

Visual Arts

Surrealism's Egyptian moment

A revelatory show celebrates a cosmopolitan collective that flourished in wartime Cairo



APRIL 17, 2017 by Maya Jaggi

Two floors above Picasso's "Guernica" in the Reina Sofía museum in Madrid, another vision of the suffering wrought by aerial bombardment has been brought to light. Samir Rafi's "Nudes", a Surrealist response to the Axis bombing of Alexandria, depicts a nightmarish shoreline of semi-submerged bodies, churning waves and scorched trees. Pale eggs sit in a nest of matted hair as naked women flee and a bird of prey carries off a rat.

While the 1945 oil painting recalls Hieronymus Bosch, its title is more likely an ironic dig at Belle Epoque bathers in the Impressionist and Symbolist painting then in vogue in Cairo's salons. The teenage Rafi, in revolt against what he saw as mimicry, was part of a daring group of young Surrealists in Egypt whose story, after five years of curatorial sleuthing, is only now being told. Their intelligent quest for a politically engaged yet unfettered art, abreast of global currents yet intelligible at home, strikingly anticipated the concerns of many 21st-century artists.

Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt is co-curated by the fast-rising duo of Art Reoriented, Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath. It traces Egypt's Art and Liberty collective of artists, photographers, writers and intellectuals through its short-lived starburst from 1938 to 1948. With more than 125 works and 150 archival documents, this is the first full show of a group whose Egyptian core embraced foreign-born artists at a time when wartime Cairo was a haven from fascism.

Art and Liberty's founding manifesto, *Long Live Degenerate Art*, was printed in December 1938 in Arabic and French, with an image of "Guernica" (painted the previous year) on the reverse. The 39 signatories stood with Picasso and others against Hitler's persecution of the avant-garde. A key founder was Georges Henein, a bespectacled poet and sometime photographer who had spent his adolescence in Madrid. His poems against General Franco were translated into Spanish for this show.

Surrealism took root in Cairo owing to a fluid network of cosmopolitan Egyptians and sojourners that was enlarged by wartime displacement. The Romanian-Greek poet Marie Cavadia was a patron, as was the Syrian-Lebanese painter Amy Nimr, who studied at the Slade in London. Lee Miller, the US photographer, moved to Cairo in 1933 after marrying an Egyptian. Her affair with the English Surrealist Roland Penrose (whom she later married) opened channels between the Cairo group and Surrealists in Britain and California.

Other affiliates included the Italian anti-fascist Angelo de Riz, and the Hungarian-Jewish photographer Etienne Sved. A graphic display of Henein's connections ranges from Belgium (a 1946 letter from Magritte) to Mexico and Japan. Two handwritten letters to André Breton mark their first meeting in 1936, and rupture in 1948 — one reason being Henein's suspicion that the French Surrealists did not view the Egyptians as equals.

The thematic exhibition first plunges visitors into 1930s Egypt. The group tilted not only at British colonial power in a "veiled protectorate", but also at monarchy, the bourgeoisie, and nationalists press-ganging art into the service of Egyptianness. In two photographs on opposite walls, an informal group of youthful men and women face off the Cairo salon artists in their fezes, pictured with the Egyptian king. Press cuttings of Wafd party paramilitary blue-shirts, and Muslim Brotherhood green-shirts, vying in their emulation of Hitler Youth, are a reminder that the fascist threat was not confined to Europe. The manifesto was sparked by a visit to Cairo by the poet F. T. Marinetti, the

Alexandria-born, fascist-inclined founder of Futurism.



Members and associates of Art and Liberty, 1945 © Coleccion Christophe Bouleau

The Surrealists clashed with police and the British army. Among the most vivid compositions is the oil painting “Baton Charge” (1937) by Antoine Malliarakis, the Greek-French Egyptian known as “Mayo”, who studied in 1920s Paris. The violent scene at a Cairo intellectuals’ café is a maelstrom of upturned green tables, spilt bottles and truncheons. In a hint of torture, one semi-abstract stick figure has his penis caught in a metal clamp. In a 1941 photograph, the group appears in high spirits, but a central easel and empty chair signal absent friends in jail.

Five group shows were held in wartime Cairo, from February 1940. Mayo’s “Cruel Drawing” of 1937 captures pre-war malaise through a tangle of grotesque faces. Inji Efflatoun’s oil painting “Girl and Monster” (1941) depicts a woman engulfed by flames. Most disturbing is Nimr’s gouache “Underwater Skeleton” (1943), made within months of the death of her young son by an explosive device. Ribbons of vapour thread through the eyes of a skeleton joining a submerged graveyard of bones.

Why Egyptian artists were drawn to Surrealism is further underlined in a section on *Fragmented Bodies*. Amid stark inequality, the artists exposed the suffering they saw around them. Hassan El-Telmisani's untitled oil painting of 1947 depicts what might be a Nile peasant in rags, his head in a sack. Henein's poetry inspired art, as did Albert Cossery's stories of Egypt's underbelly, *The Men God Forgot* (1941). With 200,000 British and Commonwealth troops stationed in Egypt, the figure of the prostitute recurs: the woman in an untitled oil painting by Fouad Kamel radiates pain. The surrealists gave a local inflection to art derived from the subconscious, as in Ramses Younan's 1939 untitled oil painting depicting the Egyptian sky goddess, Nut, stretched like a portal across the horizon.



'Portrait of Space' (1937) by Lee Miller © Lee Miller Archives

A section on Women and the City explores the role of salon hostesses, and the group's strong feminism. Miller's seminal "Portrait of Space" (1937), the desert seen through torn gauze, is also on show alongside photographers who ridiculed the neo-Pharaonic pretensions of modern Egypt. In one perhaps prescient image, a fleshly hand is crushed by an outsize stone foot.

In an anti-communist crackdown of 1946, many group members were jailed or exiled. Others switched to film-making. The final room is devoted to a splinter group that eclipsed the Surrealists after the Nasserite revolution of 1952. These artists defined themselves by nationality. A letter from Henein to Younan in 1953 expresses disgust at the refusal of these "new fascists" to allow non-Egyptians to show with them.

Art and Liberty was officially written off as a failed attempt to import an alien style from Paris. Yet as Younan pointed out, the supposedly French movement was fed by many streams, from Dalí and de Chirico to Max Ernst. Nourished by interviews with surviving relatives, this exemplary show retrieves a dynamic chapter of Surrealism that was, till now, lost even from footnotes.

'Art et Liberté', Reina Sofía to May 28, museoreinasofia.es; K20 Düsseldorf, July 15-October 15; Tate Liverpool, November 17-March 18

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2017. All rights reserved. You may share using our article tools. Please don't copy articles from FT.com and redistribute by email or post to the web.