Regards

Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth
Faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines
Institut d'études scéniques audiovisuelles
et cinématographiques

Regards
28 | 2022
Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

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Edition électronique
URL : https://journals.usj.edu.lb/regards/article/view/781
DOI : https://doi.org/10.70898/regards.v0i28.781
ISSN : 2791-285X

Editeur
Editions de l'USJ, Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth

Référence électronique
SALOMON, N. (2022). The School of the One: A Mystery on Canvas. *Regards*, (28), 29-49. https://doi.org/10.70898/regards.v0i28.781

DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :
Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

THE SCHOOL OF THE ONE: A MYSTERY ON CANVAS

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Abstract | In late 20th century Sudan, a new school of visual art emerged that sought to bridge what it saw as a gulf between contemporary Islamic renewal and the arts. Lamenting that the latter had gone in the direction of secular life, while the former had taken on a deeply anti-aesthetic bent, the school looked to Sufism's aesthetic archive to revitalize Islamic artistic practice for the 21st century. Calling itself "The School of the One" (*Madrasat al-Wāhid*), its artists sought to harness the power of beauty inherent in Islamic theological and ritual traditions while suturing it to new ends, ones that sat in complicated relationship with state projects of Islamic social reconstruction regnant at that time. Taking as a jumping-off point a mystery that the author came to untangle about one particular painting by the founder of the School of the One, Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl, this essay offers a microhistorical approach to the problem of aesthetics in late 20th and early 21st century Sudan. In what follows, the author travels with Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl to both the recent and the distant past, as the artist seeks to conjure an aesthetic experience that will at once serve God and contribute to a project in pious reform that has gone deeply astray.

Keywords | "School of the One," Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl, Sudan, Sufism, Islamic state, Art, Painting

Résumé | À la fin du XXe siècle, au Soudan, une nouvelle école d'art visuel est apparue. Elle cherchait à combler ce qu'elle considérait comme un gouffre entre le renouveau islamique contemporain et les arts. Déplorant que ces derniers soient allés dans le sens de la vie laïque, tandis que le premier avait pris un penchant profondément anti-esthétique, l'école s'est tournée vers les archives

* I thank the family of the late Dr. Ahmad 'Abd Al-'Āl who generously opened their home and Dr. Ahmad's archive to me several times over the past years, as well as Dr. Ahmad himself who sat patiently with me over several sessions explaining his work and vision. This article represents only a small slice of what I gained from those interactions. I am additionally grateful to the two anonymous peer reviewers at Regards, whose comments have greatly improved this essay. I apologize, as always, for any remaining shortcomings.

esthétiques du soufisme pour revitaliser la pratique artistique islamique pour le XXIe siècle. Se faisant appeler «L'École de l'Un» (Madrasat al-Wāhid), cette école et ses adeptes ont cherché à exploiter le pouvoir de la beauté inhérent aux traditions théologiques et rituelles islamiques tout en le conditionnant à de nouvelles fins, celles qui étaient en relation compliquée avec les projets étatiques de l'islam. Prenant comme point de départ un mystère que l'auteur est venu démêler autour d'une peinture particulière du fondateur de l'École de l'Un, Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl, cet essai propose une approche microhistorique du problème de l'esthétique soudanaise de la fin du XXe et du début du XXIe siècle. Dans ce qui suit, l'auteur voyage avec Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl à la fois dans le passé récent et lointain, alors que l'artiste cherche à évoquer une expérience esthétique qui servira à la fois Dieu et contribuera à un projet de réforme pieuse qui a depuis disparu.

Mots clés | Ecole de l'UN – Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl – Soufisme – Soudan – Etat islamique – Art – Peinture

Some years ago, I wrote a book that traced the Republic of Sudan's experiment with establishing an Islamic state, a project that unevenly persisted for nearly thirty years (1989-2019) and that came to a crashing, if still uncertain, close following the popular revolution of 2019.[1] In the present essay, by means of recalling a minor mystery I encountered regarding the painting I chose for the cover of that book, I want to loop back to an exploration of the Islamic state era in Sudan to look at a set of questions I didn't get a chance to consider fully in the book. These questions center on the place of the arts, particularly the visual arts (*al-fann al-tashkīlī, al-fann al-basrī*), in the project of creating religious and political community, a topic that seems ripe to revisit at this present moment of both artistic and political ferment in Sudan.[2] The visual arts have been at the center of political contestation in Sudan since independence, if not before, and both authoritarian and revolutionary periods of Sudanese history are characterized by distinct flourishings of new artistic forms.[3] While the period of 1989-2019 is mostly remembered for the exodus of visual artists it forced to places such as Nairobi and Kampala, aesthetic expression in the fine arts in Khartoum was not absent during that period, both coming from state institutions and "from the ground up," as well as in ways that complicate a divide between these two directions.

The story I will tell in this essay begins in the mid to late-1980s most likely, thus predating the coming of the Islamist government by only a few years.[4] It is at this point that an artist by the name of Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl (frequently Latinized Ahmed Abdel Aal), with a recently minted PhD from the University of Bordeaux in France (entitled *L'art islamique et le soufisme : étude sur les fondements*

1- Noah Salomon, *For Love of the Prophet: An Ethnography of Sudan's Islamic State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

2- Elizabeth Murray, "How Art Helped Propel Sudan's Revolution," (https://www.usip.org/blog/2020/11/how-art-helped-propel-sudans-revolution); Abdi Latif Dahir, "Sudan's Street Protests have Inspired another Revolution-In Art," *Quartz Africa* (July 12 2019), accessed on September 20, 2022 at https://qz.com/africa/1664733/sudans-protests-inspire-art-graffiti-revolution.; Noah Salomon, "What Lies Beneath the Sands: Archaeologies of Presence in Post-Revolutionary Sudan," *Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) Studies* 40 (June 2020), 31-39.

3- See, for example Salah Hassan, "Ibrahim El Salahi's Prison Notebook: A Visual Memoir," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 109:1 (2010); Mohammad Abusabib, *Art, Politics, and Cultural Identification in Sudan* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2004).

