



KAMALA IBRAHIM ISHAG

STATES OF ONENESS

SERPENTINE SOUTH

7 OCTOBER 2022 – 29 JANUARY 2023

SERPENTINE

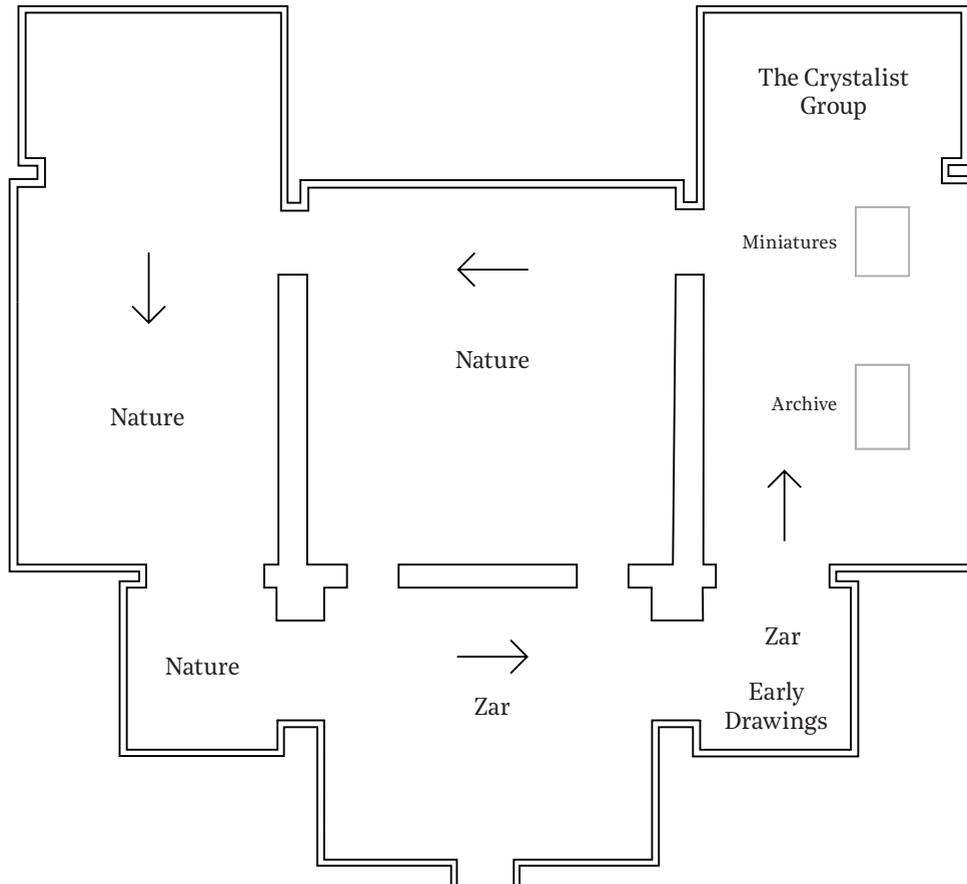


SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION



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INTRODUCTION



Pioneering artist Kamala Ibrahim Ishag (born 1939, Omdurman, Sudan, lives and works in Khartoum, Sudan) is a defining figure in modern and contemporary art and mentor and teacher to several generations of artists. Her paintings, where human and plant forms intertwine, contemplate the cyclical flow of life and the intangible aspects of women's lives in Sudan. Drawing from a diverse range of contexts, Ishag's work bridges the earthly and the spiritual through an understanding of our relationships with the natural world.

In the early to mid-1960s, Ishag was associated with the Khartoum School: an influential Sudanese modernist movement that forged an artistic identity for the newly independent nation by drawing on both Arabo-Islamic and African artistic traditions. In the mid-1970s, Ishag co-founded the Crystalists, a postmodern, conceptual group which represented a break away and a challenge to the identity-focused, and male-dominated Sudanese art scene.

