

circle art gallery

# Khartoum Contemporary

4 - 23 May 2017





Each year at Circle Art Gallery we hold a focus on East Africa exhibition to broaden our connections with artists across the region and expose our audience to some of the finest art in East Africa. It has been a privilege over the last five years to meet artists, curators and other art professionals in Kampala, Dar es Salaam, Addis Ababa, Kigali, Bujumbura and Khartoum. I discover many commonalities but also many differences in the experiences and resources of artists in each city. Khartoum was perhaps one of the most distinct. All the artists I met had studied at the School of Fine Art in Khartoum over many generations, during periods of social and political enlightenment and in times of cultural repression.



Kamala Ishaq, Untitled, Charcoal on paper, 30 x 26 cm

This exhibition is a result of two visits to Khartoum where I was introduced to many extraordinary artists, guided and hosted with great kindness and hospitality by Abushariaa Ahmed, Elamin Osman and Rashid Diab. These visits were further enhanced by many hours of conversation and research with Nairobi based and visiting Sudanese artists including Salah Elmur, Eltayeb Dawelbait, Yassir Ali, Fatima Hassan, Hassan Fadl, Hussein Halfawi and Farwaz El Said.

My decision to present artworks spanning fifty years from these seventeen artists seemed inevitable - all these artists still practice now, and many of the older generation have taught the younger; creating connections and influences that can be seen throughout this exhibition. This selection of over forty works represents some of the most interesting and important artists in Khartoum.

At Circle, our aim is to guide our audiences to discover new artists, engage more deeply with art and understand its importance. We try to show both diversity and parallels by expanding our knowledge of the art scenes from neighbouring countries.

*Danda Jaroljmek*

## Art in Sudan - an Introduction by kind permission from Salah Hassan

The discussion of art and modernity cannot 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. 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 Meriotic traditions in today’s Northern Sudan (approximately between 1000 BC and AD 600). In the modern period, the search for a common denominator – for a Sudanese national culture that would cut through this ethnic, religious and cultural pluralism – became a focal point for a new national consciousness, expressed mainly in literature and art.



Mohamed Abdulla Otaybi, Owner of the house I, Oil on Canvas, 50 x 50 cm

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. In other words, as Amilcar Cabral argued, they were “prisoners of the contradictions of their social and cultural reality”.

Facing such paradoxes of identity, the artists of the Khartoum School attempted to construct a new ethos for what constituted Sudanese identity in

## Art in Sudan - an Introduction by kind permission from Salah Hassan

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. 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”.



Bakri Bilal, Happy Couple, Acrylic on Canvas board, 50 x 60cm

*Hassan SM. (2012). Ibrahim El Salahi: A Visionary Modernist. pp 15-16.*

In the early 1970s, younger artists started to rebel against the work of these pioneers. Their critique of the early generation of the Khartoum School was very much coloured by the general disappointment with the ruling classes in post-colonial Sudan and frustration with their hegemonic policies. Two major critical movements can be identified, with specific philosophical orientations regarding art. This was a vibrant period in Sudanese intellectual history: serious dialogue on art, literature and culture was accompanied by rich theoretical and critical writings on the relevance of contemporary art and literature to culture and society. However, the renaissance was short-lived, and soon followed by a crackdown on left-wing and liberal intellectuals, among whom were several artists. Many left the country in a mass exodus that rendered the Sudanese cultural scene greatly impoverished.

*Hassan SM. (1995). Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa. pp 116.*

This exhibition presents a range of work and artistic ideas spanning the past 50 years. The artists in this show have all studied, and many of them have also taught, at the College of Fine and Applied Arts in Khartoum, which has played a central role in the movement of modern and contemporary art in Sudan. Many Sudanese artists have relocated internationally, including a number who have become integral to the art scene here in Nairobi; all those in this show, however, are now predominantly living and working in Sudan.