4- The exact date of the founding of the school of art I will discuss appears a sensitive subject in a lengthy interview published in the cultural magazine *Awrāq Jadīda* with the school's founder, Dr. Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl, as well as in my own conversations with him. In the interview, 'Abd al-'Āl is at pains to distance himself from the Bashir government, arguing that his movement has its origins in ideas formulated much earlier than its arrival. See Muhammad Hasan Arbab, "The School of the One… (*Madrasat al-Wāhid…*), "*Awrāq Jadīda* 24 (June 2007), 34.

esthétiques chez le maître Soufi : Ibn Arabi : 1165-1240),[5] returned to Sudan with a vision, one he described in an interview he conducted some years later in a popular cultural magazine.

> [The goal of our movement is] to infect all people with a bit of ecstasy around beauty (*al-nashwa li-l-jamāl*), which could then be reflected in their lives and in their behaviors. We want to create a complete civilizational vision (*ru'ya hadāriyya*) in behavior, and in how we live, and in our give and take, and in how we treat each other in this nation of Sudan in which there are many ethnicities, customs, and languages… .If we realize this civilizational gateway for the arts, then this will help us in knowing the other and the other in knowing us because the arts hurry to do this, accelerating these efforts on behalf of the nation. This is what it means to teach art from a civilizational perspective. Art is not restricted to connoisseurs in an art exhibition; it is for the society and for all people. Beauty is something basic in the life of the people. Ignorance of beauty leads to a lot of ugliness in social life… We want to draw people's attention and take them out of the space of ignorance to the space of enlightenment and self-knowledge through artistic works from music, visual arts, and literature.[6]

Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl saw art as a way to revitalize a nation that had fallen into hard times by the late 1980s, particularly torn by violence articulated in the idiom of difference (religious, ethnic, political). Art's revitalizing contribution foregrounded an experience with beauty that had been, in his mind, heretofore untapped in the modern period. While intervention by colonial powers had divided the true (science), the good (ethics/religion), and the beautiful (art) into three distinct fields, once integral, for 'Abd al-'Āl, they could merge (back?) into one with the help of the artist, thus tapping into an unrealized potential for a figure often seen as marginal to political change in Sudan. It is important to note that while 'Abd al-'Āl spoke in terms of a "civilizational vision" and an understanding of the other, the civilizational resources he had in mind were distinctly Islamic, drawing from the aesthetic principles of figures such as Ibn 'Arabi, on whom he'd written his dissertation. Calling his movement "The School of the One" (*madrasat al-wāhid*)—"the One" referring as much to that unification of ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics he sought to foster, as it did to the one God, whose name it cited— 'Abd al-'Āl sought a new role for art in Sudanese life, beyond the elite confines into which he felt it had been sequestered. In doing

5- http://www.theses.fr/1987BOR30034; rendered into English as, *Islamic Art and Sufism: A Study of the Aesthetic Foundations of the Sufi Master ibn Arabi*: 1165-1240. Though I have not been able to access the dissertation itself, a lengthy discussion of its interventions can be found in Tariq Al-Madih, "*Al-Fayd* Welcomes Prof. Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl and Holds an Enlightening Meeting with him about Art and Sufism," *al-Fayd* (March/April 2003). 'Abd al-'Āl's Sufi perspective on aesthetics is nowhere clearer than in his collection of prose parables and drawings: 'Abd al-'Āl, Ahmad, *Amshāj: Wiqā'i' min Hadrat al-Khīyāl (Elements: Realities from the Presence of Imagination*), (Khartoum: *Sharakat Sūdān li-Mutābi' al-'Umla al-Mahdūda, 2006).*

6- Muhammad Arbab, "The School of the One… (*Madrasat al-Wāhid…*)," 35.

so, he not only trailblazed a controversial path within the artistic community, uncomfortable with such instrumental readings of artistic practice, but he also contributed to a regnant project of religious reform, sponsored by the state, which spoke of civilizational renewal in similar terms. Indeed, while ʻAbd al-ʻĀl repeatedly expressed misgivings toward an association with the ruling order in Sudan, the self-titled "Government of National Salvation" (*Hukumat al-Inqādh al-Watanī*), it is undeniable that he was an unabashed participant in the project of civilizational renewal that it also promoted, and spoke fluently in its language of cultural neologisms, as we will see in what follows: from *hadārī* (civilizational), to *ta'sīl* (fundamentalization, renewal of Islamic origins), to what he called *al-fann al-wāhidī* (art in the service of God/the unification of Sudan with its origins/the unification of ethics with epistemology and aesthetics…). Indeed, the itineraries of the government and ʻAbd al-ʻĀl crossed at many even more practical junctures, from ʻAbd al-ʻĀl's role in the designing of the Sudanese currency following national unity, to his logo design for many key state institutions (Figure 1).

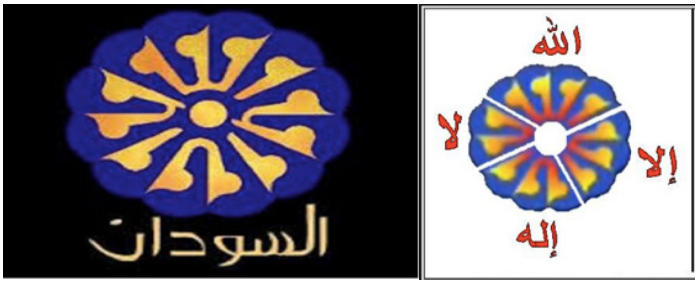


Figure 1
Sudanese Television Logo designed by Abd al-ʻĀl, with explanation, "There is no God, but God," stylized in its folds.

Focusing on a story of the multiple unveilings of one particular painting by ʻAbd al-ʻĀl that I came to use for the cover of my book, the present essay will revisit the complicated relationship between art and religion in the years of Sudan's Islamic state experiment. While "Islamism" is often bemoaned for its lack of artistic taste (or even its anti-art stances: from aniconism to ascetic brutalism),[7] this essay will explore the modern Islamic renewal's complicated artistic horizons in relating the story of my encounter with this one painting, applying a microhistorical approach to the problem of aesthetics in late Islamist

7- For both an important exception to this rule and a discussion of some reasons for such misconceptions see, Christiane Gruber and Sune Haugbolle, *Visual Cultures in the Modern Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

Sudan.[8] By unravelling a mystery about the identity of this painting's subject, we will travel with 'Abd al-'Āl to both the recent and distant past, as the artist seeks to foster an aesthetic experience of the divine that will at once serve God and the nation.

