

Review Salah El Mur

By Amira El Ahl

He loves red – sometimes deep and warm, sometimes bright and exhilarating. Or brown, and of course yellow, in all its shades and varieties, from matt to vivid - bright as the sun over Khartoum or warm as the sand under the feet.

„The colours in my paintings are very strong because of the sun in my country and also because of the people there, who love to wear colourful clothes“, says Salah El Mur.

The Sudanese artist was born in 1966 in Khartoum and grew up in the small village of Garif, situated just outside the capital on the banks of the Blue Nile where he still lives and works. It is the simple village life that inspires him most, says Salah El Mur. Bright colours are shining everywhere, turquoise on wooden doors, yellow and red on walls, and the woman glow in green, orange and cherry-red fabric that veils their bodies. The influences on his work are diverse and range from the shape of the houses and the graffiti on their walls – flowers and patterns drawn by the women of the village – to music and stories. But also calligraphy, carpets, church paintings and old magazines find their way into Salah El Mur’s scrap books, which he always carries with him. He has got thousands of them and whenever he wants to paint he goes back to them, leafs through them to find images that he will eventually put together in a new design. “Sudan is multi-cultured and very special”, says the artist. It is African and Arab, Christian and Muslim – and all of these cultural influences find their way into the works of Salah El Mur.

Yet, what probably influenced him most was his childhood and his family, who have been fishermen for generations. His mother used to do crochet, a process of creating fabric from yarn, thread, or other material strands using a crochet hook. She was very imaginative, made people or cars with wings and other invented creatures. Salah El Mur describes his mothers work as abstract in a naive way and says that up until today he is highly influenced by her creations.

“If you see my paintings you can find a lot of references to my childhood”, says Salah El Mur. Like in his most recent work from 2011, where he revived childhood memories from his first visit to a circus. There he saw a fat man jumping the ropes and a man walking on stilts.

Both feature now in one of his paintings, which was lately exhibited along with 41 other paintings in Cairo, Egypt. The 2011-series called “Circus” features strong colours and Salah El Mur’s distinctive figurative yet abstract style. There is the brown horse with the bright-orange roller skates under his hooves or the man with his tongue sticking out ready to bite into a ripe slice of watermelon – a reference to the people who came to the Circus with their picnics. The paintings are all acrylic on canvas and range in size, from 15x15cm up to 70x50cm.

Fruits are a preferred subject of Salah El Mur, they can be found again and again in his paintings, just like people and animals. His latest exhibition featured works from 2006 – Insects, Fruits and People, as well as a series from 2007 titled Guards. Time and again it

is the bird in various forms and colours that he depicts in those paintings - sitting on the head of a person or on an arm, rocking on a rope or flying high above the other images.

The exhibition at the residence of the European Commission in Cairo, organised and arranged by Stefania Angarano from Mashrabia Gallery in Cairo was Salah El Mur's third exhibition in the Egyptian capital. After closing its doors at the end of May, a collection of the paintings travelled to Washington DC, where they will be shown at the African Cultural Centre for a month.

Using traditional elements in a contemporary way, that is what distinguishes Salah El Mur's style, says Stefania Angarano. "His paintings are full of symbols and rituals but it is never clear what they really are – that makes them very mysterious and attractive."

It was at the same time his father took him to the Russian circus in Khartoum when Salah El Mur started drawing. He was in primary school back then and at the age of 16 he already knew that he wanted to become an artist. His art teacher at the time saw his talent and encouraged him and shortly afterwards his work was shown for the first time in public at a big hotel in Khartoum. He eventually studied Graphic Design at the College of Fine and Applied Arts at Sudan University in Khartoum and after his graduation in 1989 started to work as a painter, photographer, illustrator and filmmaker. He has written and illustrated several children's books and directed and produced six short films so far and participated at a number of international film festivals.

But if he had to decide between the two, he would always choose the painting over the filmmaking, says Salah El Mur. Painting and illustration are his passion. And it has taken him far. His children's books have been published in Arabic, French, Italian and Spanish and he has exhibited widely in Africa, the Arab world, Europe and Canada. His work has even been shown in a group exhibition at the British National Museum in London, a rare honour for a contemporary artist from Sudan.

Although he has sold paintings to private collectors in the United States he has never had an individual exhibition there. His visit to Washington DC., where he will give a workshop for children alongside the exhibition at the African Cultural Centre, will be his first visit to the USA. "I love to see the new world", says Salah El Mur, "but my dream is to visit Latin America." He was once in Cuba, which he instantly fell in love with – the music, the dresses, the colours. "Life is very simple there, like at home and I love this simplicity."

This love is reflected in his art, in the strong, vivid colours and the basic elements of life that are part and parcel of his work.