



Salah Elmur  
STUDIO KAMAL

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*The Curious, 2018*

## Salah El Mur by Yasser Sultan Translation by Mayadin Art

*This text is an excerpt from an essay by Yasser Sultan, included in the publication to accompany 'Fragrances of the Forest and Photos', Salah Elmur's retrospective exhibition at the Sharjah Art Museum, 28th February – 2nd June 2018. Reproduced here with permission from the artist.*

The Sudanese culture occupies a central role in the experience of the artist Salah al-Murr. The geographical disparity between Sudan's various regions and the multiplicity of tribes that constitute the general fabric of society create a diverse and rich cultural environment. Each tribe in Sudan has its customs and traditions, music, songs and other cultural components. This cultural diversity represents a significant advantage for Sudanese society. From this repertoire and the diverse visual aspects that characterise this culture, the Sudanese artist Salah al-Murr draws his vocabulary and elements. The faces of his family members and friends, the songs, the natural scenery and rivers, and the intimacy of relations, all form a complete picture of homeland as it is represented in his visual memory.

We can imagine the visual scene in which the artist grew up, and which has formed his consciousness: a rural house in a village on the outskirts of the capital (Khartoum), with large areas of greenery surrounding the place. In the distance, the river is flowing to add to the scene a lively and magical rhythm. Salah al-Murr grew up in a family that lived on fishing and agriculture. He remembers all these little details that caressed

his imagination and are still alive in his memory. His mother in the house making embroidered patterns on the fabrics, and the women of the village wear vividly colored clothes, the fishermen spreading their nets on the edge of the river, these are all visual elements that have always triggered his imagination.

(...)

In the works of artist Salah al-Murr, the features of the painting are formed before they can actually be realized on the drawing space. Usually the perception of the painting is clear in his mind before drawing it. He follows a special way to sharpen his ideas through rituals he has never ceased practicing. These rituals include for example, that he never stops drawing, he draws small sketches of the ideas that may come to his mind, and he formulates many elements and vocabulary in quick drawings so as not to allow these fantasies to escape or sneak out of his imagination. He always draws on books, where he has dozens of books that are filled with drawings inspired by his imagination and the lines and layout of typed letters. He traces the calligraphy on the pages and employs accompanying shapes as he wishes. He does not draw these fast drawings to implement them later, but rather seizes the idea before it fades in his memory.

Another thing that Salah al-Murr also does to motivate his imagination and visual memory, is that he traces old-fashioned objects. He always buys collections of old and empty metal cans, and loves the old signs indicating the names of the



Castor Branch, 2018



*The Kiss, 2018*

streets and alleyways. He has many photographs taken of these signs from several parts in Sudan, Egypt, Kenya and other countries. He photographs, contemplates and engraves in memory all these shapes and elements to be translated later by his visual consciousness in paintings. These quick sketches on the papers and pages of books, along with photographs of metal signs and old objects constitute inexhaustible fuel for his ideas, elements and the vocabulary that he uses in his paintings. Visual translation may not be direct, we might not be able to trace the relationship between these shapes and the striking visual effects in his works, but it is always surprising when he points or draws your attention to them. You may find this link in the way he draws faces, you might be surprised by how he makes the details of clothing, background or any of the components forming the work.

(...)

Thus, the work of artist Salah al-Murr takes us to a different reality, a reality in which relations change and a sense of nostalgia prevails. He does not care about the logic of these relations between his elements, as much as he tries to express those mental images mixed in his imagination with impressions and feelings about the reality, memories and things around him. Each painting has a story and context that is linked to an event or a particular memory, even if he does not wish to disclose that context or link. There are strong ties linking the works of al-Murr with all these old memories, but in no way do they distance themselves from the moment he is living in. The images stored

in his memory clash in some way with his observations, impressions and visions of people and the world around him.

The creative experience of the artist Salah al-Murr, which draws its general framework and vocabulary from the nature of social relations and the heritage of Sudan, carries among its details a general human spirit that extends beyond the geographical framework of his homeland and culture to connect with various human customs and cultures. His artworks are characterized by uniqueness, intimacy and astonishment that qualify them to be among the most important Sudanese and African artworks. Al-Murr's artworks resemble an extended tale recounted by its narrator by means of painting – a tale of passion mixed with dreams, imagination and old memories.

Yasser Sultan, 2017



Souvenir photograph from Studio Kamal



*The Pink Suit*, 2018



Souvenir photograph from Studio Kamal



Zahraa, 2018



Amna, 2018



*The Dreamer, 2019*  
*The Lonely, 2018*

*The Yellow Flower, 2019*  
*The Gift, 2019*

*Two Vision, 2018*  
*The Fiancée, 2019*

*Mariam, 2018*  
*The Yellow Face, 2019*





*The Robot and the Fish, 2018*



*While Waiting, 2018*

**SALAH ELMUR: Sudanese, b. 1966**

Salah Elmur originally studied Graphic Design at the College of Fine and Applied Art, Sudan University, Khartoum. With a career spanning three decades, Elmur has participated in group and solo exhibitions in East Africa, the Middle East and Europe and America 1985. Elmur has also published 12 children's books, and is a successful film maker, directing six short documentaries and fantasy films which have been shown at international film festivals In February 2018, the Sharjah Art Museum in the UAE held *Fragrances of the Forest and Photos*, a retrospective of Elmur's work. Most recently, Elmur's work was featured 'Forests and Spirits', an exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in London alongside two luminaries of Sudanese modernism, Kamala Ishaq and Ibrahim El Salahi. His work is collected widely, and is included in the permanent collection of the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden (MACAAL) in Marrakech.

Salah Elmur's work comprises a fertile visual vocabulary that draws on his observations of life, often returning to childhood and youth for the scenes, situations, and impressions that he depicts in his work. Heavy symbolism, a tendency towards vivid colour combinations, and distortion of natural figures and proportion are some of the markers of Elmur's painting. The resulting, somewhat surreal compositions, usually portraits, are framed in a virtual studio, an ongoing project of the artist. They reference a tradition of studio portraiture to which he was exposed as a child in his grandfather's photo studio in Khartoum, Studio Kamal. Certain hallmarks of this tradition – painted backdrops, curtains on either side of the frame, checkered floor pattern - reference that very studio, and many others like it. The resulting paintings are tender, poetic vignettes of human life.



*Friends, 2019*

Founded in 2012, and based in Nairobi, Kenya, Circle Art Gallery promotes contemporary art from Eastern Africa.

Through group and solo exhibitions, as well as participation in various international art fairs, the gallery has increased local and international visibility for established and emerging artists. Working closely with local and international collectors, curators, we are building a strong and sustainable market for East African artists.

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Excerpt from text by Yasser Sultan. Catalogue designed by Jonathan Gathaara Solanke Fraser.  
Images courtesy of the artist.

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Back cover: Souvenir photograph from Studio Kamal