The Crystalists envisioned the universe as a crystal cube – transparent but always changing according to the viewer’s position.

Despite her integral role as a member of important 20th-century art movements in Sudan, Ishag refuses to be defined by a singular group or style. Her work is inspired by the flora in her Khartoum home garden, mythology, ancient visual cultures of Sudan, and the folktales told by her mother and grandmothers.

Equally formative to her work is the field research that she carried out with spiritualist women who convene healing Zar ceremonies, a traditional practice in North Africa and the surrounding region. Since her time studying at the Royal College of Art in London in the 1960s, Ishag has been inspired by William Blake’s visionary subjects and Francis Bacon’s distorted figures and surrealist undertones.

This exhibition traces 60 years of Ishag’s practice and features large-scale oil paintings, works on paper, and painted objects including calabashes, leather drums and a wooden partition, alongside new works that have never previously been exhibited. The exhibition is grouped thematically and broadly follows a chronology, although the recurrence of themes such as Zar, nature, and crystal cubes, across Ishag’s career reveals the interconnections between all her subjects.



ZAR

Throughout her career, Ishag has taken inspiration from Zar, a possession by unwanted spirits, but also a women-led healing ceremony that includes ritualistic singing, ecstatic music, costumes, dancing and incense-burning. While the traditional Zar convenings to drive spirits away are not widely practiced today, they were popular in Sudan – in particular in Ishag’s hometown of Omdurman – and across other parts of North and East Africa and South West Asia.

The first gallery centres on Zar ceremonies and the gathering of women in states of trance and commune, which cause their bodies and faces to become increasingly strained, contorted and twisted. Ishag has described: “These physical distortions come from inside – from life, from circumstances. They are mental or psychological.” As seen in these works, Ishag’s Zar paintings shift between showing women gathered in harmonious circles and discordant crowds.

THE CRYSTALIST GROUP

Ishag's interest in Zar was prompted by the paintings of visionary English artist William Blake, which she saw at the then Tate Gallery when studying as a postgraduate at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London between 1964 and 1966. Blake's exploration of spirituality and incarnation through the sublime power of poetry and image resonated with her own contemplation of the natural world and her knowledge of Zar. Ishag carried out field research into Zar practice for her RCA thesis, and this significantly influenced the development of themes and styles that still flow through her work today.

From the early to mid-1960s, Ishag was associated with the Khartoum School, together with contemporaries including Ibrahim El Salahi and Ahmad Shibrain. The school forged a modern artistic identity for Sudan – which had gained independence in 1956 – by drawing on both Arabo-Islamic and African artistic traditions. Later, Ishag broke away to become the leading figure of the conceptual Crystalist Group during the 1970s and 1980s. The group lent towards a postmodern style and was the first to position itself in opposition to the Khartoum School's view. The Crystalist Manifesto – written by Ishag's student Muhammad Hamid Shaddad and signed by herself and other students including Nayla El Tayeb and Hashim Ibrahim – was published in the Khartoum newspaper al-Ayyam in 1976.



Envisioning the universe as a crystal cube, transparent but always changing according to the viewer's position, the group advocated for a new aesthetic and philosophy – modelled on diversity, transparency and existentialist theory – which emphasised the non-linear and challenged art historical canons as well as the idea of a 'national' movement.

This gallery presents Crystalist paintings and earlier works, alongside a selection of materials from the artist's personal archive.

NATURE



Plants and flora have appeared within Ishag's paintings and drawings since the 1970s as studies and elements incorporated into compositions of Zar paintings for instance. In the late 1990s, plants became a central focus inspired by her abundant Khartoum home garden. Ishag recognises that "the world of plants is rich in forms and unlimited aesthetic possibilities." Ishag's work over recent years can be defined by a sense of interchangeability and metamorphosis between humans and plant forms. She has said, "I believe vegetation and humans are one and the same. We eat plants for sustenance, we die and are buried. We become sustenance for the plants. I consider all these plants [in my garden] are part of me."

