

## **To View, Engage, and Act**

By Mohamed A. Hassan

In Sudan during the 1960s and 1970s, two distinct art schools emerged. The first, the Khartoum Art School lacked a clear theoretical foundation, whereas the second, the Crystal School, was grounded in a solid theoretical base articulated through a manifesto. However, the 1980s witnessed artistic work that transcended collective and school traditions. The critique of these schools by artists Abdullah Bola and Hassan Musa marked a significant phase that led to a re-evaluation of the status of collective artistic traditions. Although these two artists shared views on many artistic issues such as the significance of art and pure form, creativity, and craftsmanship and criticized the tenets of "authenticity" and Africanism, they did not adopt a single style in practice. Immediately following this period, Issam Abdel-Hafiez's artistic journey began in the mid-1980s, a time marked by a re-examination of the celebrated status of style. This era coincided with social, political, and cultural transformations in Sudan and parts of East Africa, shaping the overall context of his artistic experience and that of his generation. Issam's early work can be described as occupying a middle ground between the completely experimentation exemplified by his friend Hassan Ali Ahmed and the maintenance of style as a flexible framework. At the start of his artistic career, Issam's paintings and drawings were dominated by semi-abstract compositions that combined human figures with elements of the open urban environment, particularly houses scattered across spaces interspersed with decorative motifs. Faces appeared among these elements, creating a coherent visual composition in which it became difficult to distinguish between naturalistic representation and abstract cultural forms. During this period, his work was divided between fully colored paintings and black ink drawings.

Issam graduated just before the popular resistance against Nimeiri's regime erupted, leading to its downfall in 1985. For several consecutive years, he held a recurring exhibition titled "January 10th," commemorating the violently suppressed youth movement of 1982 that sparked the uprising. This exhibition was initially started by a group of artists, but Issam continued it solo for several years, most recently in Kenya last year. In the latter half of the 1980s, Sudan experienced a brief period of democracy, known as the Second Democracy, which inspired widespread hope for building a "New Sudan," as the late John Garang, the founder of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, described it.

During this same period, East Africa, particularly Sudan and Ethiopia, suffered a severe drought that triggered massive displacement to major cities. Khartoum transformed into a capital city representing all Sudanese, where diverse Sudanese languages were spoken and a variety of clothing styles were displayed, despite retaining its colonial-elitist character. Then, in June 1989, Islamists seized power in a coup, and repression returned. These environmental, social, and political transformations shattered the certainty of the post-colonial generation and the optimistic expectations of Issam's generation, contributing to the maturation of his awareness. Perhaps for these reasons, which linked art to these various transformations, viewers will notice that Issam's works draw on hybrid visual sources, making it difficult to pinpoint their country of origin. People are presented simply as human beings, and sometimes it is even difficult to determine their gender or age, despite the clarity of their emotional and psychological states. Issam also worked as a professional photographer, traveling throughout Sudan and neighboring countries. This experience instilled in him an awareness of the negative impact of social and political conflicts, which is evident in various aspects of his work from his paintings and exhibition titles to his life story - reflecting a dynamic engagement with cultural, social, and political activities. The influence of his photographic experience is apparent in two distinctive features of his paintings: a high degree of selectivity in his subject

matter and an intense focus on key elements which, however numerous, remain equally accessible to the viewer.

Following the dawn of the third millennium, Issam's artwork took on a distinctly dynamic character. Brushstrokes became the dominant element, and splashes of color assumed a performative role. The palette shifted toward black and red, complemented by shades of grey and ochre. Although this phase appears entirely new, it was, in fact, a fusion of two preoccupations that had been central to Issam's work since his early days, the exclusive use of black and fully saturated colors. Because his works during this period tended toward spontaneous and direct expression with consequently simplified elements, they acquired a minimalist character, featuring fewer colors and a greater emphasis on black and variations of grey. The presence of areas devoid of color in some works indicates that the pieces absorbed the experience of drawing through coloring. Here, it seems Issam began to express himself in more intense forms, where consciousness aligned with impulsive bursts of emotion. Perhaps this reflected a sense of necessity to take direct, practical action, rather than engaging solely in cultural work, to confront the oppression his homeland was experiencing which, instead of diminishing as resistance grew, intensified. During the December 2018 uprising, Issam lived in the heart of Khartoum in an apartment that included his studio, rarely leaving it. Demonstrations and clashes between young revolutionaries and the police raged in his neighborhood, and tear gas filled the building. This continued throughout the year, while Issam continued to produce his work and fulfill his duties as Secretary-General of the Sudanese Visual Artists Union from the same place. He left when war suddenly erupted, abandoning most of his paintings, some of which were later rescued and are now included in this exhibition.

Interestingly, the paintings Issam produced in Kenya over the past two years whilst living in Nairobi reveal a decline in the use of achromatic colors, as he has rediscovered a vibrant and diverse palette. Few of his earlier works featured shades of violet engaging in such a powerful dialogue with contrasting greens and yellows, as is evident in some pieces from this period. While the faces in certain works have become darker, the surrounding environments are characterized by rich, vivid colors. This shift may stem from the cultural richness and lush natural environment of Kenya, where several Sudanese artists have lived before him. The first Sudanese artist to live in Kenya was Taj Al-Sir Ahmed, who headed the Department of Graphic Design at Kenyatta College - then a constituent college of the University of Nairobi - from 1974 to 1976.<sup>1</sup> This evolution suggests that Issam's experience will deepen further through his exposure to Kenya's dynamic cultural scene, which is itself open to neighboring cultural centers and international influences. In this brief space, I have endeavored to provide a general overview of the context in which Issam's experience has evolved, on the occasion of this retrospective exhibition, which follows a previous one hosted by Downtown Gallery in Khartoum. Perhaps these words will illuminate for the viewer what is missing regarding his artistic contribution and his homeland, which endured a prolonged war in the past and is now experiencing another conflict with an uncertain outcome.

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<sup>1</sup> This biographical information about Ahmed was provided to me by Dr. Fathi Osman, the author of the first book on Ahmed's art, titled \*Khartoum from Memory: The Life and Art of T S Ahmed\*, which will be launched alongside a comprehensive exhibition of Ahmed's paintings at the Almas Art Foundation in London, just five days after Issam's exhibition.