The Right to Claim the World
Conversation with Ibrahim El Salahi

Ulli Beier

Ulli Beier: Yesterday, reflecting on your life you said: “I am a Sudanese but I have made my home in Qatar and I keep a second home in England, but being here in Germany, I have to become a little bit of a German too.” You are touching on a point that concerns many of us; artists and writers all over the globe are forced to leave their countries and work in exile. In the process of putting down roots, of adapting to new conditions, they are anxious to preserve their old identity. How has your own exile affected your concept of nationhood? In what way has it shifted your loyalties and modified or extended your sense of identity?

Ibrahim El Salahi: I think it has affected me a great deal, to the extent that the locality of one’s own home becomes almost a past dream, very, very dear. You have a longing for it, nostalgia, as if it were something from a distant past. But this is a common human experience because throughout history people have migrated across the globe; the Huns pouring into Europe, the Indonesians crossing the Indian Ocean to settle in Madagascar, the Jews scattered all over the world. Humans must have an in-born capacity to adapt. As a child one feels that one’s home is the centre of the universe. When I was growing up I thought that England, France, the Philippines, were on some remote periphery of Khartoum, which was at the centre of everything. But as I moved out to London, my new home then became the centre of the world.

There is an instinct that makes you try to adjust, to put down new roots, to search for the common human elements in the new surrounding. You feel torn inside, particularly when you are confronted with a set of values completely contrary not only to what you know, but also to what you believe in. Then you find yourself a complete stranger and you go through emotions like: How could I have left my paradise to come to this hell? It doesn’t make sense. You begin to worry: will they accept you? Will they care about you? Will they allow you to function? Will they believe that it is your right to be there?

UB: You refer to exile as ‘Hell’. How does that manifest itself?

IES: When people denounce your humanity, when they deny that you are a human being who has a brain, who has feelings, who is sensitive enough to
absorb, to understand, to respond, when they judge you by your exterior...

**UB:** In concrete terms, did you experience racism in England?

**IES:** Oh yes, quite a lot. Let me give you an example. I was looking for a room; I needed a place big enough to paint in; and one day I saw a card on the notice board from a lady who said that she wanted to rent a room particularly to a student from the Slade. So, I phoned. She asked me to come over. But as soon as she saw that I was Black, she said she was sorry but the room had been taken. You know what I did? I practically put my foot in the door and I said: Please, I have been running around looking for a room and I feel very tired. OK, I accept that your room has been taken, but just let me come in for a while and rest a bit. She became embarrassed and allowed me in. And I didn’t touch upon the subject at all. I just told her where I come from, what I am doing: I have come to learn, to know things about people and their art, and then go back home. Suddenly, she got her raincoat and her umbrella and she said to me: “Look, come here, I’ll show you a place with a big room which is far less expensive than mine.” I went with her. There was a teacher and his wife, both English, who had decided that they were going to rent a big flat so they could help foreign students, particularly Africans, who had a lot of trouble finding accommodation. I remember the room was £2.75 with full board! And the lady who had brought me there, became a good friend. Later, we could remember the incident and joke about it.

**UB:** Well, you set out to give an example of racism and you end up telling a story of unusual kindness.

**IES:** Yes, but the racism existed all the same, even among some of the young artists at the Slade. Those were the days of the Jive and we all went dancing a lot. One day a New Zealand student turned to me on the dance floor and said, with such hatred in his eyes: “You bloody nigger!” I had to laugh, and my laughter made him even more angry — maybe he was jealous because a lot of the girls liked dancing with me. At first I even had no idea what that word meant, but later, when I became aware of the insult, it didn’t worry me because I thought, I’m not a ‘nigger’, I am Ibrahim Mohammed el Salahi who happened to be born on September 5, 1930, who came to London to study and to work and to know people and then return to his home. So if that is what he says, that is his problem.

**UB:** But then, those were your student days and you could laugh it off. What about when you had to go into exile, when you knew you could no longer return to the Sudan and that you would simply have to live with such attitudes? Wasn’t there a danger then of closing up within oneself, the usual danger of isolating oneself with a vision of one’s culture that gradually becomes more and more removed from reality? Isn’t that what happened to the Jews in the diaspora, that the religion became more and more closed up, formal and rigid? Under such pressure one reacts in either of two ways: you either withdraw from your surroundings, isolate yourself and protect your own values in some kind of ‘pure’ form; or you respond to the foreign culture by extending your horizon, your personality, and your identity.

What happened to you when you were forced to leave Sudan, when it became impossible, even dangerous, for you to return home? I know from my own experience that the host society appears much more menacing at such moments, much harder to cope with.