Unification

There are few in Sudanese art circles who do not have a position on Dr. 'Abd al-'Āl, both due to the vocal stances he took and the state favor he enjoyed during years of the Salvation Regime until his untimely death from complications related to diabetes in 2008 (Figure 2). The dean of one of Sudan's premier art faculties (The College of Fine and Applied Arts, Sudan University for Science and Technology) from 2002 until 2008, 'Abd al-'Āl was a prolific producer. From his instillations at the departure hall at Khartoum International Airport to his participation in designing the national currency, to his reported drawing of over 500 logos of private and public institutions, in the first decades of the 21st century, one encountered his output on an everyday basis.[9] This public work was in addition to the thousands of paintings and drawings he produced. Indeed, it


الشرق الأوسط

الجمعة 23 شوال 1429 هـ 24 اكتوبر 2008 العدد 10923

صفحة المدخل | الأولى | الأخبار | الاقتصاد | الرأي | الملاحق | ملفات الشرق | اولى 2 | الوظائف

رحيل أحمد عبد العال أبرز التشكيليين السودانيين

صمم شعارات اكثر من 500 مؤسسة بينها التلفزيون السوداني

الخرطوم | إسماعيل ادم

غيّب، الموت امس الدكتور احمد عبد العال، احد ابرز الفنانين التشكيليين في السودان، ومن الاكاديميين اللامعين في مجال تدريس علوم الفن التشكيلي في السودان، وذلك إثر علة لم تمهله طويلا. وخرجت الاف في العاصمة في موكب مهيب طاف بجثمانه عدة شوارع قبل ان تشيعه الى مثواه الاخير في مقابر بمقابر «بري» بالخرطوم. وقاد موكب التشييع الرئيس عمر البشير، كما شارك في المناسبة عدد من الوزراء الاتحاديين وبجالات الإعلام والمسؤولين بالدولة.

وعدّ المشيعون ماثر الفقيد وإسهاماته في المجالات الفكرية والثقافية والإبداعية، ويجمع التشكيليون والنقاد على ان عبد العال يعتبر التشكيلي الاكثر تجويدا وانتاجا في السودان، ويقولون ان فنه يتغلغل في نسيج الحياة اليومية، ويرصدون في هذا الخصوص انه صمم النصب وشكل «شعارات» العديد من المؤسسات، بلغت اكثر من 500، كما صمم شعار تلفزيون السودان في شكل «لا إله إلا الله»، وصمم الرسومات التي تحملها العملة السودانية الحالية، التي طرحت للتداول العام الماضي. وفي مجال الخط ابتدع خط عربي باسم «البردة» وصار ضمن خيارات الخطوط العربية المجازة في برامج الخطوط العربية المتداولة. ويعتقد النقاد أن عبد العال عمله الأساسي والذي أعطاه كل عمره وشبابه هو التشكيل، وذكر في حوار صحافي سابق معه بانه يرسم اغلب ساعات اليوم، وحتى اثناء السفر، ويهيئ لنفسة مراسم في المنزل ومكان العمل.

ولد عبد العال في مدينة كسلا بشرق السودان في عام 1946 م، وتلقى فيها تعليمه الأولي والوسطى، قبل ان ينتقل الى الخرطوم طالبا في الكلية المصرية الثانوية بالخرطوم، ثم جامعة القاهرة فرع الخرطوم، والتحق مباشرة بكلية الفنون الجميلة حيث تخرج فيها في نهاية الستينات من القرن الماضي، وحصل على بعثة دراسية في جامعة السوربون بفرنسا ونال فيها درجتي الماجستير والدكتوراه في جمالية الخط العربي. وفي علم الجمال الإسلامي. وأسس عبد العال مدرسة

احمد عبد العال

Figure 2
Obituary of Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl, *al-Sharq al-Awsa*t, 24 October, 2008

8- The conception that nothing of note was happening in the visual arts during the Salvation period is a common one. While recognizing that the government was indeed investing in the arts, an interview with a Sudanese artist in the early 1990s argued that "Nothing significant in the arts is going on since they (the Fundamentalists) have taken over. The nature of art is against Islamic Fundamentalist ideology. The best artists I know have left Sudan. Any real artist I can think of has left or is thinking of leaving." Quoted in Constance Kirker, 1992, "'This is not your time Here': Islamic Fundamentalism and Art in Sudan: An African Artist Interviewed," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion, xx/2*. This is a position echoed by the interviewer who sees what she also calls 'fundamentalism' as merely revitalizing a basic set of Islamic scriptural principles that oppose the figural image. Jamal Elias questions the coherence of this classic narrative in Jamal Elias, *Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Meanhile, recent work on art and Islamism, such as the essays included in the volume cited in the previous footnote, have come to question the assumptions of its uncomplicated retrieval by Islamists as well. This said, the dangers faced by artists who did not cooperate with the regime during the Salvation period cannot be understated, as the above-cited interview relates.

9- Muhammad Arbab, "The School of the One… (*Madrasat al-Wāhid…*)".

was a rare thing to enter his studio or office and not find him in the midst of a project, seemingly always with a drawing pen or brush in his hand.

Given that his paintings were encountered only by an elite slice of society and that he did not sign his public art, ʻAbd al-ʻĀl is perhaps most well-known for his founding of the School of the One, a project as controversial with the fine arts community as it was with a significant swath of those calling for Islamic renewal in those days. Indeed, many Islamic activists have seen canvas-based modern art to contradict "authentic" Islamic art forms, not for its reproduction of figural form, as has been assumed, but rather for its mimicking of the west. ʻAbd al-ʻĀl had an answer to such criticisms, however. Responding to the question, "How can a project that attempts to return modern society to its Islamic origins (*al-ta'sīl al-islāmī*) in fine art take place through painting on a canvas that hangs at a gallery (*lawhat al-hāmil/al-lawha al-sālūniyya*), since it is originally coming from western roots?", he answers :

> [Art] is a world in an independent space that parallels our world here. It is as if there are two parallel worlds, our natural visible world and a world that the artist creates that agrees with the laws that derive from the laws of the universe and the movement of the galaxies and of the planets. This advanced view was created by Muslims early-on, but unfortunately some people think that painting is something that derives from Western culture, and this is a big mistake.[10]" Clearly, for ʻAbd al-ʻĀl, the wāhidī artist (i.e. the artist that belongs to his School of the One) grasps that realm of forms existing behind the apparent reality of the material world. In that way, the artist him/herself matches the mystic, accessing and then communicating those divine characteristics (beauty, truth, the good) that can often be occluded by worldly forms. For ʻAbd al-ʻĀl, this is a task that transcends any sort of East/West divide in artistic presentation, irrespective of the medium in which it arrives.

