know oneself, to understand one’s own identity.
The largest work in this exhibition is your Flamenco Dancers painting that you made in 2012, after a visit to Andalusia (p.39). It is a very dynamic work, inspired by the Alhambra and the art of the flamenco dance. Could you tell me more about your interest in the Moorish culture in Andalusia and the flamenco?

We were invited to visit Andalusia for eleven days, visiting the Islamic culture and the Moorish relics. It was exciting to have this chance to look at things from within. 'Alhambra' in Arabic refers to the red bricks, and it reminded me of the colour of the desert.

The colours in the painting do look like in some of your works that relate to the landscape in Sudan.

Yes, very much so – it's the same kind of colour scheme as in *No Shade but his Shade*.

The idea was to see Andalusia in general. We visited Toledo, Granada and other lovely places. Every night we went to see the flamenco dance. I liked the music that the dancers create with their feet.

*Flamenco Dancers* is also a multi-panel work. Which of the panels did you begin with – which is the nucleus? When you begin working, do you know how the work will develop?

Let me see – I think I started here, in the middle right [pointing on the second panel from the lower right]. This figure is the nucleus. I leave it to the nucleus to grow. I'm one of those people who talks to the work, and the work talks back to me. It tells me exactly what needs to be added, what needs to be taken off and what needs to be worked over. Many times I have thought that a semi-finished work is finished, and it gets acquired. But then in my mind the picture calls to me and says, 'that thing needs growth; it is not finished yet.'

That might be a bit difficult if the work is already in someone's collection!

I laugh. Well, we'll see how things go.

What is art to you, and what do you like best about creating art?

Art to me is an element of relief from down to earth things: it offers us a wider scope, widening our horizons, expanding and bettering the human being. Art has knowledge and beauty within itself which we can see grow. Through meditation we begin to understand. Through art we find our real self, with no limits. As the Americans say, 'the sky is the limit.' The same potential is within the human being. In understanding beauty, creating and appreciating beauty, we find ourselves. I find enrichment.

I like asking this same question to different artists, and it is always interesting to receive very different answers...

I find that meditation is most important – you start to check on yourself and see if you can understand yourself. And it is most difficult. When you start to meditate, you struggle with yourself, trying to see where you have gone right or gone wrong. You try to improve your vision by expanding your horizon, by making it wide enough to cater for the human being, for the whole universe. We live and learn. We live and learn.

*Thank you so much Ibrahim.*

You are welcome.

Notes

1 Blackbushe Airport in Hampshire was first used for civilian flights in 1945. It became a diversion airport for London Heathrow, and was used for numerous flights from and to Africa in the 1950s. It closed in 1960 due to the newly built Gatwick Airport and the growth of Heathrow Airport.

2 Nubians are an ethnolinguistic group indigenous to present-day Sudan and South Egypt. They originate from the early inhabitants of the central Nile valley and have an ancient history predating dynastic Egypt. Nubia is also a term used by Egyptologists to describe the region of northern Sudan from the confluence of the Blue and White Niles to the First Cataract at Aswan in Egypt.

3 In 1975, when Sudan was ruled by the dictator Gaafar Nimeiry, El-Salahi was falsely accused of participating in a failed anti-government coup. He was imprisoned in the notorious Kober prison for over six months. Here he secretly continued drawing on small paper scraps.
Ancient Sudan in the Ashmolean Museum

Sudan is the largest country in Africa. For thousands of years it has provided a bridge between the sub-Saharan region and the Mediterranean world. Central to its pivotal position is the longest river in the world: the Nile. Emerging from separate sources in equatorial East Africa and Ethiopia, the White and Blue Niles converge near Sudan’s capital city, Khartoum. From here the river flows northwards over six groups of cataracts (shallow stretches where boulders and stones on the riverbed make the channel impassable) before entering Lake Nasser at the modern border with Egypt.

In ancient times the annual inundation of the Nile deposited fertile silt along the river’s banks, enabling humans to flourish in settlements built close to the cultivable land that emerged when the flood waters receded. Many of the cultures that developed in ancient Sudan are identical to, or closely connected with, those known from ancient Egypt, and thus Sudan has often been unfairly overshadowed by its neighbour to the north. However, international awareness of the country’s extraordinarily rich and diverse cultural heritage has been raised by archaeological investigations conducted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – often in response to rescue situations connected with the expansion of agricultural land and settlements, the construction of roads and the building of dams. All serve to reflect Sudan’s status as one of the most rapidly developing countries on the African continent.

