

'I was touched by Efflatoun's courage and determination'

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IN RETROSPECT: Leonore-Namkha Beschi says as part of Mathaf she is witnessing the unveiling of region's history.



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A relatively young institution yet a host of large collections of regional and international art, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art is uncovering the history of the region. It has amassed contemporary and modern collections from regional and international artists "that are in dialogue with each and in continuity with what can be described as Arab Modernity."

Leonore-Namkha Beschi, Assistant Curator at Mathaf, says it is important not to look at the collection with the eyes of a Westerner or from a Western understanding of art history.

Speaking to Community, Beschi says Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Arts is a fairly young institution that is currently building its collection, developing its research through the Mathaf Encyclopaedia and presenting a range of artistic practices from the Arab World through a number of permanent and temporary exhibitions.

"We, as part of the institution, are witnessing and unveiling the history of this region, whether we decide to define it as the GCC, the Levant of the Mena (Middle East, North Africa, South Asia). This is a context full of complexity to evolve in and a unique opportunity to be part of," says the curator.

She recently held a talk on Inji Efflatoun, the pioneer of modern Egyptian art, and her works at Mathaf, and curated an exhibition called Mother Tongue on Efflatoun's work earlier in Focus, the exhibition showcasing five different regional artists' works.

Speaking about Mother Tongue, she says her favourite moments in the exhibition was a paradoxical juxtaposition in the gallery space of two important pieces, Efflatoun's Self-Portrait and Fellaha in a Moment of Reflection, both painted in 1958.

The paintings narrate two diametrical visions of Efflatoun's personal reality. On one hand, her self-portrait can be perceived by the elite as a classic, nostalgic and ideal depiction of the artist inside her studio. Possibly the translation of a form of entrapment and fakeness imposed to the artist by the Cairene elite. On the other hand, Beschi says the work portraying a farmer (Fellaha), out in the field and anxious about an unsettling future, embody Efflatoun's actual preoccupations and will become a recurring theme in her artistic practice.

This particular work is a prime example of the artist's unceasing effort to relate to Egypt, which is literally depicted as "the mother of the world" (Um al-Dunya) by its own people.

When asked to curate for Focus, Beschi says as a curator she was first curious to identify a feminine figure with such an eventful life, rich in personal tragedies and pivotal moments embedded in the history of the region, that it seemed almost as if taken from a novel. "With that approach in mind, I was fascinated by the powerful work of Inji Efflatoun and touched by her courage and self-determination," says the curator.

The first pieces she saw from Efflatoun's works were her series of "Portrait of women behind bars (1959, 1960 and 1963)."

In June 1959, Efflatoun's political and feminist activities got her arrested and incarcerated until 1963. Four years during which she continued painting thanks to her ability to convince the prison director to sell her work at his own profit.

"Efflatoun showed courage and self-discipline to keep her artistic production thriving. The prison system became an endless source of inspiration to practice her art and allowed the reaffirmation of her aesthetics in series of prisoner's portraits and landscapes behind bars," says Beschi.

She first began depicting her inmates with intense facial expressions, capturing the traces of the hardship of life in their eyes. And then she transitioned to reference nature and the outside world in her paintings, expressing her longing for freedom.

The curator says it is inherent to the curatorial process to feel somehow "connected" with each artist you work with. The further your research goes, the more you get a glimpse at their world and feel invested in sharing your findings with the

audience, whether through your writings or in the layout of the exhibition. "In this case, I was determined to emphasise on the importance of her time spent in prison on her artistic practice, as she is mostly known for her later work referencing to the 'white period,'" says Beschi.

However, working on the body of work of an artist that is no longer alive definitely requires a different approach and methodology to the subject. Most of the challenges come when the information about the artist and the work are scarce or in a different language.

"This can affect the hierarchy of the information when anecdotes are interpreted in a way that history is 'rewritten' or simply lost in translation," says Beschi, adding that it requires a thorough analysis of the information found via other sources than the artist such as the family estate, galleries, institutions and previous writings, for instance, and to focus on the curatorial perspective that you wish to translate in the exhibition.

For Efflatoun's exhibition, Beschi says her main points of reference were numerous conversations with Nadia Radwan, Assistant Professor in World Art History at the University of Bern, who researched on the artist and wrote Efflatoun's biography for the Mathaf Encyclopaedia as well as the Memoirs of Inji Efflatoun: From Childhood to Prison first published in 1993 and never translated from Arabic to this date.

Efflatoun's upper middle class origins, she says, made her feel unrooted and captive of an elitist upbringing for which she developed a forceful sense of resistance, as depicted in her Egyptian working force portraits.

As a painter, a feminist and a political activist, she was filled with the urge to investigate her own heritage and connect with the Egyptian people. "Efflatoun belonged to this generation of women who witnessed the social and political transformation of the Egyptian society, but also initiated these changes by their activism and positions towards human rights," says the curator of Mother Tongue.

She became alongside her peer Doria Shafik, a philosopher, poet and writer, a leading figure of Egyptian feminism. Women of Efflatoun's generation were successors to the legacy of Egyptian intellectuals such as Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947) or Saiza Nabarawi (1897-1985) who paved the way to a reflection about social justice, women's right and the role of art in the construction of a nation.

The fertility of its lands and the river Nile, cultivated and harvested by the agricultural labour force, are a quintessential symbol of Egyptian nationalism. Her numerous encounters with agricultural families from Upper Egypt living humble lives, were decisive in instigating the convictions that Inji Efflatoun is known for and drove her ambition not to become a stranger to her own culture and identity.