**IES:** I may have mentioned to you that some years ago, my family and I returned to London from the Gulf. I had had enough of my job and I thought I’d do go
back to where the rest of the family were. In London we were quickly running out of money, and I thought I’d better get a job, any job. I went to the employment office and went through lots of cards that were all pinned up in neat rows on the wall. The officer sitting at her desk was staring at me. Whenever I took a card over to her, she said, ‘Oh sorry, it’s been taken.’ At last I found this job about sausage packing; it was £46 a week, which was just about the lowest pay you could get. But I thought I might just as well start with anything until something better turned up. The lady asked me for my qualifications! I told her that I had a degree in Fine Art, but she thought that was irrelevant. She wanted to know what else I had done. I said I’d been working in the Ministry of Information in Qatar. She said no, this is beside the point. But I told her that I really needed the job and I wanted to do it. Then she phoned the firm and talked to somebody there after which she turned round to me and said: ‘Look here,
this is quite a difficult job, it needs a very efficient person, and above all they require someone with the highest standards of cleanliness and hygiene.' I said: 'But I am probably cleaner than most people, just give me the chance.' Then she said: 'How old are you?' I said I was fifty. 'Maybe you are a little bit old,' she said. I told her: 'My hands are not old, my eyes are not old, I can work and I need the job.' The last thing she said was: 'Do you have any previous experience in sausage packing?' I said: 'No, and I don’t think I ever want to.'

This experience made me curl up inside and retire into that attic in my house to paint. I felt that I carry my values within me, which are partly Muslim and partly artistic, and under pressures from the outside world I close up to protect those values. But I suppose you can close up either destructively or constructively.

**UB:** Nevertheless, at some stage something else happened to you as well, because now you feel part of a bigger world, with virtually three parallel homes...

**IES:** Let me go back to Sudan for a moment; you know how we deal with each other in our social activities. When a guest comes to your house or someone moves into a new house or during any of the big festivals like Ramadan, everyone brings whatever little food he has from his own house, and whether it’s a lot or just a little bit, they all put it together and sit around and eat together. What you have, you share with others, and this brings about a feeling of affinity, togetherness, closeness. When I came to England as a refugee, after I had been jailed in Sudan, I brought my values with me and I was willing to share them with others just as I was willing to share with my hosts whatever they had to offer me. That is my concept of moving into a new and strange society, because I believe it’s *human* society and I have a right in it; I really believe that.

Now I am in Germany for a short time, I am away from my present home and I am away from my original home, but I am not away from my big home, which is humanity. So, I believe I have a right here, though I know that legally and politically I have none. But for how long? Because surely this will change.

**UB:** And the complexity of this expanding identity, how is it reflected in your
work? What process is at work when you create a painting? How do these different experiences from various cultures and countries merge into one organic whole?

IES: Well, actually, I never seem to use an immediate experience. The experience is absorbed, digested, and may surface quite unexpectedly. I remember when I first went to England in the 1950s and I saw the greenness, the intensity of the green and the red roofs of the houses, and the pink faces. All that came out much later in my work; these intense, often gloomy colours. For in Sudan, there is such glare that you have to half-close your eyes — only at certain times of the year can you open them fully. So, in the Sudan, your impressions are almost half-seen. But I feel them through another eye; I know it by experience of another kind.

In England my eyes were fully open; it's a grey world, old houses, dark, sooty. The appearance of things is rather haunting. I took it all in, but never did anything about it while in London. It surfaced later on; its almost like regurgitating.

Some artists will do the superficial thing, because they are concerned with scenery or human action. It becomes a direct thing, like 'I see, I draw; I see, I paint'; I see, I sculpt', and so on. But there are other people, like myself, who take it all in, and then let it sleep through. I find that when I come to a new place, I don't take the ideas in too easily because, I have a store within me which is loaded. So, whatever I take, it can only come later, when I might have emptied that store a little bit. Maybe why I don't join groups easily. Many artists work in community, they join the current movement immediately. It makes life easier for them because they want to exhibit, they want to sell, to be recognised, and being part of the current trend means the galleries will accept them and they can deal more easily with the public. I am not like that. I bring out what I want to, not what the galleries think I ought to bring out.

UB: How then does the Sudanese element fuse with your Qatar or English experience?

IES: Well, the Sudanese experiences are in the images. As a child I had images of people. They appeared and I saw them physically. The things I draw are not imagined; they appeared in front of my eyes. I draw almost like a medium...

UB: But you didn't draw them as a child, did you?

IES: Not as a child, no. I didn't have the tools or means to do it.

UB: Is it that you remember the images or do you still see them?

IES: Sometimes, like a fraction of a second, the horizon opens and I see them. They are watching me and I watch them. The other day, when you did the final rehearsal for the music of Georgina's [the painter Georgina Beier] exhibition, I came in and I was looking at the applique with the two tall black and white figures, and when you turned the light off, the thing actually came alive! I felt it was going to step out of the cloth and move, and I quickly moved out of the room.

That reminds me of something that happened many years ago, when I was teaching at the Art College in Khartoum. I was working in one of those long studios and I was painting a huge canvas together with my friend Hussein Sharif. I did most of my work at night; often I was in the studio up to three o'clock in the morning. One night I looked at the picture, and one of the figures, a little one in the corner, came alive and was about to step out of the canvas! I thought this was sheer imagination, but I looked at it again, and in fact it was alive. So I turned off the light and went home.