The Ashmolean Museum’s collections from ancient Sudan are among the most significant anywhere in the world outside the National Museum in Khartoum. The objects derive mainly from excavations conducted during the first half of the twentieth century in Nubia – a term used by Egyptologists to describe the region of northern Sudan from the confluence of the Blue and White Niles to the First Cataract at Aswan in Egypt. Interest in the history and archaeology of northern Sudan (‘Lower Nubia’) was fostered by the building of the Aswan Dam in 1898–1902 and the High Dam in 1960–71, which resulted in the flooding of much of the region. Major rescue campaigns of archaeological survey and excavation were conducted in 1907–8, 1929–31 and from 1959 onwards. Similar dam construction projects have also been the focus of much recent archaeological work; completion of the Merowe Dam at the Fourth Cataract in 2008, for example, inundated a 170 km stretch of the Nile valley.

The Oxford Expedition to Nubia was launched in 1910 in response to the increased height of the Aswan Dam, which threatened to flood
the ancient sites in the north of Sudan. The excavations were directed, and largely financed, by the University of Oxford’s first Professor of Egyptology, Francis Llewellyn Griffith. Between 1907 and 1913 he investigated the sites of Faras, Kawa and Sanam. Following Griffith’s death in 1934, Sir Laurence Kirwan directed the Oxford Excavations at Firka (1934–5) and Kawa (1935–6). The collection also includes objects from the excavations of Sir Henry Wellcome at Abu Geili and Gebel Moya (1910–14), John Garstang at Meroe (1909–11), George Reisner at Nuri (1916–18) and Leonard Woolley and David Randall-MacIver at Buhen (1909–10), as well as items from the Egypt Exploration Society’s excavations at Buhen (1962–3) and at Qasr Ibrim (1961–2), both directed by Walter Emery. All of these archaeological excavations brought to Oxford an extraordinary collection of material, representing the cultures of ancient Sudan from prehistory to the Christian era.

In this exhibition Ibrahim El-Salahi has selected examples of ancient Sudanese pottery from the Ashmolean’s extensive collections, ranging in date from 2250 BC to AD 350. Several feature abstract incised patterns, recalling El-Salahi’s use of simple lines drawn on paper in pen and black ink. Others depict the humans, plants and animals which occupy the landscape of the Nile valley and which appear frequently in El-Salahi’s paintings. His preferred colour palette also employs the same red and yellow ochres that were common pigments in the ancient world. All of the selected artefacts are pottery vessels, one of the most ubiquitous products made and used by humans living in the Nile valley up to this day, thus reflecting the strong links between Sudan’s ancient past and its present.

Liam McNamara
Lisa and Bernard Selz Curator for Ancient Egypt and Sudan
Ibrahim El-Salahi and the Sudanese Community in Oxford

My name is Nazar Eltahir and I moved to Oxford in March 1996, when there was only a small Sudanese community in the city. Between 1998 and 2000 more Sudanese people came to Oxford, among them the famous artist Ibrahim El-Salahi, who moved here in 1998. In the same year Nizar Ateeg suggested that we should meet up regularly and exchange ideas with each other, as we were all working in different fields. The Al-Muntada Al-Thagafi (Cultural Forum) was established, providing a place for Sudanese people and Arabic speakers to debate every month. We used to meet up on the first Saturday of the month at the East Oxford Community Centre in Princes Street. Here we talked about the most recent issues in culture, art and politics, as well as our own challenges.

After Ibrahim El-Salahi moved to Oxford I used to meet him every Friday at the Madina Masjid mosque and every month at Al-Muntada Al-Thagafi. He shone in the Forum and always added a very pleasant atmosphere to discussions. His wisdom and rich, colourful experiences enhanced our debates. He took our conversations to another level when delivering precise conclusions at the end. We feel privileged when El-Salahi, who is a truly humble person, comes to events organised by the Sudanese community, or to the Sudanese Supplementary School, where he speaks about his art and work. I have noticed his passion when he talks about painting trees (especially the *al haraz* tree) and the link that he sees between trees and life.

