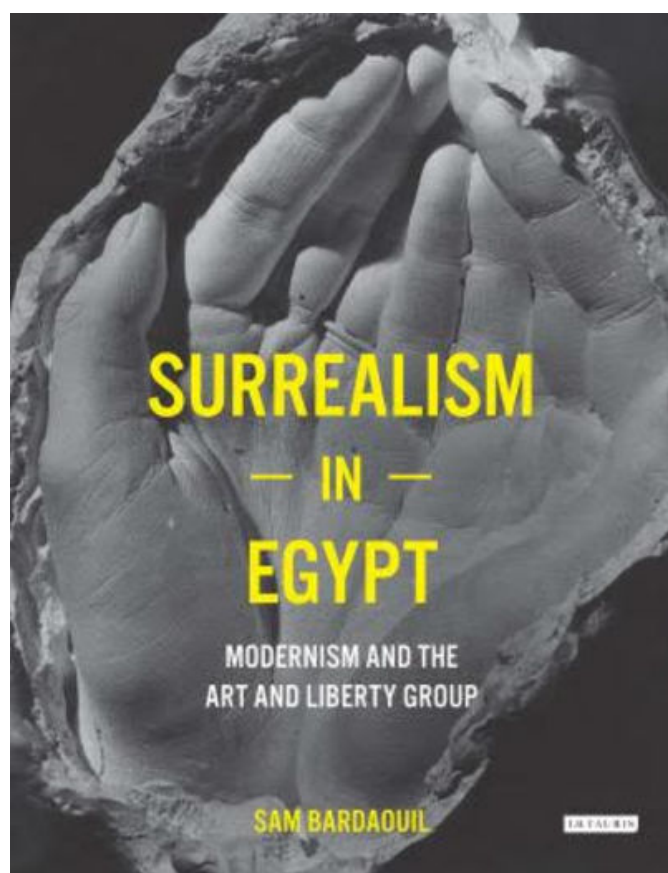


The Double Game of Egyptian Surrealism: How to Curate a Revolutionary Movement

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APRIL 17, 2017



“WE FIND ABSURD, and deserving of total disdain, the religious, racist, and nationalist prejudices that make up the tyranny of certain individuals who, drunk on their own temporary omniscience, seek to subjugate the destiny of the work of art.” So wrote 37 Egypt-based artists and writers in their 1938 manifesto *Long Live Degenerate Art*, expressing solidarity with their counterparts in Europe suffering under fascism. This was the beginning of the Art and Liberty

Group, an avant-garde movement also known as Egypt’s Surrealists.

“Modern art in Egypt was always a pale copy and a delayed copy,” says the contemporary Egyptian painter Adel El Siwi, “but for the first time in our history, we have this very rare moment where what was going on in Paris was in parallel to other things going on in Cairo.” The Art and Liberty

Group forged connections with Surrealists and Trotskyists abroad while shaping their own identity. Working in tandem with their European peers, they also grappled with the circumstances of an increasingly militarized Egyptian capital, where trends in art and publishing remained conservative. They responded to the fault lines of interwar Cairo and were of a piece with them.

By the time of the 1952 Free Officers' coup in Egypt, which led to the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the rise of a new Egyptian nationalism and later pan-Arabism, the members of the Art and Liberty Group had been dispersed: many were exiled or imprisoned. All that is left of their experimental exhibitions in wartime Cairo are catalogs and reviews. A couple of their canvases hang in the permanent collection of the state-run Egyptian Museum of Modern Art and others in private collections, but the full extent of their legacy, which extends beyond drawing and painting into political criticism and radical publishing, has until recently been largely overlooked.

Two efforts to curate this revolutionary art movement from the archive have sparked debates about the Art and Liberty Group and Surrealism in the Middle East. In October, the Centre Pompidou launched the exhibit *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War, and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)*, with support from Qatar, which will tour Europe throughout 2017 and 2018. It is now showing at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid. A few weeks earlier, in September, the Sharjah Art Foundation and Egyptian Ministry of Culture opened a sprawling show in Cairo, *When Art Becomes Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists (1938-1965)*. This was associated with Cornell University's three-day academic conference on Egyptian Surrealism, convened at the American University in Cairo in November 2015.

