

XXX CROSSINGS

IBRAHIM EL-SALAH
DAVID HAMMONS
STANLEY BROUWN



Welcoming Remarks:

Salah M. Hassan

By His Will: We Teach Birds How To Fly

Due to unforeseen circumstances beyond my control, I am not able to be with you this evening, to welcome you to the opening of our exhibition *By His Will Teach Birds How to Fly: Ibrahim El Salahi in Black and White*. But here are few words to introduce the exhibition and its concept to you, as well as to express my gratitude to everyone who contributed to making this exhibition a reality.

The exhibition is celebration of the career of **Ibrahim El-Salahi**, the Sudanese and Oxford-based artist, and Prince Claus Laureate (2001), albeit smaller in scale considering his rich and vast oeuvre and prolific career. Yet, the exhibition is also unique in focusing selectively on his black and white work as it evolves over more than 50 years of career. Conceived as part of the multi-sited exhibition *Three Crossings*, (which include David Hammons, and Stanley Brouwn), El Salahi's exhibition foregrounds El Salahi's experimentation with the genre of the "artist's book," yet it also includes other works that contextualize his interventions in black and white, as well as broaden our appreciation of his overall oeuvre.

The starting point of the installation is El-Salah's early small-scale works such as his series *By His Will We Teach Birds How To Fly*, (1965), after which the exhibition is being titled.

But what is in the title? Or as they say: What's in the name? Everything! The title captures the essence of El Salahi's aesthetic, style and mode of work, and above all the glue that binds his visionary work, its transcendental, and mystical spirituality. It is also a testimony to his spirituality and passion for freedom, not only in artistic expression, but as essential to human

dignity and the will to survive.

To understand this fully, I invite everyone in the audience **to spot the bird** in El Salahi's works as you make your way through the exhibition. You will find that the "bird" as a motif has continued to have a persistent recurrence in El-Salahi's work through the years. Many of El Salahi's classic masterpieces and self-portrait (not included in this exhibition) such as *The Woman, the Bird, and the Pomegranate* (1968) also features the bird. In other words, the bird has become the artist's own alter-ego and own conscious.

Few words about the installation will help: The installation in the exhibition evolves spatially and chronologically to cover a range of El-Salahi's works in black and white as they mutate into large-scale mural-like paintings. The first floor represents an effort to capture in a panoramic way the highlights of El Salahi's work in different scales as the exhibition evolves in the upper floors. Starting with early works such as *By His Will* and *Nar Al Magazeeb* (the Fire of the Ecstatic) stands as an early landmark in his career in embodying his mode of work, his ideas, and the aesthetic that binds his larger oeuvre in Black and White. It is a testimony to El-Salahi's earlier rigorous investigation of the best ways to move away from his academic training, and explore the creation of a new work of art, that speaks to his personal aspiration as an artist. This is contrasted with a larger scale composite painting *Untitled* representing his 1980s post-prison period marked by his "endless organic" paintings in pen and ink, to help us comprehend the range of the artist's work in black and white.

Before moving to explore the exhibition, it is necessary to contextualize the exhibition and the selected works. Since the 1960s, El-Salahi has intermittently focused on creating drawing in black and white, (that is, in black ink on white, nonacidic paper) using these contrasts, as he explains, "to try to evoke a degree of intermediate gray without actually mixing the two." Majority of the work in this exhibition, comprises various units that share compositional affinities with those around them but are set within separate frames. The units are arrayed in formations, each unit being integrated into the larger design, "as individuals are within their social milieu, or the different elements of an arabesque design are on their flat surface." For El-Salahi, the work of art, whether as a mental construct or as a visual one, "is a permutation of elements that include an original, visual inspiration; a spontaneous artistic impulse, to a certain extent controlled and directed by the artist; and knowledge and skill in the basics of artistic creativity." To fully comprehend El-Salahi's vision, it is important to know his quest in since the 1960s as he eloquently expressed it: "I was unembarrassed about staying open to the fleeting inspiration of vision and spirit." It is these fleeting moments, where visual images intermingle with visions and dreams, from whose components, El-Salahi has created the composites, and visual dramas that have given vent to his artistic passions and emotions. In this regards, El-Salahi shares a surrealist's tendency, in fostering exploration of the unconsciousness, and the move beyond reason to tap into a world of dreams, ecstasy and unrestrained fantasies.

Hope these few words give you a sense of the exhibition and helps you explore its different facets.

Before I end, it is important to pay dues, and to express utmost gratitude, when it is most appropriate. Many people and institutions have contributed to the success of this modest tribute to Ibrahim El Salahi and to the larger project of *Three Crossings*.

Much appreciation goes to Toby Clarke and Vigo Gallery and his wonderful team and most specifically Pia Austin-Little, for lending the work and for working tirelessly to ensure the success of this exhibition. I am grateful to Nick Hayworth's of Modern Forms for ensuring that we have El Salahi's masterpiece *The Arab Spring*. Much appreciation goes to my dearest friend Hoor Al Qasimi and the Sharjah Art Foundation for lending several of El-Salahi's crucial works for the exhibition, and for sponsoring their shipment to and from Amsterdam. As always, I remain grateful.

The design of the exhibition is a very much contribution of the master Tom Postma and his design team I am grateful to Tom Postma for his unwavering support over the years. Despite his stature in the field of exhibition design globally, and despite his busy schedule, Tom never hesitated to collaborate with me, and over many years, provided his most elegant and efficient designs ever since our first collaboration at the Venice Biennale in 2001. This has ushered a lifelong friendship which I so cherish. To Mihaela Rodesou (MIKA) of Tom Postma design, I am so grateful for your efforts, diligence and eloquent designs and renderings, and for your patience, and for being so graceful.

To the brilliant Irma Boom, I am so grateful for the designs that graced several of my publications over the years! Which as I said yesterday, made me "famous in a way" as I discovered over the years that many young designers I have worked with, pursued my friendship, to discover that it was not for my own sake, but to get Irma's contact information, or simply obtain a copy of the now landmark publication ***Authentic/Ex-Centric***!! I Despite your busy schedule, you took the time to design the publications for this project and to equally brand it! **XXX Crossings!** Thanks Irma.

Words cannot express my gratitude to the Prince Claus Fund and its wonderful and most professional team. Starting with its Director, my sister Joumana El Zein Houry, thanks for inviting me to do this **Three Crossings**, to honor not only a Prince Claus Laureate and my Sudanese hero Ibrahim El Salahi, but also to honor two other heroes of mine: Stanley Brouwn, and David Hammons. I owe Prince Claus a lot in supporting my projects, my career, over the years since the days of its founder Els van der Plas. I hope this project is one way to return the debt. So thank you Joumana.

To my dearest sister Fariba Derakhshani, I owe you a lot, and most importantly your friendship and unwavering support. Words can't express my gratitude for your hard work in shepherding this project from its inception to this moment of its realization. Fariba, I appreciate the tireless effort to ensure all goes well. I know of the late evenings train's journey back home to your village after hours of overtime! So forgive me for the headaches and sleepless nights. I am so grateful Fariba!!! To the indefatigable and hardworking team of Prince Claus Fund Hannah Vollom, Ginger de Silva, Sarah Smith, Dilara Kanik, and Akvile Dubakaite, I am so grateful to you hard work and efforts to ensure the success of this and the other two exhibitions.

- Salah M. Hassan, Curator of Three Crossings