ʻAbd al-ʻĀl founded his school under the idea that while the Islamic world had a rich and robust artistic tradition in its early centuries, at some point in recent history the paths of art and Islamics had diverged from one another, the former going in the direction of secular life, mimicking trends in Europe, while the latter had taken on a deeply anti-aesthetic bent, from the iconoclasm of Wahhabi or Salafi traditions, to the tasteless architectures of the Islamist nouveau-riche (of course an aesthetic in and of itself, but thought only in terms of its absences by most). ʻAbd al-ʻĀl was not alone in this assessment. Finbarr Barry Flood has pointed out that the vast majority of academic surveys of Islamic art also stop in the 17th or 18th centuries, giving the impression that the Islamic fine arts (or at least anything original in them) ceased in modern times, to be replaced

10- Muhammad Arbab, "The School of the One… (*Madrasat al-Wāhid…*)", 34. For an interesting parallel case, see Kenneth George, *Picturing Islam: Art and Aesthetics in a Muslim Lifeworld* (Malden, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2010).

by, if anything at all, only cheap copies thereof: "In surveys of Islamic art it is axiomatic that the advent of modernity heralds the end of art."[11] Yet, while on the one hand 'Abd al-'Āl echoed such presumptions about the state of much of contemporary Islamic art, on the other he reminded us of what art *could be*, of the aesthetic power that has never dampened within Sufism, despite myriad attacks. This power simply remained to be embraced by the professional artistic classes who have the unique tools to transform aesthetic and spiritual form into civilizational project. The visual landscape of Khartoum in the early 2000s, when 'Abd al-'Āl was most prominent, was changing, as oil began to be exploited and Gulf fashions were obliterating the traditional Sudanese landscape, pledging to replace the remaining vestiges of local artisanal form with the glass and steel characteristic of the new Persian Gulf megacities. While much of the Dubai-fication of Khartoum imagined in bootlegged flyover architectural renderings that circulated the city in those days turned out to be fantasy (particularly following the loss of oil revenue in 2011 due to Southern secession), nonetheless the direction in which the urban space was being reworked alarmed aesthetes like Abd al-'Āl bemoaned the diverging of the paths of art and Islam, and his School of the One sought to tie them back together again. What would it mean to create a consciously *modern* Islamic art form, he asked?

"This is a country whose subjugation is facilitated… by all the civilizations that have met on its land," he said in the interview with *Awrāq Jadīda* I cited above. He continued,

> How can we, in the midst of today's world, present a vision for contemporary Islamic art? Some consider it not possible, but I think it is possible. For Islam is contemporary—and when I say contemporary, it is not necessary that past experiences of Islamic art are repeated. The world has changed in an immeasurable way. We are in a new world. And I believe that the Islamic vision with its tributaries, the Honorable Qur'an and the pure prophetic Sunna, it will very possibly [once again] give rise to ideas and inspirations in art. Thus, *al-fannān al-wāhidī* is one of the new hopes in today's world….We ought to [promote this] within this new project that we hope detaches the negative fusion [of art] with western cultural achievement, as this negative fusion has gone on a long time. It is necessary to have a new vision with the utmost courage and conviction (*yaqīn*) as well, for we are the inheritors of a great civilization.[12]

11- Finbarr Barry Flood, "From the Prophet to Post-Modernism? New World Orders at the End of Islamic Art" in Elizabeth Mansfield, ed., *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions* (London: Routledge, 2007), pg. 34. For a parallel phenomenon in the study of Christian art see Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), particularly Chapter 6. Recent studies in "material Islam" have done much to reset the balance, however, questioning the "art" and "object" divide of such literature along the way. See the helpful survey of this field in the introduction to a wonderful recent special issue on "material Islam" by the Center for the Study of Material & Visual Cultures of Religion: Anna Bigelow and Kambiz Ghanea Bassiri, *Mavcor Journal* 6:2.

12- Muhammad Arbab, "The School of the One… (*Madrasat al-Wāhid…*)", 38.

For Ahmad ‘Abd al-‘Āl, the artist was the revitalizer of religion and nation, the one who could reconnect Sudanese Muslims with their religion and heritage through a singular encounter with beauty. Such an encounter, though pulling on a long historical tradition of aesthetic experience in Islam, did not need to limit itself to classical form. Indeed, new methods were needed for a new time. ‘Abd al-‘Āl sought to merge new and old in his practice. In addition to being a renowned painter, he had also been given the rank of Sufi shaykh by the Sadqāb branch of the Qadriyya order, whose headquarters lay in the small Blue Nile village of al-Hilaliyya, and he was the author of a book of celebrated Sufi parables, *Amshāj* (Fig. 3).[13]

Figure 3
Amshāj, by Dr. Ahmad ‘Abd al-‘Āl

As someone researching Islamic renewal in Sudan in the first and second decade of the 21st century, I found ‘Abd al-‘Āl’s work compelling for a variety of reasons. First, he was a figure who was difficult to categorize, neither fully of the state nor entirely outside it, having latched onto the discourse of civilizational renewal that the state promoted, but pulling its threads in different directions. In his example, we could see a more dispersed and horizontal sort of political power to the one that is often imagined to be circulating in the Arab world, coming from authoritarian states on high or the protest politics of activists in the squares from “below.” Next, as an explicitly *Sufi* intellectual, ‘Abd al-‘Āl was responsible not just for a re-reading of the mystical tradition, but a reworking of it in a project of civilizational reform. ‘Abd al-‘Āl seemed the perfect figure to help us understand how Sufi concepts could be put to work as part of not just individual enlightenment, but also, markedly, nation-building, particularly at a moment of uncertain future, such as the one in which Sudan found itself in the years directly prior to national partition in which I first came to know him. The fate of Islam in