We are so proud that the Ashmolean Museum is organising an exhibition of El-Salahi’s work this year. It will be a very special event in which the past can truly meet the present. Museum visitors, including the people of Oxford and those of Sudanese origin, have the opportunity to see works by a great artist. Displayed not far from the Shrine of Taharqa, the exhibition shows where El-Salahi comes from: a rich culture that goes back thousands of years.

Nazar Eltahir
Secretary General
Sudanese Supplementary School, Oxford
his interest in calligraphy. He discovered the Western artistic tradition, from the great masters of classical art through to contemporary art, by keenly visiting London's museums: "one thing I loved about London was the British Museum. I spent a lot of time looking at old manuscripts in the library [now the British Library]. I was interested in the origin of the written letters, their background and structure and meaning. I even studied ancient hieroglyphics." When a teacher commented that one of El-Salahi's works appeared to be influenced by Mondrian, El-Salahi, who was not familiar with the Dutch artist's work, "hurried over to the Tate Gallery to see his art for the first time."

At the end of his studies in London El-Salahi returned to Sudan, accompanied by his first wife Eve and their first-born son. He lectured in the Painting Department of the School of Fine and Applied Art at Khartoum Technical Institute. He had all of the works produced at the Slade shipped back to Sudan and, full of hope and excitement, opened his first solo exhibition in Khartoum. Although people came to the opening, they then ceased to visit the exhibition, provoking a strong response from the young El-Salahi: "I was disappointed and shocked."

This reaction led him to stop painting for over two years: "I kept asking myself why people couldn't accept and enjoy what I had done."

1958–61
The realisation that his works did not interest the Sudanese public led El-Salahi to embark on a journey around the country, seeking to understand what kind of art was displayed and appreciated in Sudanese homes and public places: "I was amazed to rediscover the riches I had seen all around me during my childhood, and whose value and rich meanings I had for years abysmally failed to grasp." As a result of El-Salahi's quest for a connection with Sudan, he rediscovered Islamic calligraphy and decorative patterns: "it was as if I discovered them for the first time although I had been seeing them all my life."

Together with the painters Ahmed Shibrain and Kamala Ishag, El-Salahi became a major figure in the 'Khartoum School' – a Modernist movement geared towards creating a distinctive artistic identity for the newly independent Sudan through the use of abstracted calligraphy and the simplification of letters into abstract shapes. Calligraphy served to reconnect El-Salahi with the local community: "I started to write small Arabic inscriptions in the corners of my paintings, almost like postage stamps ... and people started to come towards me. I spread the words over the canvas, and they came a bit closer ... That was when I really started working."
In 1960 El-Salahi became Tutor and Head of the Painting Department of the School of Fine and Applied Art at Khartoum Technical Institute. The following year he made a visit to Nigeria where he met the writers Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka and became acquainted with African Modernism. This was a period of artistic experimentation, following the regaining of independence by many African countries who now sought a new, modern identity: ‘my short visit to Nigeria ... gave me the chance to connect artistically with a dynamic part of the African continent, opening myself to influence and be influenced.’

1962–6
In 1962 El-Salahi received a UNESCO Fine Arts Fellowship to study in the United States. He also visited Mexico, Peru and Brazil before returning to Sudan. Two years later he returned to the US again, this time with the support of a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship. It was a highly productive time for El-Salahi. There he met different artists and influential members of the art world, including Alfred Barr Jr, director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He also studied in the Department of Journalism of Columbia University in New York, specialising in black and white photography.

In 1966 he acted as the head of the Sudanese delegation during the first World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar, Senegal.

1967–9
El-Salahi became Principal Lecturer at the School of Fine and Applied Art at Khartoum Technical Institute. In 1969 he served both as a member of the Committee for the Study of Arab Culture at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris and as a member of the Sudan Cultural Delegation to the First Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers. He also participated in the Contemporary African Art exhibition at Camden Arts Centre, London, in which artists from all over Africa participated: ‘it was exciting, but also frustrating, because there was little response from the rest of the world, or even Africa itself.’

1969–72
El-Salahi was Assistant Cultural Attaché at the Sudanese Embassy in London. In 1971 he was awarded the Order of Knowledge in Arts and Letters of the Democratic Republic of Sudan (gold).

1972–5
In 1972, during the Gaafar Nimeiry regime, El-Salahi was offered the post of Undersecretary for Culture, responsible for the National Council for Arts and Letters of the Democratic Republic of Sudan (gold).