Art et Liberté portrays a discordant group that both broke with the establishment and also contained a multitude of perspectives, eventually

leading some younger members to break away and form the more folkloric Contemporary Art Group and others the more militantly political Bread and Freedom. By contrast, *When Art Becomes Liberty* imposes a sense of continuity within the group and suggests that its impact can be felt in the work of many successors. The substance of Art and Liberty Group's revolt — their Marxist critique of Egyptian tyranny, their antifascist bent — is concealed. Instead, Sharjah's curators emphasize how Surrealist motifs persist in the folk nationalism and social realism of midcentury Egyptian artists. The fact that the show was co-hosted by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture might explain this narrative of continuity, which obscures the group's radicalism.

To grasp the Art and Liberty Group's rallying cry against anything that impedes expression, one need only look at the catalog of their Second Independent Art Exhibition in Cairo, from March 1941. "The painter works on ruptures," it reads. "In fact, he obeys the summons to play a double game of the most radical nature: he crushes what he sees, undoes what he generates, exorcizes what he invokes." All edifices are continually dissolved in order to reveal something new, and this spirit of experimentation was alive in the Art and Liberty Group's late-night gatherings held in the depths of the old Islamic city. After some sessions, they would set their own works aflame. Their public exhibitions involved games and performance. Unfortunately, in the contemporary exhibition spaces of Paris and Cairo, the paintings of this revolutionary movement were frozen in time, divorced from current politics and contemporary art practice, and put on display by wealthy benefactors. The tension between the desire to present the Surrealist movement to an international audience and the concomitant instinct to commodify the movement undermined the power of both exhibitions.

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In the 1930s and '40s, the Art and Liberty Group agitated the hierarchies

of fine art and sought to extricate it from nationalism, moving it out of the stodgy halls of officialdom. In five annual shows, the group introduced Egyptians to works that defied the *bon ton* of the academy. Some played with photography, others with installations, sparking curiosity among local audiences and involving Egyptian artists in international debates about modern art. And yet, today, this cast of cosmopolitan characters remains largely unknown outside of erudite circles in the Middle East. New details emerge in an academic study by Sam Bardaouil, co-curator of *Art et Liberté*, entitled *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group* (I.B. Tauris, 2016).

Each individual could be the protagonist of his or her own study. George Henein, the provocative poet and radical publisher, brought the Art and Liberty Group to international publications and European galleries, corresponding with André Breton, among others. Painter and patron Amy Nimr connected the group with Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell, and prominent British Surrealists. Ramses Younan, the painter and theorist who translated Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* into Arabic, reworked Pharaonic mythology in his canvases. There are also the Brothers Kamel: Anwar, the Marxist journalist who put out several publications that were quickly banned by Egyptian authorities, and Fouad, the painter and poet. Kamel Telmissany, the painter of grotesques, taught a young woman named Inji Aflatoun, who went on to become one of Egypt's best-known painters and spent the 1950s in prison for her communist views. Aflatoun and friends worked closely with the novelist Albert Cossery, who left Egypt in 1945 but continued to write fiction about his homeland from his home at the divey l'Hôtel La Louisiane in Saint-Germain until his death in 2008. Bardaouil has also dug up little-known collaborators like Mayo, a Greek-Egyptian painter who was trained in Paris. Just as many of the names associated with the group remain mysterious, having seemingly vanished from history.

The show *Art et Liberté* concentrates on the turbulent decade of 1938 to

1948. Curators Bardaouil and Till Fellrath's selection emphasizes that the movement cannot be subsumed by the master narrative of Western Surrealism. The rooms introduce the group in reference to various themes, including a focus on the body, war, and women, as well as genres like photography, poetry, and literature. In nine rooms, about 130 paintings, drawings, and photographs — gathered from the curators' extensive fieldwork and never before seen together — are accompanied by scores of original documents, snapshots, and periodicals, as well as engaging texts and quotes from the artists. Political cartoons and video reels capture the interwar zeitgeist; this is, after all, not only the story of a long-lost vanguard, but also of the North African front of World War II, the twilight of Egypt's monarchy, and the fading days of francophone Egypt.