13- See footnote 6. The title refers to the Quranic concept of the most elemental form of life (*innā khallaqnā al-insāna min nutfatin amshājin…* (al-insān: 2), and here is used as a symbol of the elemental forms of the stories within this volume.

the national project was particularly unsettled at that time as unification with the majority non-Muslim South was still on the table. ʻAbd al-ʻĀl offered a novel thesis centered on the figure of beauty as an irreducibly powerful force that might steer the modern Islamic project in new directions. Finally, as an artist, ʻAbd al-ʻĀl fascinated me because, despite his critiques of the status quo, he challenged the concept of art as anti-power, oppositional, rebellious and strange, which is rife in studies of popular artistic form in the Muslim-Majority world.[14] Instead, his work contributed to what musicologist Nomi Dave, in a different context, has discussed as the derivation of a theory of aesthetic pleasure that pays attention to its embeddedness in networks of power, a topic that ʻAbd al-ʻĀl himself was keen to "discuss" in his artwork, as I was soon to learn.[15]

Unveiling

When I began to think of a cover for the book I was writing, ʻAbd al-ʻĀl's work immediately came to mind. The book was about a broad project of Sudanese state and society to merge a series of paths that had diverged—Islam and scientific knowledge, Islam and politics, Islam and aesthetics—under the heading of a vast and influential project called many things, at many different times, but often referred to as, simply, *al-ta'sīl* , literally bringing something back to its root (*al-'asl,* here an Islamic one). Given this, ʻAbd al-ʻĀl's oeuvre seemed the perfect representation of a major theme the book discusses. Therefore, when I was writing the manuscript that became *For Love of the Prophet*, I made a trip to Sudan, in part to look through what remained of the late artist's work at his home so as to consider buying a piece for my book cover. I went through painting after painting, finding much of beauty and meaning, but without really finding anything that matched what was then the title of the book, the rather unwieldy "*The People of Sudan Love You, Oh Messenger of God*."[16] I wanted to find a painting that would illustrate this sentiment of a popular piety in aesthetic form.

Near the end of the search through ʻAbd al-ʻĀl's studio, just when I was about ready to give up, I suddenly came across a painting that struck my eye (Fig. 4). Torn and tattered, title-less (or so I thought) but with the outlines of ʻAbd al-ʻĀl's

14- As one example of such an approach, see Mark Levine, 2008, *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008).

15- Nomi Dave, *The Revolution's Echoes: Music, Politics and Pleasure in Guinea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). She writes there, "Much work on art and state authority has focused on the ways in which regimes mobilize artistic resources, rather than on the experiences and pleasures of citizens themselves. A common view in such work is that if pleasure plays any role at all, surely it is in the thrill of subversion and resistance. Yet, the underlying idea there—that if pleasure is not resisting power, it is nothing more than a form of false consciousness—is one of the ways in which pleasure is reduced as a concept and a phenomenon." (3).

16- The title quotes the popular *madha* (praise poem put to music) *shʻab al-sūdān yuhibbak yā rasūl allāh,* by Khalid al-Mustafa. My editor insisted this title would never fit on the spine of the book and thus nixed my idea shortly before publication!

unmistakable signature in the bottom left corner, it nevertheless seemed to express exactly what the title of my book then suggested, the people of Sudan in various pious postures: from nature mysticism (squares 2, 8 and 13), to Sufi ceremony and motifs (squares 7 and 10), to the basic *sharī'a* requirements of right worship (squares 1 and 17), to the ecstatic metaphor of the heavenly ascent of the mystic as a bird (square 23), as characterized most famously in the 12th century Nishapuri mystic Farīd al-Dīn 'Atār's "Conference of the Birds (*Mantiq al-Tayr*)." It seemed perfect. The one problem was that it was falling apart—ripped, faded, caked in dust, paint chipping off—and I had no idea if it would survive the plane ride back to the United States. To make a long story short, I purchased the painting, got it home to the US, and began the process of having it cleaned, lightly "in-painted" and restored, and professionally stabilized, as we were in danger of losing it from the change in climate alone. When the restorers I had hired began to work on the painting, however, something rather unexpected, indeed remarkable, occurred, another unveiling of sorts beyond the emergence of the painting itself.

Figure 4
The painting at the moment of its first unveiling to me
(squares mentioned above counted from right to left, up to down)

In the process of cleaning the canvas of dust, the restorers noticed that some text had come to the surface on the back of the painting. Neither I, nor they, had seen it previously. They emailed me a photo of the back of the painting (Fig. 5), wondering whether I thought the text was anything of importance. When I read

what was written there: "From the Diary of Shaykh Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī" (*Min Mufakkirat al-Shaykh Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī*), signed Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl, I knew most certainly that it was indeed of great significance. This was it, likely the painting's title that was missing all those months that I had projected a meaning of my own onto the canvas with no guidance from its creator. But whatever did this title mean? And did it bolster the appropriateness of the painting for my book's cover, or did it cancel it out? In other words, had I spent a lot of time and money restoring a painting for use on my book that now, with its title revealed, could not in fact represent the discussion I wanted to have there? The sudden unveiling of a title both tantalized and terrified me.

