



Coup de Batons , (1937), Mayo. © Adagp, Paris 2016

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‘In a time when the only voice the world cares about is the voice of the cannons, we find it necessary to give an artistic spirit the chance to express its independence and its vitality.’ So wrote Georges Henein, a founding member of the Art and Liberty Group, in the catalogue of the group’s first exhibition of Independent Art in Cairo in 1940. The group had announced its formation at the end of 1938 with the manifesto ‘Long Live Degenerate Art’, standing against the twin evils of Fascism and academic art.

The exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, dedicated to this collective of surrealist artists and writers, charts the short but influential history of the

movement with paintings, archival documents, printed materials, and photographs. Its aim is to make artists such as Fouad Kamel, Inji Efflatoun, Kamel El-Telmissany better known – not simply because they are part Egyptian art history, but because they are part of the global Surrealist movement. The title of Sam Bardaouil’s accompanying book (and the subtitle to the exhibition) is, crucially, not ‘Egyptian Surrealism’ but *Surrealism in Egypt*. It hopes to show, to quote Kamel el-Telmissany, that ‘Surrealism is not a “purely French movement” [...] but rather it is distinguished primarily by being international in its thinking and realisation.’ As well as Egyptian artists the exhibition includes art by non-Egyptians working in Egypt, such as Roland Penrose and Lee Miller.

This charismatic and radical group, steeped in the ideas of communist internationalism, did not want the parochial label of Egyptian art. They cared deeply about improving the lot of their country, and particularly that of the poor and downtrodden, but they expressed themselves through the global medium of Surrealism. ‘Art has no country’ was their frequent refrain.

The majority of the group’s members were in their late teens or very early twenties and it is no coincidence that the works by older artists stand out here. *Coup de bâtons* (1937), a painting by Greek-Egyptian artist Mayo, dominates the third room. In the chaos of a brawl, bizarre stick-like figures grab each other, hurl chairs, and contort themselves in pain. Among the tumult, moments of stillness emerge: a discarded pack of cigarettes, a lone bicycle, and a bottle of Arak lying sideways on the table. If you consider the painting alongside Ramses Younane’s chaise-longue female forms and the playful photos of Ida Kar, Van Leo, and Étienne Sved, it seems as if an interest in the artificial construction of the human body runs through many of the works in this exhibition.



Portrait Surréaliste de Gulperie Efflatoun , (1945), Georges Henein. Fondation Arabe pour l'Image, Beyrouth

Georges Henein and Ramses Younane were almost elder statesmen, at 26 and 27 respectively, at their second exhibition in 1941; Inji Efflatoun and Hassan el-Telmissani cannot have been older than 17 or 18 – and sometimes this shows in the work. Efflatoun, who later served time in prison under Nasser for her communist politics, and painted very well, is clearly in an early stage of her development here.

These firebrand young artists and intellectuals were, in fact, mostly communists. But they were, by and large, communists who lived in very large villas. The cosmopolitan Egypt that they have become associated with has been criticised for its links to imperial power and even the oppression of the Arab population of Egypt. This political contradiction is never far from the surface of this exhibition.

In many ways, the criticism of their support for an imperial power is rather unfair. Their publications were often banned by the British; many spent time in prison for their politics; the villa of the Curiel brothers, who were members of the group, was given to Algeria to support their people's movement and to this day it is still the Algerian embassy in Cairo. In other ways, however, their detractors may have a point. Amy Nimr was married to British official Walter Smart. Most of the rest of the group were from aristocratic or elite families. Despite their efforts to help the downtrodden, it was Nasser's Egyptian and Arabic nationalist anti-colonialism that inspired people, not them. To the delight of some and the chagrin of others, modern art was incorporated into the new Nasserist project.

Another exhibition on Egyptian surrealists, 'When Arts Become Liberty', took place in Cairo in October 2016. There, a direct line was traced from the Art and Liberty group to Egypt's 1950s and '60s national modern art movement. Henein, who is the hero of this exhibition but peripheral to the one in Cairo, would have been disgusted. For him the new nationalist art movements represented everything he thought Surrealism was against. He called it 'a morally blurred Fascism helmeted under an incorrigible ignorance', and in 1962 he went to exile in Paris.

This exhibition raises questions about the culture of 1940s and '50s Egypt which are hard to answer; it is not clear that we can write off either Henein or Nasser as wholly wrong. Behind this exhibition hides the failure of a progressive, cosmopolitan elite to communicate with many outside its circle. But surely this does not mean we must write off their emancipatory message and give in to what Georges Henein called the 'heinous mating of conformism and terror'?

'Art and Liberty: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)' is at the Centre Pompidou, Paris from 20 October–16 January 2016

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