







# CHANGING THE *SURREALIST GAME*

**James Parry** evaluates a groundbreaking show on Egyptian Surrealism that has impact way beyond its obvious parameters.



Opening pages: Rateb Seddik.  
*Untitled*, c. 1940. Oil on wood.  
 120 x 220 cm. Rateb Seddik  
 Museum, Cairo. © Timothy Kaldas.

Facing page: Amy Nimr. *Untitled*  
*(Underwater Skeleton)*, 1943  
 Gouache on wood. 54 x 45.5 cm.  
 © HE Sheikh Hassan MA Al Thani  
 Collection, Doha.

*E*very so often, an exhibition comes along that somehow changes the artistic landscape. Not just in terms of its subject matter, or the ways in which it handles the presentation of the material and works involved. What makes such shows stand out is the repositioning of connections and context that they orchestrate, assembling arguments that force us to reassess our understanding and interpretation of particular chapters in art or in history.

One such exhibition is *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)*, which opened in Paris at the Centre Pompidou last month and tours subsequently to Madrid, Düsseldorf and Liverpool. Curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, who set up Art Reoriented in 2009 and have since made their mark through artfully crafted shows and projects, *Art et Liberté* continues the duo's impressive track record for refreshing minds and reappraising perceptions of subjects we thought we already knew well. Think the iconic *Tea with Nefertiti* show at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in 2012–13, and *Songs of*

*Loss and Songs of Love: Oum Kulthoum and Lee Nan-Young* at Gwangju Museum of Art in 2014.

Bardaouil and Fellrath – Sam & Till, as they are more usually known (or even by the combo “Still”) – have now turned their attention to Surrealism, with impressive and far-reaching consequences. Billed as the first comprehensive museum exhibition about the Art and Liberty Group, a Surrealist collective of writers and artists living and working in Cairo during the decade spanning the Second World War, their latest show is ambitious both in terms of scope and message. It presents not only a historical narrative of the group, but also an insightful artistic assessment and, most critically, a declaration that Surrealism as we know it may never be the same again. “We wanted to avoid the usual binary treatment of the subject,” explains Bardaouil, “in which it’s framed within a structure of comparison with what was happening elsewhere. This approach serves to dilute the complexity of the real situation and detract from its core significance and value, so we aimed to break from this approach.”







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**Sam Bardaouil**

The exhibition is presented in nine distinct but coherent sections and opens with an introduction to late 1930s Egypt, a distinctly nationalistic and conservative place epitomized artistically by the effete and predictable Salon du Caire. Railing against the ruptures of social inequality and what they saw as a drift to fascism under King Farouk, members of the group concentrated on articulating the oppression of the deprived and excluded masses. Artists such as Inji Efflatoun (*Surrealist composition*, 1942) and Amy Nimr (*Untitled (Underwater Skeleton)*, 1943) created powerful expressions of economic and social exclusion and personal anguish, all the more remarkable in the case of Efflatoun who was just 18 when she was first invited to show at the group's Independent Art Show.

Efflatoun and Nimr were two of many women in the group, a demographic that helped underline their professed egalitarian and progressive ethos. This aspect is the subject of one of the exhibition sections, *The Woman of the City*, which focuses both on

female pioneers such as Marie Cavadia and Lee Miller as well as on the group's interest in, and support for, the plight of prostitutes in Egypt during the war years, when the country was flooded by foreign troops. Artists such as Fouad Kamel (*Untitled*, undated) and Kamel El-Telmisany (*Nude*, 1941) depicted prostitutes pierced with nails and with their breasts and navels contorted to resemble faces, as both an expression of their lost humanity and an indictment of their treatment by society. The standout piece in this section is arguably Mahmoud Saïd's *La femme au boucles d'or* (1933), which has a talismanic quality that resonates through the entire show.