Abdalla M. ElTayeb, Untitled, Water colour on Paper, 35 x 50 cm

The collection of works demonstrates the continuing relevance to contemporary Sudanese artists of the ideas which were developed by the early Khartoum School; of constructing a distinct aesthetic language, used to navigate and visualize complex cultural identity. However, the selection also reflects the diversity of directions artists have taken, and challenges they have made, to these central ideas.

Kamala Ishaq is one of Sudan's foremost modernist painters and remains very influential today. She was the leader and co-founder of the movement known as the Crystallist Group, which challenged the traditional male perspective of the Khartoum School in the late 1970s. Her own work has been influenced by her study of the woman-centred cult of the Zar, which has roots across the horn of Africa, and whose spiritual and women-only ceremonies have become a part of contemporary urban culture.

Also practising during the dynamic period of the 1970s, and making influential work, deeply embedded in Sudanese heritage, were artists such as Abdel Basit El Khatim and Mohamed Abdella Otaybi. Otaybi's early work was very much immersed in the ideas of the 'old' Khartoum

School and, although his painterly language has developed, the use of architectural and decorative motifs and calligraphic forms can still be seen in these recent paintings.

The practices of artists such as Rashid Diab and Salah Elmur, although still overlapping with the concerns of the artists before them, are more engaged with global art movements and techniques. These monotype prints of Diab's, from the 1990s and early '00s were completed in Madrid, where Diab lived, studied and taught for many years. Elmur's symbolic and semi-narrative paintings reflect a departure from the formal and skills-based training of the College. His use of glass boxes as a tool for exploring how light transforms colour and texture seem to draw connections to the themes of Ishaq's Crystallism. His portraits of individuals and family groups are inspired by his collection of formal studio photographs popular in the 1960s and '70s in Sudan.



Abdelbasit El Khatim, Boats Towards the North, Mixed Media on Wood, 42 x 57 cm



Elamin Osman, Illustration, Ink on Paper, 26 x 30 cm

Emerging artists, such as Amel Bashir and Elhassan Elmountasir, are producing work in a new socio-political framework. They inherit the legacy of the Sudanese artists who have come before them, as well as looking outward, forging connections with international contemporary artists and ideas.

**Abushariaa Ahmed, born 1966 in Sudan.**

Abushariaa graduated with a BA in Fine Art from the College of Fine and Applied Arts in 1990. Like many artists, he left Sudan in the mid-nineties and settled for many years in Nairobi and then Kampala, where he exhibited extensively, before returning recently to live and work in Khartoum again. He has exhibited in Norway, Germany, Canada, Denmark, Monaco, the UK and Sudan. His work is held in the private collection of the African Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea and the collection of the World Bank in Washington, the USA.



Abushariaa Ahmed, Flowers Blossoming I, Acrylic on Canvas, 122 x 122 cm

**Amel Bashir, born in 1981, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.**

Bashir is a young artist and illustrator based in Khartoum. She received a BA in Interior Design from the College of Fine and Applied Arts, Khartoum. As well as exhibiting frequently in Khartoum, Bashir has illustrated published books and was recently included in the book *Art in Times of Adversity* (Hagggar et al. 2016).

**Bakri Bilil, born 1943 in Omdurman, Sudan.**

Bilal received a BA specializing in Painting from the College of Fine and Applied Arts, Khartoum in 1967, and a Diploma of Education from the Khartoum Polytechnic in 1976. He has exhibited widely in Khartoum and internationally; in the UK, Switzerland, Kuwait and the USA, including the exhibition *Modernism in Sudanese Art*, British Museum,



London, in 2004. Bilal's works are in many public and private collections in Sudan, Europe and the USA. His articles on the development of folk art in Sudan have been featured in a number of international publications.

### **Rashid Diab, born 1957 in Wad Medani, Sudan.**

Diab is now living in Khartoum where he has opened two exhibition spaces alongside his practice as a painter and critic. He received a BFA in Painting from the College of Fine and Applied Arts in 1978. In 1982 he moved to Spain where he obtained an MA in Painting and another MA in Etching from the Complutense University of Madrid, followed by a PhD in the Philosophy of Painting from the same university in 1991. He stayed and taught in the department of Fine Art at the Complutense University until 2000, when he returned to Khartoum. Diab has exhibited widely across Europe, the USA and the Middle East and can be found in a number of private and public collections including the Museum of Fine Art in Cairo, the National Library of Madrid and the Royal Museum of Fine Art in Amman.