The curators present the movement and the period through the lens of rupture. Aesthetically, the Art and Liberty Group split with the traditional European-style portraits and landscapes replicated in early 20th-century Egyptian art by drawing crude bodies, dream sequences, and abstractions. These aesthetic choices resonate with the political ruptures of the time, especially conflict between British colonial soldiers and German fighters throughout World War II. There were also ruptures among colleagues. In 1948, the group's founder, Henein, broke with his longtime associate Breton. That same year, a group of young artists broke off to form the Contemporary Art Group, seeking to inform their work with an Egyptian national character.

The exhibition and the monograph *Surrealism in Egypt* emphasize the movement's intrinsic value separate from the legacy of French or British Surrealism, while showing its active participation and communication with leading Western theorists and artists. In spite of the curators' underlying claim that the Art and Liberty Group represents a rupture from French Surrealism, a Pompidou press release pegs the exhibition to the 50th anniversary of Breton's death.

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Art et Liberté, perhaps the first group show of an Egyptian modern art movement held at an international museum, will only tour European cities. “Where would you show it in Cairo?” says Fellrath, the co-curator. No exhibition space in the Egyptian capital could accommodate the paintings and archival documents, he maintained, adding that few lenders would feel confident that their prized pieces would be able to enter and exit the country freely; six years after the revolution, the political conditions in Egypt are too volatile. So the closest Bardaouil and Fellrath’s contributions will come to reaching Egypt’s art community will be through the translation of their exhibition catalog into Arabic.

In *Art et Liberté*, Bardaouil and Fellrath never connect the free art of the war period to the current bout of authoritarianism in Egypt, where a military strongman has muffled expression and choked politics since 2014. Yet the works they have painstakingly uncovered from private collections speak for themselves. In particular, a large 1937 painting by Mayo leaves little question as to the relevance of the Art and Liberty Group’s work to today’s Egyptian audience. From afar, the canvas *Coups de Bâtons* is a playful geometric composition. Upon closer inspection, it is a street cafe scene, with blue skies and latticed white fences overflowing with foliage. But the viewer can scarcely distinguish between each abstract, squiggly human on the cafe terrace. White characters wield batons at the denizens. One man is choking, his red tongue hanging out of his mouth. Another has fallen face down; chairs are strewn about, a cigarette pack lies on the floor. Do the batons belong to the police? Or to hired thugs? It’s a scene that is all too familiar for Cairenes of the 21st century, who know to avoid street cafes on the anniversary of the January 25 uprising for fear of violence from the police or from thugs operating with impunity.



"Coups de Bâtons," 1937, Mayo.

Of *Art et Liberté*'s thematically curated rooms, "Women of the City" left the most questions unanswered. The room was framed around the active role women played in the group, and aimed to show the artists' critique of prostitution in wartime Cairo. A video of archival photographs and footage played to the "St. Louis Blues," which included a newspaper photograph of belly dancers in gas masks, emblematic of the contradictions of wartime pleasures and objectification.

Yet the room featured works by mostly male artists, including Ramses Younan's woman fractured in three ways and Fouad Kamel's and Kamel El Telmissany's grotesque nudes, in which faces of dogs and wolves pop out of the women's chests. The most famous piece, *La Femme aux boucles d'or*, was the portrait of a prostitute with golden locks, peering out of the canvas with a sultry stare. It is by the pioneer of Egyptian modern painting, Mahmoud Said, a former judge and Alexandrian aristocrat; he was not a member of Art and Liberty, but his portrayal of unconstrained libido

exerted a huge influence on their work, and this painting appeared in the group's first exhibition. Gazing into the eyes of Mahmoud Said's iconic prostitute, one longs for commentary on how these paintings contributed to a counter-narrative of empowerment rather than engage in run-of-the-mill objectification.