Anyway, I work like a medium, so my imagery is not something I think about. I do not create them, they create themselves. When I came to England, I learned
two things: I learned about techniques, and I learned about the people. I was keen to acquire the tools of painting, so I acquired every technique that was available. But I was also anxious to know about the people. I wanted to know about European history: the background of the Renaissance, about early Christian painting, the contemporary movements. I wanted to know how people in England think; how they deal with things. I wanted to know about music, about ballet, about opera.

When I went to live and work in the Arab world my experience linked again with my early childhood. Arab culture is linked with the Arab language, with the Koran and calligraphy. And calligraphy is a most important subject for me, because it is abstracted form, with symbols which carry sound and meaning. First, I used to write calligraphy as it is: poetry or words of wisdom. But later on, I applied some of the techniques I had learned in Europe. I like what Picasso had done with Cubism, taking the visual form and breaking it into its original components, and then reconstructing it in a new form. I think I did the same thing with calligraphy.
At first I wrote a kind of gibberish that does not read, using the letters without meaning. Then I started to break the letters. I was interested in the rhythm within the writing. When you write, you put down the letters in a line, and then another line. But when you have a closer look, when you magnify it, you find the shape of the letters and also the shape of the spaces between them, and that gives you another rhythm.

Again, I tried to go deeper and break the actual shape of the symbol to its origin — to take it back to animal forms, or water — its like hieroglyphs; they are abstractions of so many visual forms. And once I opened this door and went through it, it was like breaking glass! I had to walk carefully: sometimes you could cut yourself. You have to pick your way through. I was breaking and breaking and breaking, and figures appeared; the early components of calligraphy began to come to me. And strange enough, they were the same figures or spirits that used to appear to me as a child! They came to me when they were freed of the rigid form of the letter.

UB: What is so surprising to me about all this is that when you broke up the calligraphy and the figures began to appear — and I think that must have been the very moment when I first saw your work in Khartoum ...

IES: Yes, indeed, exactly.

UB: ...These images were strikingly African. You could almost have thought they had emerged from some culture in the Ivory Coast. There was this extraordinary affinity: maybe there is some deep layer of consciousness that reaches out way beyond its narrow geographical location. It was not that you had purposely gone about studying West African art; there was something welling up inside you.

IES: That is quite true. At first, I was just taken in by them. I couldn’t even think about it, because they wanted to come out and I brought them out; and they kept coming and coming. They did not have the colour in them; they were always very dark figures. There was no bright light. Always mysterious.

Maybe that is why I keep going back to those black and white drawings. Later I used to think: here I am, thinking of myself as an Arab, but these do look like African masks! How come? I am trying to refine my calligraphy and these kinds of images emerge! Then, I got very much interested in Sudanese patterns in the leatherwork, the woodwork, the wickerwork, the tapestry. I found that there was some distant relationship to Islamic work, but there was another element; the stronger element was different. And when I came to analyse these forms they seemed to relate more to West Africa.

UB: In other words, in the creative process there are two, quite different, even mutually opposed, processes: one which is totally uncontrolled by you, an image that just comes, and another where you actually go and look at something, where you analyse, break up, and reshape. Do you find that at times you are becoming too conscious of what you are doing?

IES: This can cause a dilemma, this process of wedding what flows from within with what you have acquired from outside. How to weigh the two elements, which may be quite contradictory with each other, that is the nature of the work. Because ideas are ideas, not art. Art is what you make of the ideas. This process of trying to weld this to that, change this and add that, until you are satisfied that no more adjustment is needed, that is the artistic process. Sometimes it takes a long time. You may even get to a point where you tear up the work because something got drained out of it. On rare occasions it can emerge — complete.
You hold the finished work in your hand before you know what happened. But most of the time it is hard labour and you even begin to think: if only there was some other job that I could do!

Often you feel caught in the middle; between this forceful element that you have no control over, and the conscious process which you try to impose like discipline. But you have to learn it, slowly, and, I would say, by the will of God, whoever created you comes in and guides your hand to know exactly how to measure right and to treat it right, how to complete it the way it should be.

Many people say to me. Oh, you are an artist, what a wonderful life it must be! But I say: it is hell! Because it is so difficult to preserve that first vision that you see. That first glimpse is often overlaid and confused and blurred, and because it keeps growing, other things happen and your mind is distracted. That mysterious force only reveals the image to you at a certain moment and the rest is a process of filtering it through all the intellectual processes that go into producing a picture.

UB: Could you say that this image that appears, uncontrolled and unsolicited, is really some kind of archaic identity, and that the intellectual process then finds some common denominator between it and all the other acquired identities?

IES: Yes. Let us say that the work of art is the meeting point. The work is like the child which is the product of the male sperm and the female ovum. The archaic image, hidden, coming through you from the unknown and, allowing you to glimpse it briefly, has become wedded to the things you have learned, the things you see and feel. The wedding is the work of art.