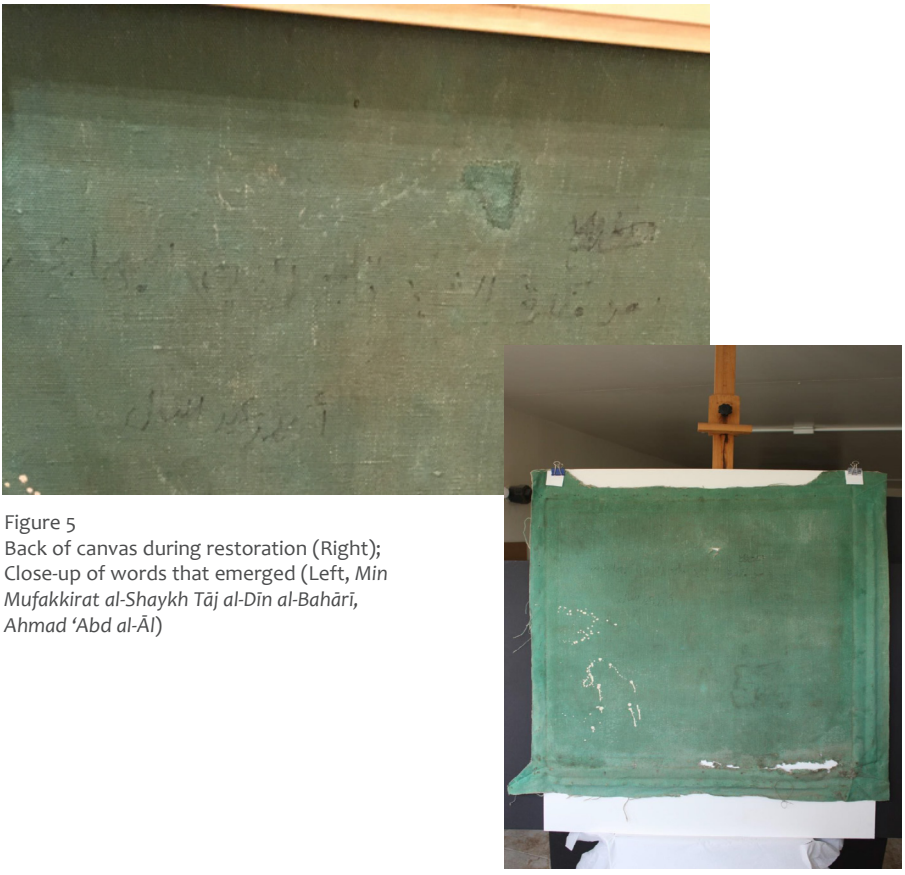


Figure 5
Back of canvas during restoration (Right); Close-up of words that emerged (Left, *Min Mufakkirat al-Shaykh Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī, Ahmad 'Abd al-Āl*)

Revelation

Though I am no historian, the name Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī, now at the center of the painting with its title unexpectedly revealed, was nevertheless not unfamiliar to me. Indeed al-Bahārī (born around 1520, died around 1600) was a crucial figure in the history of what we might call the Islamization of Sudan: a process said to

begin in the 16th century AD with the conversion of the Funj rulers of Sinnar in central Sudan, a slow process (and a comparatively late one for Muslim Africa due to the strong presence of Christian kingdoms in Sudan that predated the Funj) that one might say is still occurring today.[17] Given that the then-current Sudanese regime claimed to spark a revitalization of the Islamization process and harkened directly back to the 16th century as its predecessor—the vanguards of the first Islamic state, as they called it[18]—figures like Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī were having a renaissance in Sudanese intellectual life, resurrected from the dusty volumes that chronicle their lives and deeds. Indeed, that is the only reason I'd heard of him, as he had been revitalized in recent years as a symbol of Sudan's Sufi heritage and of a time when—in the government's rendering—Islamization happened without the kind of push-back the regime felt during the years directly preceding national partition in 2011.

It is in the *Tabaqāt* of Wad Dayf Allāh, a late 18th century biographical dictionary of the holy men of Sudan of the previous centuries, that we find the first historical mention in the chronicles of which I am aware of this Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī, the imagined author of the images that 'Abd al-'Āl was channeling in the painting I had purchased.[19] Al-Bahārī's name appears at the end of a story about the spread and development of *fiqh* (jurisprudential) learning in the land of Sudan:

> When the Funj came to power in 1504 there flourished in these lands neither schools of learning nor… the Qur'an; it is said that a man might divorce his wife and she be married by another the same day without any period of probation (*'idda*, a key provision of Islamic divorce law). [This was the case] until Shaykh Mahmūd al-'Arakī came from Egypt and taught the people to observe the laws of *'idda*… Early in [the rule of *'Ajīb al-Mānjilūk*, one of the leaders of the early sultanates], Shaykh Ibrahim al-Būlād came from Egypt to the Shāyqiyya region where he taught the *Khalīl* [i.e. the *Mukhtasar* of Khalīl b. Ishāq] and the *Risāla* [the Risāla Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī) from where knowledge of the *fiqh* [jurisprudence] spread to the Gezira [central Sudan]. Then, after a short time, Shaykh Tāj al-Din al-Bahārī came from Baghdad and introduced the path of the Sufis [i.e. the Qādiriyya] into the Funj country.[20]

The author of the *Tabaqāt* is here trying to make sense of Sudan's Islamization, in stages, all coming from abroad, looking back at the 16th century from his perspective in the 18th. Basic custom and ritual (Egypt, Mahmūd al-'Arakī), Mālikī *fiqh* (Egypt, Ibrahim al-Būlād), and Sufism (Baghdad, Tāj al-Din al-Bahārī, the imagined author of 'Abd al-'Āl's painting), arrive in the Funj territory in rapid

17- See Neil McHugh. *Holy Men of the Blue Nile: The Making of an Arab-Islamic Community in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500-1850* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994).

18- Noah Salomon, *For Love of the Prophet: An Ethnography of Sudan's Islamic State*, 49-52.

19- Dayf Allah, Muhammad al-Nūr bin/wad, 2012 (late 18th cent.). *Kitāb al-tabaqāt fi khusūs al-'awlīyā' wa-l-sālihīn wa al-'ulamā' wa al-shurarā' fī al-sūdān*, edited by Yūsuf Fadl Hasan., (Khartoum: Sudatek Limited).

20- Quoted in Ali Salih Karrar, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 16.

succession. The Funj and their Arab partners and sometimes rivals, the ʻAbdallab, were the first Islamic dynasties of Sudan and both had been reimagined as the founders of the "First Islamic State" by the Salvation regime under which ʻAbd al-ʻĀl lived in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Such revisionism took place in order to give historical precedent to what was in fact an unprecedented project: that is, the merging of modernist Islamic political thought with the infrastructure of the colonial state, something that certainly did not exist in the Funj period nor in any other experiment in Islamic politics prior to Sudanese independence in 1956. Tāj al-Din al-Bahārī was, as the *Tabaqāt* recalls, one of the first Islamizers of Sudanese society in the mid-16th century, in particular through his proselytization of the Sufi path, having popular success in a way that legal scholars didn't always achieve, a Sufi missionary, known for time immemorial as the carrier of the global Qādriyya trend to Sudan, the famous Baghdadi order founded in the 11th century by Shaykh ʻAbd al-Qādir al-Jaylānī. Out of all of the religious reformers in Sudan's Islamic history, why had ʻAbd al-ʻĀl chosen this one in particular as the subject of his painting?