"La Femme aux boucles d'or" (The Woman with Golden Locks), 1933, Mahmoud Said.

And what about the women of the movement? The catalog indicates that women were patrons and participants in the Art and Liberty Group, but

painters Inji Aflatoun and Amy Nimr, and photographers Ida Car and Lee Miller were sidelined. Even the obvious question of why the so-called Surrealists were primarily male was not broached.

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In Egypt today, the art establishment against which the Art and Liberty Group rebelled is still ascendant, though its form has evolved. The Egyptian Ministry of Culture, a massive bureaucracy with tens of thousands of employees and dozens of museums and cultural palaces, remains a major benefactor of local artists. But in the past decade, ultra-wealthy institutions from the Persian Gulf have come to dominate the world of Middle East art. Writing of these tensions [last year](#), the Egyptian critic Ahmed Naji described how the Ministry's newfound interest in Egyptian Surrealism is a response to outside forces. "Since its inception, the ministry marginalized and rejected what have come to be known as the Egyptian Surrealists," Naji wrote. "The resurgent interest in Surrealism results from a cutthroat race underway between the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Sharjah Biennale in the United Arab Emirates. The two are competing to present the heritage of the Egyptian Surrealist movement to the world."

Sharjah launched their exhibition first, but the results were decidedly mixed. On the opening night of *When Art Becomes Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists (1938-1965)*, the Egyptian Minister of Culture and his entourage walked through the airy atrium alongside the sheikha of Sharjah as scores of journalists snapped photos of VIPs standing in front of 150 works, mostly paintings, in the two-floor labyrinthine cultural palace on the Cairo Opera House grounds.

Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, president and director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, had worked closely with the Ministry to extract a slew of paintings from the ministry's neglected depositories and ill-maintained museums. Many of these paintings are foundational works of Arab modern

art, yet they rarely see the light of day. The ministry's storage places are afflicted by humidity, conditions that are "heartbreaking," says Al Qasimi. "They don't like works to come out of their storage. It's like high security when it comes to the art world. But I kept saying that it was important for people to see these works."

Some of the paintings by Younan, Kamel, Rettib Seddik, and Abdul-Hadi Al-Gazzar were perhaps stronger than the ones on display in Europe. But without a catalog or accompanying book to add context or history to the show, visitors to the gallery were essentially left adrift on the Nile. The vitrines of the movement's vast publications featured Photostats, not the originals. No artists were profiled.

The first room contained rare and significant paintings and drawings, some of which appeared in the group's radical publications, but with limited descriptions. The wall text explained the exhibition's goal:

Documenting their relationship with western counterparts, especially the French Surrealists, and their contribution to internationalism, anti-fascist global protest, and decolonization in the 20th century, this exhibition provides a glimpse of the complex and nuanced story of artistic and literary modernisms as they are staged and performed outside of the West.

But *When Art Becomes Liberty* contained neither a discussion of French Surrealism nor of other modernisms. This was peculiar, given that Sharjah, Cornell, and the American University in Cairo had convened a three-day conference to launch this inquiry into Egyptian Surrealism in November 2015. It seems the questions raised by the international scholars simply haven't been considered by the curators, who basically threw the works up on the zigzagging walls.

The very nature of Surrealist imagery, however defined, was left un-discussed, although most observers would note that the paintings actually demonstrated a variety of influences — social realism, folk art, and

abstraction, to name a few. A section called “The Afterlife of Surrealism” featured pieces from the 1970s and ’80s, which displayed Surrealist techniques more in line with the European avant-garde than with the early Egyptian artists, who had developed their own visual language.

The tacit argument put forth by the Sharjah exhibition was continuity from decade to decade, from the core group to later spinoffs, and across generations. Absent were the ruptures of 1948, when Art and Liberty’s founders went their separate ways, with some jailed and others expatriated. By obscuring this dramatic demise with the distasteful euphemism “a short-lived experiment,” the exhibition masked the group’s and the nation’s dynamics and politics.