1975–6
In September 1975 El-Salahi was imprisoned in the notorious Kober prison. He was held captive for over six months without charge, being suspected of taking part in a failed coup d’état in which his cousin had been involved.
In the Amiri Diwan’s Office in Qatar, El-Salahi worked as a biographer and translator. El-Salahi recollects working as a translator at the archive section: ‘after sending my texts to the typist, while waiting to receive them back to proofread, I was always quite bored. To relieve myself from this boredom I used to make a large number of drawings.’

In 1995 he took part in the Africa 95 Festival in London. Interest in modern African art began to grow globally.

El-Salahi resigned his job in Qatar to rejoin his wife and children in England; they had not returned to Qatar due to the first Gulf War raging in the region. Since then El-Salahi has lived and worked in Oxford as an artist.

El-Salahi won the Honorary Award at the Sharjah International Arts Biennale.

El-Salahi became a British citizen. He was awarded the Prince Claus Fund Award in the Netherlands and became a Member of the Board of Directors of the Forum for African Arts.

He won the gold medal at the Festival International des Arts Plastiques des Marhès.

In 1977 his work was shown at the Second World African Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos and he married his second wife, Katherine. El-Salahi served as Expert Adviser in the Department of Press and Publications of the Ministry of Information in Qatar and then as Expert in the Office of the Undersecretary, before returning to England with his family.

El-Salahi acted as a UNESCO Consultant to the Ministry of Information and National Guidance in Somalia.

El-Salahi worked as an Expert in the International Information Relations Committee of the Arab Gulf States and as Adviser to the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Information and Culture in Qatar.

A major retrospective exhibition, Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist, organized by Salah M. Hassan, was inaugurated at the Sharjah Art Museum. A collaboration between the African Museum of Art, New York and Tate Modern, London, the show travelled to the Katara Arts Center in Doha and Tate Modern, London.
El-Salahi became the first African artist to have a retrospective at Tate Modern. The museum also acquired two of El-Salahi’s works, in particular Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams, 1961–5 which now features prominently in the permanent display. In 2016 Elvira Dyangani Ose, curator of the exhibition at Tate Modern, explained the impact this had on museum history: ‘perhaps to me, the simplest and most indisputable proof of how much the acquisition of Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams, 1961–5 changed forever art history as we knew it was the fact that one could no longer visit Tate’s “Poetry and Dream” display and imagine those rooms without that work. 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.’

In 2014, Vigo Gallery, London began representing the artist.

2015–17
El-Salahi received an honorary Doctorate of Literature (D. Lit.) from University College London. His works continued to enter major museum collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Guggenheim Museum Abu Dhabi, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. They were exhibited in numerous gallery solo exhibitions and included in major group shows, such as Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–65, curated by Okwui Enwezor at Haus der Kunst, Munich and The Khartoum School: The Making of the Modern Art Movement in Sudan, at the Sharjah Art Foundation, co-curated by Hoor Al Qasimi and Salah M. Hassan.

In 2014, Vigo Gallery, London began representing the artist.


2018
The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology dedicated a solo exhibition to Ibrahim El-Salahi’s work, presenting it together with selected objects from the museum’s collection of ancient Sudanese material. El-Salahi received an honorary Doctorate in Law from Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman.

Compiled by
Federica Gigante
Cross Collections Trainee Curator

NOTES
2 El-Salahi, ‘The Artist in His Own Words’, p.33.
5 ‘In Conversation with Ibrahim El-Salahi’, p.49.
7 El-Salahi, ‘The Artist in His Own Words’, p.53.
8 ‘In Conversation with Ibrahim El-Salahi’, p.51.
10 El-Salahi, ‘The Artist in His Own Words’, p.57.
11 ‘In Conversation with Ibrahim El-Salahi’, p.52.
12 Hudson, ‘Ibrahim el-Salahi’. 
Curator’s Acknowledgements

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full-page illustrations:
p. 6: Page from Diary 3, 2012–13; pen and ink on paper (bound diary-book), 29.5 × 19 cm; Vigo Gallery.
 pp. 8, 48, 62: Pages from Diary 2, 2012–13; pen and ink on paper, 27.5 × 18.5 cm; Vigo Gallery.