Ishag is also inspired by mythology, folklore and stories of spirits told by her mother and grandmothers when she was a child, including proverbs and tales from Kerma culture and Nubian civilisations. The artistic practices of these women

in her family, who would skilfully decorate items in the home, have also remained central to Ishag. She shares a fascination with painting on surfaces other than traditional paper or canvas, including wooden screens, the tops of leather drums, and calabash gourds.



BIOGRAPHY

Kamala Ibrahim Ishag (b. 1939) was amongst the first women artists to graduate from the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum in 1963, which she followed with studies in Mural Painting at the RCA in London between 1964 and 1966 and Lithography, Typography and Illustration between 1968 and 1969.

Recent exhibitions were held at Sharjah Art Foundation (2016) and Prince Claus Fund, Amsterdam (2019). Solo exhibitions include several at the Institut Français of Khartoum (2014 and 2015), Shibrain Art Centre, Khartoum (2014), and Sudan National Museum, Khartoum (1974) and Akhnaton Gallery, Cairo, Egypt (1970). Group exhibitions include Camden Arts Centre, London, UK (1969), National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC, USA (1993), the Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK (1995), University of Brighton Art Gallery, Brighton, UK (2000), Royal Society of Fine Arts, Amman, Jordan (2002), and Saatchi

Galleries, London, UK (2018). In 2019 Ishag was awarded the prestigious Principal Prince Claus Award for Culture, and in 2020 she participated in the Lahore Biennial, Lahore, Pakistan. Her work is held in international collections including The Jordan National Museum of Fine Art, Sharjah Art Foundation, Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington DC and Museum of Modern Art, New York. She lives and works in Khartoum.



LIVE PROGRAMME

KAMALA IBRAHIM ISHAG: IN CONVERSATION

Kamala Ibrahim Ishag returns to the RCA where she studied to the 1960s to be in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Artistic Director, Serpentine to discuss her work, teaching career and exhibition.

Friday 7 October, 7pm

Royal College of Art Lecture Theatre 1

Kensington Gore

South Kensington

SW7 2EU

Tickets £5, booking required

SATURDAY TALKS

Free talks and tours will take place at Serpentine South on select Saturdays during the exhibition to explore the Kamala Ibrahim Ishag's practice in greater depth.

Saturday 29 October 2022, 3pm

Melissa Blanchflower, Curator Exhibitions
and Public Art

Saturday 10 December 2022, 3pm

Sarah Hamed, Assistant Curator Exhibitions

Free, no booking required

Check serpentinegalleries.org and sign up for our Newsletter for further Live Programme updates

Kamala Ibrahim Ishag: States of Oneness is organised by Sharjah Art Foundation and Serpentine, in collaboration with the Africa Institute, Sharjah. It is co-curated by Hoor Al Qasimi, Director, Sharjah Art Foundation; Salah M. Hassan, Director, The Africa Institute, Sharjah, and Professor at Cornell University; and Melissa Blanchflower, Curator Exhibitions and Public Art, Serpentine, with Sarah Hamed, Assistant Curator, Serpentine.

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Image credits in order of appearance
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Procession (Zaar), 2015
Oil on canvas, 175 x 175 cm
Courtesy the artist

Women in Crystal Cubes, 1984
Oil on canvas, 192 x 185 cm
Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation Collection

Lady Grown in a Tree, 2017
Oil on canvas, 139.7 x 139.7 cm
Courtesy the artist

Two Figures in Two Balls, 2016
Oil on canvas, 139.7 x 139.7 cm
Courtesy the artist

Kamala Ibrahim Ishag standing in front of
Bait Al-Mal, 2019 at Serpentine South © 2022.
Photo: Harry Richards, Courtesy Serpentine

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Look out for numbers next to selected artworks and use the digital guide to explore the exhibition further.

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