The hastiness of the staging was also evident on opening night, when a label from Ibrahim Massouda’s *The Sacrifice*, an undated painting of Jesus at the cross, fell to the ground. Weeks later, when we visited the exhibition again, a young Egyptian university student stood puzzled in front of the painting, and asked if we knew anything about Massouda. Although a half dozen of his works were on display and one of them was even on the show’s posters and flyers, there was no text on the artist anywhere in sight.



"The Sacrifice," undated, Ibrahim Massouda.

When Art Becomes Liberty is due to open in the Emirates later this year, hopefully with a more fully developed curatorial vision worthy of the revolutionary paintings.

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These two exhibitions signal the entrance of Egyptian modern art into the international canon. This in itself is laudable. According to Adel El Siwi, in the 1980s, an exhibition in Milan on global Surrealisms neglected to even mention Egyptian artists or writers. Of course, the current turn toward Egyptian Surrealism on the international scene is inextricably linked to market forces. When it comes to Egyptian Surrealism's new benefactors, the main players are the Sharjah Art Foundation and the Qatari royals. The latter are also behind Doha's Mathaf Arab Museum of Arab Art, and own a vast private collection. "They are buying all of Egypt's history," the

contemporary Egyptian artist Mohamed Abla says of the Gulf's deep pockets.

The sanitized representation of the Art and Liberty Group is a case study in how a radical movement can be reappropriated by and for the establishment. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates share an authoritarian politics anathematic to free artistic production: both countries are ruled by undemocratic dynasties that limit expression, jail dissidents, and forbid many forms of political activity. Even drawing a caricature of a ruler can land you in prison. That so few of the reviews of both Egyptian Surrealism exhibitions have acknowledged that the Gulf drives the Arab art world is a testament to capital's power to suppress discussion of contentious political dynamics — which are nonetheless apparent to the naked eye.

The long-neglected artists of Art and Liberty, some of whom held radical views that would be forbidden in the contemporary Persian Gulf, have become collectables in the circles of conservative royals. Younan, Kamel, Telmissany, and Aflatoun, among others, are highly sought after at international auctions, often selling for much higher than the estimated gavel price. Exhibitions in Europe and the Middle East have also raised the price and profile of Arab modern paintings. “In this market, dealers and curators are competing to promote specific artists or sell specific art works,” says May Telmissany, a literary scholar and the niece of one of Art and Liberty's founders. “This — in my opinion — is deplorable because it simply betrays the principles of the Art and Liberty Group, who fought against the bourgeois and capitalist rhetoric and called for total freedom, including freedom from art market impositions.”

It is little wonder that Egyptian galleries have sought to profit from the newfound interest in local modern art. For *Art et Liberté*, the private Al Masar Gallery lent about a dozen paintings and drawings by the Contemporary Art Group. Concurrently, Al Masar held a small show in Cairo to sell further works from this period, and from the very artists on

display in Europe. Similarly, Safar Khan Gallery, which also lent items for *Art et Liberté*, recently hosted a show of sketches from Inji Aflatoun entitled *Freedom After Prison*. The buzzword “Surrealism” now appears in many gallery promotions in Cairo for artists whose works are anything but.

Gulf money is art power, the unacknowledged political force that is defining the way that Arab modernism is being exhibited in the Middle East and conveyed to the world. Perhaps that is why neither exhibition noted the parallels with the current political moment in the Middle East region, where expression has been stifled and artists have been censored.

Some 80 years later, we are again in a period where terror and conflict have come to define Egypt. The *Art et Liberté* show devoted its second room to the theme of art grappling with war and destruction, while *When Art Becomes Liberty* barely touched on the group’s antiwar sentiment. Yet, in the parking lot of the Cultural Palace’s grounds, not far from the Sharjah exhibit, were a couple of life-sized cannons being prepared for a theater production. It was a sort of cosmic joke and reminded us of the Art and Liberty Group’s raison d’être. “In this hour, when the entire world cares for nothing but the voice of cannons,” wrote Henein in the leaflet of the First Exhibition of Independent Art, held in Cairo in 1940, “we have found it our duty to provide a certain artistic current with the opportunity to express its freedom and its vitality.”

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