

# Ibrahim El-Salahi

## Pain Relief Drawings

04.02.-14.05.2023

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Ibrahim El-Salahi is renowned as one of the key figures of African Modernism. El-Salahi founded the so-called Karthum School and travelled throughout the USA, Mexico and Brazil in the 1960s, where he met the artists of the Spiral Group, as well as Rufino Tamayo and many others. He was a cultural attaché for Sudan and later the Sudanese Director of Culture, as well as being a member of the legendary Mbari Club in Nigeria with future Nobel laureates Wole Soyinka and Nagib Mahfuz. And in 1976 El-Salahi was imprisoned for six months without charge in connection with an attempted coup he had nothing to do with, before going into exile in Qatar, where he worked as an advisor to the Emir.

Most importantly, El-Salahi was one of the first artists to deliberately try to un-learn the art of Europe (where he had studied at Oxford) in order, from the end of the 1950s onwards, to arrive at a new art through his head-on engagement with his origins and Sudanese traditions. This is what makes him more relevant today than ever. El-Salahi is a key figure of Modernism per se, for his work reflects an entire century with its ruptures, hopes and claims. Not least because of this, El-Salahi was honoured with a solo exhibition at Tate Modern in his adopted home, Great Britain, in 2013.

The Kunsthalle Zürich is showing a precise selection of Ibrahim El-Salahi's sixty-year oeuvre: a group of 89 small-format *Pain Relief Drawings*, which the artist has been creating since 2016. At first glance they appear light and ludic, like drawings made in passing while on the telephone. But they are much more than absent-minded doodles. Drawn on medicine packets or envelopes, the *Pain Relief Drawings* are focused, concentrated miniatures of the kind that thought, drawing a line, produces; they are associative, agile and meditative.

*Ibrahim El-Salahi: Pain Relief Drawings* is organised by Laura Hoptman, Executive Director at The Drawing Center, New York, and is curated at Kunsthalle Zürich by Daniel Baumann, Director / Curator.

### About the *Pain Relief Drawings*

When I am drawing, my mind is concentrated, and I can forget about the pain. [...] It's a mental thing – when I concentrate, my mind goes from the pain to what I am drawing. Drawing for me is a kind of meditation. (Ibrahim El-Salahi in conversation with Anna MacNay, *Studio International*, 26/06/2019)

Drawing has continued to be the focus of El-Salahi's production over the last several decades, and in the past five years he has created an extraordinary series of small works that he calls "pain relief drawings." El-Salahi started the series in 2016 when back pain reduced his mobility and caused him to rely on medication for relief. A diagnosis of Parkinson's disease further hampered his movement and added to his intake of prescription drugs. As he explained in an interview from 2019, "I am surrounded by packets of medicine, so I said, 'What a waste. Why don't I use them?' I started opening them and chopping them to size, and I started working on them. I had a

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number of pens with waterproof and fade-proof ink, which the material of those kinds of packages takes very nicely.” In the past half-decade, El-Salahi has produced hundreds of Pain Relief drawings, despite his advanced age and compromised physical ability. Throughout his career, El-Salahi has emphasized the connection that exists for him between making art and praying, as if the act of creation carries with it some spiritual power to comfort and maybe even to heal. (Laura Hoptman, in *Ibrahim El-Salahi: Pain Relief Drawings*, p.12)

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. 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 or a transparent window into the artistic composition; debossed structures of medicine packets become part of an artwork’s pattern. 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. (Lena Fritsch, in *Ibrahim El-Salahi. A Sudanese Artist in Oxford*, p. 41)

## Biography

Ibrahim El-Salahi is born in 1930 in Omdurman, Sudan. His father, a Sufi scholar, is in charge of a Qur’anic school, where El-Salahi learns to read and write and to practice the Arabic calligraphy that later becomes an important element in his artwork.

From 1949–1950, he studies Fine Art at the School of Design of the Gordon Memorial College, which later becomes the University of Khartoum. With the help of a scholarship he subsequently goes to the Slade School of Fine Art in London from 1954–1957. At the London art school El-Salahi is exposed to a European education system and the works of artists that gradually influence his art.

In 1957, he returns to Sudan to teach in Khartoum. His time at the College of Fine and Applied Arts there sparks a movement now known as the Khartoum School, of which El-Salahi is one of the founders. Trying to connect to his heritage, El-Salahi begins to fill his work with symbols and small Arabic inscriptions. As he incorporates Arabic calligraphy into his work, symbols begin to produce animals, humans and plant forms, lending his artwork new meaning. El-Salahi combines European artistic styles with traditional Sudanese themes.

In 1962, El-Salahi receives a UNESCO scholarship to study in the United States, from where he visits South America. From 1964–1965 he returns to the US with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation. In 1966 he leads the Sudanese delegation during the first World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar, Senegal. El-Salahi is equally part of the Sudanese delegation at the first Pan-African

Cultural Festival in Algiers in 1969. Both of these events are significant in the development of modern African art.

From 1969–1972 El-Salahi is assistant cultural attaché at the Sudanese Embassy in London. After that, he returns to Sudan as Director of Culture in Jaafar Nimeiri's government, then is Undersecretary in the Ministry of Culture and Information until September 1975.

In 1975 El-Salahi is imprisoned for six months and eight days without trial, accused of participating in an anti-government coup. He is stripped of his freedom in Kober Prison in Khartoum: prisoners are not allowed to write or draw and if a prisoner were to be caught with paper or pencil, he would be punished with solitary confinement for fifteen days. Despite this, El-Salahi is able to get his hands on a pencil and brown paper bags. El-Salahi is released on 16 March 1976 and does not keep any of the drawings he made; he leaves them where they were hidden, buried in sand within the prison. Confined to house arrest, he rents a house in the Banat region of Omdurman for a short period of time.

Two years after his release from prison he makes himself an exile from Sudan and for 20 years lives and works in Doha, Qatar, before finally settling in Oxford, United Kingdom, where he currently lives.

Opening hours: Tue–Sun 11 am–6pm, Thu 11 am–8 pm, Mon closed

Our exhibitions by Ibrahim El-Salahi and Pippa Garner are accompanied by an extensive mediation programme, including workshops for school classes and free tours every Thursday evening at 6.30 pm.

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