Rashid Diab, Homage for my Friends, A/P, Mono print on Paper, 56 x 48cm

### **Abdel Basit El Khatim, born 1942 in Sudan.**

El Khatim graduated in 1967 from the College of Fine and Applied Arts, Khartoum, where he is now a professor of Graphic Design. He obtained an MA in Education from the University of Wales and also holds a PhD from Juba University. El Khatim has experimented with diverse material and techniques throughout his career, combining sculpture and painting to create a unique relief style. His work was part of the seminal

exhibition *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, Whitechapel Gallery, London in 1995.

**Elhassan Elmountasir, born 1986 in Sudan**

Elmountasir is a young artist based in Khartoum. He studied Graphic Design at the College of Fine and Applied Arts, Khartoum and then in 2011 received a BA in Technical Education from the Sudan University of Science and Technology. In 2012 he co-founded Khaish Studio – a project space working to promote international exchange between artists. Earlier this year he completed an artist residency in Bhubaneswar, India.

**Salah Elmur, born 1966 in Khartoum, Sudan.**

Elmur graduated from the College of Fine and Applied Arts with a BA in Graphic Design in 1989. He has participated in group and solo exhibitions all over East Africa, the Middle East and Europe since 1985. He has published children's books and is a successful film maker, directing six short documentaries and fantasy films which have been shown at international film festivals. He now lives and works between Khartoum and Cairo.



Salah Elmur, *Lonely Lover*, Acrylic on Canvas, 90 x 90 cm

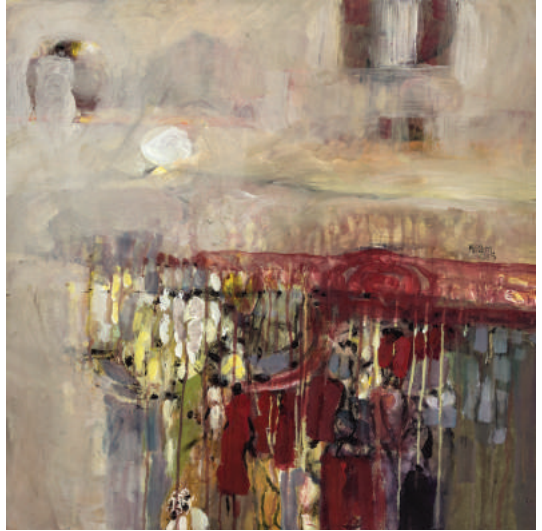
**Abdalla Mohamed Eltayeb, born 1951 in Gadaref, Sudan.**

Eltayeb received a Diploma in Painting in 1976 from the College of Fine and Applied Arts, Khartoum. He won the Noma Prize for children's

book illustration in Japan in 1979 and the Gold Medal at the Biennale in Kuwait in 1980. He has illustrated many children's books in France and in Sudan and has exhibited widely in Khartoum.

### **Issam Hafiez, born 1959 in Khartoum, Sudan.**

Once a mural artist, now an established painter and photographer, Hafiez graduated from the College of Fine and Applied Arts, Khartoum in 1982. He has exhibited in selected group exhibitions in the UK, Egypt, Syria, the UAE, Eritrea, Uganda and Kenya. His work is included in selected collections in Kampala, Khartoum, Cairo and Syria.



Issam Hafiez, My Crazy Home, Mixed media on Canvas 80 x 80cm

### **Hazim Al Hussain, born 1986 in Khartoum, Sudan.**

Al Hussain studied Painting at the College of Fine and Applied Arts, graduating in 2007. He co-founded Khaish Studio in 2012, and has participated in numerous exhibitions in Khartoum, Qatar and Germany.