ʻAli Salih Karrar summarizes what is probably the most famous story about Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī, one that could not have been unknown to ʻAbd al-ʻĀl. The story reveals at once a humorous and politically savvy side to this historical figure:

> There is a popular story that describes how [al-Bahārī] chose those who were worthy of initiation [into his Sufi order]. He hid some rams in a storeroom and then told those [people] present [around him] that he was going to initiate, guide, and [then] slaughter them [the people, that is]; they would thus die [gloriously] in the faith. The people were so frightened [at al-Bahārī's proposition] that all fled, except three who volunteered to be initiated. These [brave souls] were Muhammad al-Hamīm, Bān al-Nagā al-Darīr and ʻAjīb al-Manjilūk, the ʻAbdallāb ruler. Al-Bahārī took them one by one into the storeroom, initiated them, and [then] slaughtered *the rams*. When those waiting saw the blood flowing from the storeroom, they thought he had indeed slaughtered the initiates [as he promised].[21]

It was upon unearthing stories such as these that I came to realize that the painting fit my book better than I could ever have imagined before I knew exactly what the painting was about, when I just appreciated it for its beauty alone. ʻAjīb al-Manjilūk, the ʻAbdallāb ruler, who had shown his people that his commitment to faith was strong enough that he would suffer early death so as to meet God without sin, was known in particular as a promoter of Sharīʻa and supporter of Islamic scholars. Since it was Tāj al-Din al-Bahārī who had initiated him, ʻAbd al-ʻĀl's painting that imagined his life represented a figure whose program sat precisely at the intersection of Islamic piety and power that the current regime sought to foster. The teacher of the great Islamizing political

21- Ali Salih Karrar, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*, 22, my emphasis.

leader of the 16th/17th century ‘Ajīb al-Manjilūk was celebrated here in ‘Abd al-‘Āl’s painting. It seems little coincidence that this figure was not only a Sufi Shaykh but one who embraced the political relevance of his Sufi ideas and practice, who is remembered not merely for working with the masses but because of his close relationship with the king.

In “From the Diary of al-Shaykh Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī,” now gloriously restored (Fig. 6), ‘Abd al-‘Āl imagines what the great shaykh must have seen in his travels as he spread his mystical order slowly across Sudan, day by day, image by image. A figure who sought to bring a renewed Islam to the masses, beyond mere legal observance alone, one that inspired an ecstasy so strong that even politicians would sacrifice their lives for it, was at the center of this painting. This was a figure who had sparked precisely the kind of civilizational renaissance for which ‘Abd al-‘Āl advocated, one who saw the profound relevance of the kind of aesthetic experience that Sufism promoted. Al-Bahārī’s Sufism—at once civilization-transforming and God-centered, beautiful and dangerously power-laden, ecstatic and strategic—represented the very sort of potential that ‘Abd al-‘Āl hoped the art of the School of the One could embrace.

Figure 6
From the Diary of Shaykh Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī by Dr. Ahmad ‘Abd al-‘Āl, restored.

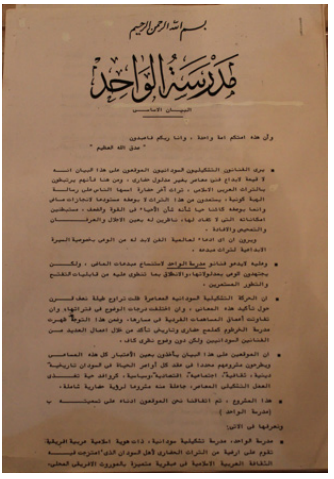
Art and Sufism went hand-in-hand for ‘Abd al-‘Āl as they both were means of accessing *in* the world a beauty that exists in a realm of forms *beyond* the world. “Art is that which transcends the ordinary in a vision of life that explores the facts of existence (*haqā’iq al-wujūd*),”[22] wrote one of ‘Abd al-‘Āl’s interlocutors.

22- Tariq Al-Madih, “Al-Fayd Welcomes Prof. Ahmad ‘Abd al-‘Āl and Holds an Enlightening Meeting with him about Art and Sufism,” 38.

Or, in other words, as Jamal Elias has put it in his illuminating study of art in Islam, which also explores the complex relationship of the mystical and the aesthetic, "inner beauty, apprehended through esoteric perception (*al-basīra al-bātina*), constitutes beauty in its real form."[23] This beauty, at its essence, is the sign of God, *al-wāhid*, the name under which 'Abd al-'Āl's school of visual artists was founded. That such a quest for beauty came to be associated with a regime famous for some of the most ugly episodes in Sudan's recent history remains one of the singular tragedies of 'Abd al-'Āl's remarkable oeuvre.

Vision

A famous hadith discusses this elusive inner vision (*al-basīra al-bātina*) under the frame of *al-ihsān.* That the term, in its common articulations, is explained using the language of sight was a fact that could not have been lost on Abd al-'Āl. It is said that the Prophet was asked, "What is the meaning of *al-ihsān*?" to which he replied, "It is to worship God as if you can see him (*ta'bud allāh ka'annak tarāhu*). And if you don't see him, he sees you."[24] According to Abd al-'Āl, it was both the artist and the mystic who equally had access to this world of beautiful forms. The School of the One held that an aesthetics coming out of the Sufi tradition—one that focused on *al-ihsān,* the vision of God, as the highest level of pious subjectivity—had to be reintroduced to both the contemporary Muslim (who had lost an interest in the fine arts) and the contemporary artist (who had lost an interest in Islam), and ultimately to Sudanese society as a whole (which needed a recalibration of its vision). As 'Abd al-'Āl wrote in the *bayān* (founding document, Fig. 7) that announced the inauguration of the School of the One:


بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

مدرسة الواحد

البيان الأساسي

Figure 7
Cover page of the founding proclamation of the "School of the One"

23- Jamal Elias, *Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 166.