Art and Liberty members were well connected with their fellow artists in a fluid network right across the globe and so were able to articulate fast-moving international thoughts and trends in their own opinions and works. This made them immediately suspect in the eyes of the Egyptian authorities, and they were regularly rounded on by the establishment and, like any other group deemed “subversive”,











Facing page: Ramses Younane. *Untitled*. 1939. Oil on canvas. 46.5 x 35.5 cm. © HE Sheikh Hassan MAAI Thani Collection, Doha.

This page: Mayo. *Coups de Bâtons*. 1937. Oil on canvas. 167 x 243 cm. Private collection. Image courtesy Annunciata Galleria, Milan.



subject to state-organised physical violence. Mayo's *Coups de bâtons* (1937) was inspired by a police baton charge on a café frequented by artists and intellectuals. Discord and vitriol from outside was mirrored to some extent by outbreaks of dissent and agreement within the group, which saw some artists dissociating themselves from Surrealism and breaking away from Art and Liberty to form the Contemporary Art Group, dedicated to the development of what they saw as a truly authentic Egyptian art. This group included artists who were to become seminal figures in Egyptian Modern art, such as Abdel Hadi El Gazzar, Hamed Nada and Samir Rafi.

Meanwhile, central to the Art and Liberty call to arms was the concept of 'subjective realism', advanced by group members such as Ramses Younane (*Untitled*, 1939) and Rateb Seddik (*Untitled*, c. 1940) as a more valid and productive way forward than what

they felt was the excessively premeditated and unspontaneous expressions of such Surrealist stalwarts as Dalí and Magritte. The unceremonial dumping of such big beasts may seem shocking, but Art and Liberty cherished the power of the collective imagination over what they perceived as contrivance and selfishness. Other members such as Kamel El Telmisany identified this as 'free art'. Therein lay real power, real liberation and real art, they contended. This, perhaps, may represent their greatest offering of food for thought in any more general assessment of Surrealism. "It's really important to understand that these artists did not see themselves as any sort of sideshow," says Bardaouil. "They had no sense of being on the periphery. They felt at the very heart of Surrealism as a movement, full of confidence that an equal discussion of these issues was happening in Egypt, just as it was in Paris or elsewhere." As seminal to the formation, ethos and







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Till Fellrath

development of Art and Liberty as subjective realism was the figure of Georges Henein. Attributed with inaugurating the Surrealist movement in Egypt with a seminal lecture in Cairo in 1937, this remarkable polymath has an entire section in the show dedicated to his individual work and overall contribution. His writing assumed a defining quasi-manifesto character for the group and he emerges as an inescapable leitmotiv throughout the show, his star mirroring the wax and ultimate wane of the group's fortunes and cohesion in the late 1940s.

The skilful distillation and explanation of material demonstrating Henein's significance exemplifies one other key aspect of this exhibition: the depth and extent of its scholarly rigour. The curators' interest in the subject of Egyptian Surrealism goes back several years, and the wealth of knowledge and painstaking detective work (“We spent a huge amount of time tracking down documents and references in archives, libraries, museums and private collections,” says Fellrath) in assembling and marshalling the content and direction of this exhibition is abundantly clear in the richness and diversity of the items on display. Long-lost works have been retrieved (and, in some cases, restored) and presented in public here for the first time in decades. Loans have been made

from a wide range of sources, including from the private collection of Sheikh Hassan bin Mohammed Al-Thani, who supported the idea of an exhibition from the very start: “It was always clear to me that the work of the Surrealists in Egypt represented a very important chapter in the history of Surrealism globally, yet it was one that was little recognised nowadays in Egypt, let alone elsewhere. This exhibition will hopefully change that.” Meanwhile, one glittering seam running through the exhibition are the pamphlets, posters, photographs and cartoons that have been rediscovered and enabled connections to be made that might simply never have been recognised. It is a hugely impressive and rewarding endeavour, and one that should serve as an exemplar for other exhibitions to follow. 

*Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)* runs until 16 January 2017 at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, before moving to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 14 February–28 May 2017; to the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen K21, Düsseldorf, 15 July–15 October 2017; and to Tate Liverpool, 10 November 2017–11 March 2018. For more information visit [www.artoriented.com](http://www.artoriented.com)