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Press release:

Ibrahim El-Salahi

Pain Relief Drawings

4 February–14 May 2023

Press conference Friday 3 February 2022, 11 am

Opening Friday 3 February 2022, 6–9 pm

Ibrahim El-Salahi is renowned as one of the key figures of African Modernism. El-Salahi founded his own 'school', 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, before going into exile in Qatar, where he worked as an advisor to the Emir.

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. El-Salahi was honoured with a solo exhibition at Tate Modern in his adopted home, Great Britain, in 2013.

At Kunsthalle Zürich we are 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, as if they drawings made in passing while on the telephone. But they are much more than this. Drawn on medicine packets or envelopes, the *Pain Relief Drawings* are focused, concentrated miniatures of the kind that thought, drawing a line, produces: associative and meditative.

In the exhibition, visitors will be able to engage in-depth with Ibrahim El-Salahi's biography, context and critical reception.

The exhibition is organised by Laura Hoptman, Executive Director at [The Drawing Center](#), New York, and curated by Daniel Baumann, Kunsthalle Zürich.

Ibrahim El-Salahi's exhibition is accompanied by an extensive mediation programme, including schools workshops and free exhibition tours every Thursday. Our 'Afternoon for all' workshop activity takes place approximately once a month on a Sunday; all are welcome, young or old, alone, with friends or family. Further information can be found on our [mediation](#) page.

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A short biography of Ibrahim El-Salahi:

Ibrahim El-Salahi, a key figure in the development of African Modernism, is born in 1930 in Omdurman, Sudan. His father, a Sufi scholar, oversees 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. That year he is imprisoned for six months and eight days without trial, accused of participating in an anti-government coup.

El-Salahi 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.