24- https://sunnah.com/bukhari:4777

> The artists who signed this document are of the opinion that there is no value to contemporary artistic works without civilizational significance. So, for this reason, they connected to the Arab and Islamic tradition, the tradition of the last civilization that was founded, founded upon the cosmic gift of revelation… The School of the One understands that the two poles of creative experience are *vision and the skill to reveal that great vision*… as such, the school cares about the [artistic] vocations and professions per se, as a means for civilizational progress, and the artists of this school see that this is an entry point to *al-ihsān*… [25]

"Vision and the skill to reveal that great vision… as a means to civilizational progress," lay at the center of 'Abd al-'Āl's project of accessing *al-ihsān*. This particular project could only be inaugurated by the artist who straddled both a commitment to union with God and to reforming his nation, as well as the skills to spread this vision to the masses. A history stained with the blood of colonial occupation and civil war could not be overturned by politicians, he argued. A unification of radical proportions —with a historical experience of Islam uninterrupted, with a clearsighted vision of the Divine, and with one another— needed to take place. It was the artist who could bring Sudan where it needed to go, to the heights of *al-ihsān,* to a place where art did not merely adorn, but inspired.

Epilogue: Retrieval

The final mention in the historical record of Shaykh Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī, the subject of Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl's painting that has been at the center of this essay, comes in the *Tabaqāt* in the middle of another story about a separate figure in Sudan's Islamic history. The narrative here concerns the conversion to the Sufi path of a Sudanese legal scholar, Shaykh 'Abdullah al-'Arakī, who, unlike al-Bahārī (who may have been the first to bring Sufism to Sudan but did not stay long enough to develop an order around him), has a Sufi order that is active until today. We meet al-'Arakī as he is travelling from Sudan to Mecca to find al-Bahārī so as to be initiated by him in his Sufi order. The story picks up here:

> Shaykh 'Abdullāh [al-'Arakī] saw that the followers of Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī had rejected him [Shaykh 'Abdullāh, that is], and the Funj and the Arabs were following these [Sufi] adepts, since there had appeared for them miracles and other extraordinary things… Shaykh 'Abdullāh got jealous. And he went to find Shaykh Tāj al-Dīn in Mecca, but he found that he had died [and so he took the Sufi order from his successor]… And when he came back [to Sudan] one [local notable] said to him, "You refused to become our brother [i.e. "in faith" by following Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī when he was alive] so now you have become the son of our brother [by following Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahāri's Meccan

25- "Founding Proclamation of the School of the One," Archives of Dr. Ahmad Abd al-'Āl, my emphasis

> disciple].” Still, however, the people of his community [in Sudan] put down for him the mats and seated him on the ceremonial bed (*‘anqarayb*). From then on, he guided the people in knowledge of the exteriors and of the interiors… And these days his tomb is a place of great pilgrimage, and his order grew even more than that of Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī.[26]

While Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī was indispensable to Sudan’s Islamization process—clearly then, and aspirationally now, as well—he was not unsurpassable, even by someone with a questionable provenance to his Sufi inheritance, such as Shaykh ‘Abdullāh as relayed in the *Tabaqāt*. Indeed, while Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī needs retrieval by artists, governments, and intellectuals so as to weigh-in on the present, Shaykh ‘Abdullāh al-‘Arakī, whose “order grew even more than that of Tāj al-Dīn al-Bahārī,” clearly does not. Al-‘Arakī’s order, headquartered in Tayba in the Gezira region of Central Sudan, remains to this day active as both a pilgrimage site and as a bastion of the Sufi left, gathering former (and present) communists, revolutionaries, and spiritual seekers of many sorts within its fold. It is an order politically active most recently in the 2019 protest movement[27] that overthrew the very regime in which ‘Abd al-‘Āl’s work flourished, despite his strong desire to distance himself. Perhaps, even, we can think of Sufi orders such as that of al-‘Arakī in Tayba as alternative models to the School of the One in the fusing of Islam, the arts, and national renewal, whose horizons remain still open (Figure 8). If we can do so, we can reimagine the interface of art and religion as ripe for rediscovery, a topic of equal importance to contemporary practitioners in the arts (both those who take on the name “artist” and those who don’t) and those who seek to engage them.

Figure 8
Contemporary tableau of the ‘Arakiyya Sufi Order

26- Dayf Allah, Muhammad al-Nūr bin/wad, 2012 (late 18th cent.). *Kitāb al-tabaqāt fi khusūs al-’awlīyā’ wa-l-sālihīn wa al-‘ulamā’ wa al-shurarā’ fī al-sūdān*, 252-3.

27- “The Death of the Shaykh ‘Abdallah Azraq Tayba,” Dār Hayā website, November 10, 2021, https://darhaya.com/news/2021/11/10/38466/ وفاة-الشيخ-عبدالله-ازرق-طيبة-موعد-الجنازة-والسيرة-الذاتية

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ملخص | في نهاية القرن العشرين ، ظهرت في السودان مدرسة جديدة للفنون البصرية. سعت إلى ردم الهوة بين النهضة الإسلامية المعاصرة والفنون. تتأسف المدرسة على أن هذه الأخيرة نحت في اتجاه الحياة العلمانية ، في حين أن الأولى قد اتخذت اتجاهًا عميقًا ضد الجمالية ، لذا لجأت إلى المحفوظات الجمالية للصوفية لتنشيط الممارسة الفنية الإسلامية للقرن الحادي والعشرين. سعت هذه المدرسة وأتباعها ، التي تطلق على نفسها اسم "المدرسة الواحدة" ، إلى تسخير قوة الجمال المتأصلة في التقاليد اللاهوتية والطقوسية الإسلامية مع تكييفها لأغراض جديدة ، تلك التي لها علاقة معقدة مع مشاريع الدولة المسلمة. منطلقا" من لغز أراد المؤلف حلّه حول لوحة معينة لمؤسس مدرسة الفرد ، أحمد عبد العال ، يقدم هذا المقال مقاربة تاريخية دقيقة لمشكلة الجماليّة السودانيّة. أواخر القرن العشرين وأوائل القرن الحادي والعشرين. فيما يلي يسافر المؤلف مع أحمد عبد العال في الماضي القريب والبعيد ، بينما يسعى الفنان إلى استحضار تجربة جمالية تخدم الله وتساهم في مشروع إصلاحي تقي اختفى منذ ذلك الحين.

كلمات مفتاحية | "مدرسة الواحد"، أحمد عبد العال، السودان، الصوفية، الدولة الإسلامية، فن، رسم.

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