### **Kamala Ishaq, born 1939 in Omdurman, Sudan.**

Ishaq graduated from the College of Fine and Applied Arts, Khartoum in 1963, and then studied Mural Painting at the Royal College of Art, London from 1964-66. After her studies Ishaq returned to the College of Fine and Applied Arts, where she served as head of the painting department for some years. Ishaq has recently had a solo exhibition, Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq: Women in Crystal Cubes, at the Sharjah

Foundation, the UAE in 2016. Her work was also included in the touring exhibition *Breaking the Veils: Women Artists from the Islamic World*, sponsored by the Royal Society of Fine Arts, Jordan in 2002, and *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, Whitechapel Gallery, London in 1995.

### **Miska Mohammed, born 1995.**

Miska is a full time young artist based in Khartoum. She received a BA in Painting from the College of Fine and Applied Arts in 2016. She has exhibited in Tunisia, and in numerous shows in Sudan.



Miska Mohammed, *In the City*, Oil on Canvas, 51 x 51cm

### **Ashraf Monim, born 1980 in Omdurman, Sudan.**

Monim has received a BA, MA and a PhD in Painting from the College of Fine and Applied Arts, Khartoum. In 2009 he became head of Painting at the same college. He has participated in many exhibitions in Sudan and in 2013 he completed an artist residency in Amsterdam with the Thami Mnyele Foundation.

### **Mohamed Morda, born 1983.**

Morda is currently studying for his second BA, in Graphic Design, at the College of Fine and Applied Arts, Khartoum.

**Laila Mukhtar Adam, born 1969 in El Rahad, Sudan.**

Mukhtar is a ceramic artist living and working in Khartoum. She holds a BA, MA and a PhD in Ceramics from the College of Fine and Applied Arts in Khartoum. Her work has been exhibited internationally, including solo presentations in Norway, Germany and Sudan. Her work is currently displayed in the exhibition Contemporary Arab Art part 3, Al Markhiya Gallery, Doha, Qatar.



Laila Mukhtar, People of Nok, Clay and Paint, Various sizes

**Elamin Osman, born 1954 in Waqur, Sudan.**

Osman graduated from the College of Fine and Applied Arts with a BA in Fine Art in 1977, he went on to further studies in Belgrade in 1983. He has taught art in Libya and was a lecturer at the College of Fine and Applied Arts in Khartoum until 1989.

**Mohamed Abdella Otaybi, born 1948 in Ad Dueim, Sudan.**

Otaybi now lives in Omdurman, where he works as a painter, illustrator, graphic designer and teacher. He received a BFA in Graphics from the College of Fine and Applied Arts, Khartoum. He has had regular solo exhibitions in Khartoum from 1970 to the present, and has been included in important international group exhibitions including the Sharjah Biennial, the UAE in 1993 and Modernism in Sudanese Art, British Museum, London in 2004, and is currently part of the exhibition Sudan: Emergence of Singularities, P21 Gallery, London. His work features in private and public collections internationally including the National Museum in Sharjah, the UAE.



Mohamed Morda, Untitled, Ink on Canvas, 49 x 96 cm

## Further reading

Hassan SM. The Khartoum and Addis connections; two stories from Sudan and Ethiopia. In: Lampert C, Havell J (eds). Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa, Whitechapel Gallery, 1995.

Hassan SM (ed). Ibrahim El Salahi: A Visionary Modernist. Museum for African Art, 2012.

Kennedy J. New Currents, Ancient Rivers, Smithsonian Books, 1992.  
Haggag L, Saeed T, Rohm V. Contemporary Artists of the Sudan: Art in Times of Adversity, Dabanga, 2016.

front cover: Kamala Ishaq, Untitled, Water color on paper, 25 x 17.5 cm

inside front cover: Salah Elmur, Pages of the photo albums II, Acrylic on Canvas, 150 x 100 cm

back cover: Rashid Diab, Series of the Nile(Blue), Water Colour on Paper, 73 x 101 cm (detail)

inside back cover: Amel Bashier, Peace, Ink on Paper, 70 x 45 cm (detail)





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