

# African Painters

Here is a blog about contemporary art on and off the continent of Africa. To push forward the concept of African cultural development I have created this blog but more importantly than that it's a place where we can blow-off steam and discuss the impossible task of defining a continent.

MONDAY, MAY 15, 2006

## Ibrahim El Salahi | The Inevitable



The Inevitable by Ibrahim El Salahi 1984-1985 | 9 panels total: 530.86 x 604.52 cm

What Constitutes A Modern African Masterpiece | The Inevitable by Ibrahim El Salahi

Ibrahim El Salahi, the picture maker, was born in 1930 in Omdurman, in the Sudan. He is best known as the pioneer of modern African art.

It was in 1975, when working as the Cultural Minister he was betrayed and accused by the military dictator General Nimieri, of conducting anti-government activities. He was imprisoned for six months without trial. Whilst serving time in prison he had asked the guard for some paper and a pen in order to write letters, draw and occupy his creative mind. He remembers his warden laughing and muttering "Pencils...paper...you're not in New York now Ibrahim!"

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The conditions in a Sudanese prison are unimaginable. There are no beds for inmates, who have to make do with shoes for makeshift pillows. A death sentence in a Sudanese prison is on average 3 years as most inmates die either of TB, Aids or Cerebral Meningitis. The same is true today as it was back in 1975.

When confined to his cell one of the inmates had given Ibrahim a sharpened toothbrush end and suggested he used it as a pencil in the sand, while in the exercise yard. By Ibrahim's account, the inmates were let out of their cells 3 times in a day. Firstly, around 5.30am to take porridge, served up in dirty tin buckets, then again at 10.00am for exercise for about 25 minutes and finally at 1.30pm for their evening meal. The only way an inmate could determine the time was through the traditional Muslim call for prayer. The call for prayer was routinely conducted five times daily and this gave the inmates a sense of structure, sanity and normality.

Ibrahim explained that he would use the 25 exercise minutes to sketch out ideas for a huge painting. Every day he would sit quietly on the concrete floor in his grubby cell thinking intensely about his new artwork. He couldn't wait until the 25 minutes came around each day when finally he could return to his work: sketching secretly in the sand. It soon became clear to the other inmates that Ibrahim was a man of culture and out of respect for his position and standing they would proudly keep watch and ensure the guards didn't catch him hard at work. He was often given a tap on the shoulder and when tapped would quickly scrub out the day's sketch and bury the sharpened instrument deep in the grubby sand. Daily he would make a strong mental note of where he had buried his sharpened toothbrush and, like a devoted husband to his patient awaiting wife, would habitually revisit the specific spot punctually the following day. As the 25 minutes were up the inmates were all ushered back to their cells and once again, Ibrahim was given another 23 hours to think on the development of his masterpiece. This continued for six long months. By the end of his stay he had created a huge mental sketchbook. After being released from prison he wasted no time in re-establishing his links with the UK and quickly left the Sudan. He soon gained a respectable position as the Cultural Minister for Sudan in Qatar in the Oman and frequently travelled between the Middle East and the UK.

Ten years later, having never forgotten his Government's betrayal and his time caged in prison, he decided to exercise his thoughts sketched out on the exercise yard in the sullied prison sand. The painting was to be on nine separate panels. The panels were to be broken up in a specific way in order to reflect the time spent incarcerated.

The Sudanese gained independence from the British in January 1,

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1956 only to be plunged into a brutal civil war between rival factions from the North and the South this was Sudan's first civil war 1956-72. In 1969 General Nimieri gained ultimate power through a military coup and after 21 years and to Ibrahim's delight, Nimieri was finally overthrown in 1985. His painting is a celebration and recognition of the determination of all those who suffered within these years under horrendous tyrannical rule.

Never has there been a better time to show the world, "The Inevitable" by Ibrahim El Salahi. These nine panels of artwork are Africa's, "Guernica", a testimony of war and revolution, which raises the global consciousness about the imminent threat of dictatorship and civil unrest. From its creation, "The Inevitable", has been housed in its temporary home at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art in Ithaca, NY, though it makes frequent trips abroad but the one place it never goes is the Sudan. Ibrahim has always maintained that the Sudanese people should own the 9-panelled Masterpiece, yet he refuses to allow the painting to travel to the Sudan until the country enjoys, public liberties and democratic institutions.

Speculations as to the exact meaning of the anguished images are as numerous and diverse as the people who have viewed the panels. "The Inevitable", challenges the notion of warfare and depicts the chaotic, exposing the brutal acts of destruction and genocide. It is a testimony of Ibrahim's art that the symbols chosen hold many, often paradoxical meanings yet the meticulous significance of the imagery remains ambiguous. Never before has an African artist made such a social statement, which has echoed the sentiments of an entire Nation and is as relevant today as it was in 1984/85. The panels are extremely powerful with determined lines. The western distinction between painting and drawing is irrelevant and as Ibrahim says: "There is no painting without drawing and no form without lines... in effect all pictures can be reduced to lines."

As the crisis in Darfur escalates and the world looks on, we, like these powerful lines, must ensure that the people of the Sudan survive this appalling genocide.

Author: Joe Pollitt

Posted by [African Painters](#) at [6:55 PM](#)

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