

# VOGUE

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A DECADE OF HUDA KATTAN'S BEAUTY REIGN

SURREAL FASHION: BRINGING BACK THE FUN TO DRESSING



# THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Cairo's surrealist collective has paved the way for a  
contemporary art landscape without borders

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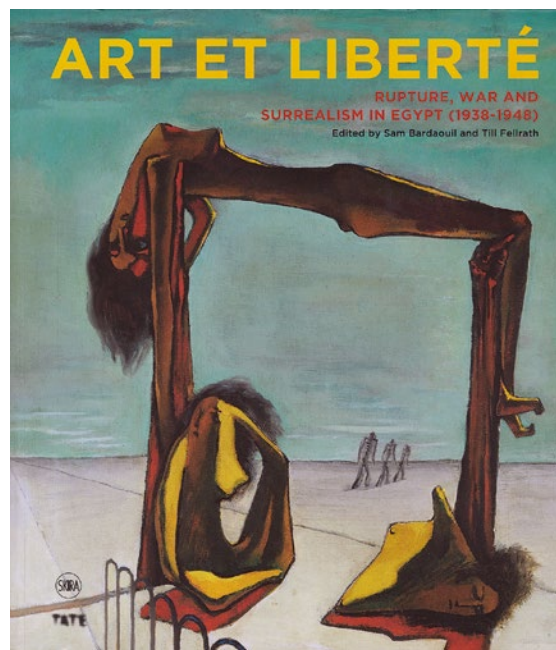




**A**lymamah Rashed is a self-proclaimed cyborg. While this word usually conjures images of robots and mechanical body parts, the 29-year-old Kuwaiti visual artist does not use it in reference to artificial intelligence. To her, this cyborg is a spiritual avatar containing multiple bodies: Rashed's physical form, and one that dons a thobe. When these two existences unite, the Muslima Cyborg is born. Or more accurately, she is liberated – unobstructed by any conventional ideas of reason or humanity so that Rashed can capture her emergence on canvas. The only rule governing this artistic practice is that, simply put, there are no rules at all. “You are able to enter my work through the story of my body and you're able to enter into my work through your own gaze. I want to constantly establish a linkage between faith and art through self perception and self analysis,” Rashed says. She's inspired by artists who rearrange spaces, experiences, or memories through the “fragmenting, stretching, or isolating of the body,” and last month marked the end of her two-part solo exhibition in the UAE. The title for each chapter was taken from a single sentence Rashed had split in half so that the first part, “When My Heart Danced Near Your Mirage” appeared at Tabari Artspace in Dubai, and the second, “A Hundred Flowers Sang Back to Us” featured at Abu Dhabi Art.

In the same way the exhibit lived between two emirates, Rashed's paintings straddle two worlds. Her embrace of both the natural and supernatural has led to her artistic style being described as surrealist, which Rashed says is a fair characterization. “I have particularly gravitated towards the Arab Surrealist Movement, which was founded in Cairo by [poet and theorist] Georges Henein. The movement converged visual fragmentations, writing manifestos, and social protest. Ramses Younan's paintings are connected with an ongoing investigation of the body and to my own attempt to ‘bodify’ the soul through disorienting its borders,” Rashed explains. She also cites the influence of Algerian artist Baya Mahieddine who, though she did not self-identify as being part of a particular art genre, painted peculiar figures imbued with bold hues that have been classified as surrealist.

Henein and Younan were two key figures from the Art et Liberté group, which was a collective of artists, writers, and intellectuals created in Cairo in 1938. The group was built upon principles of the broader Surrealism Movement led by poet and critic André Breton in Paris following the First World War. The initial purpose of the movement was to explore the power of art as a tool for transformation in society following one of the deadliest conflicts in history. Disillusioned by a civilization that was capable of such destruction, proponents of surrealism were attracted to the ideas of Austrian neurologist Sigmund



**LEFT** Can Your Mirage Become My Savior (I Long for You), 2022, Alymamah Rashed  
**OPPOSITE** The Art et Liberté group, circa 1945 **ABOVE** Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948), edited by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath

## “The Arab Surrealist Movement converged visual fragmentations, writing manifestos, and social protest”

Freud, whose theories on psychoanalysis and the impact of the mind on human behavior were gaining momentum. Surrealists wanted to move away from the didactic methods of creating all forms of art that were rooted in rational thinking and instead unleash the freedom of the subconscious, explains Sam Bardaouil, who alongside Till Fellrath co-founded Art Reoriented, a multidisciplinary curatorial platform based in Munich and New York. The pair also curated *Surrealism in Egypt: Art et Liberté 1938–1948*, the first comprehensive museum exhibition about the movement's Cairo-based contingent.

“Reason and logic had failed them, so basically they wanted to delve into the realm of the subconscious to unlock anarchy, the breaking of rules, and the workings of dreams as a means of creating a new world order; a new way of looking at things,” Bardaouil says of Breton and his earliest followers. By juxtaposing imagery that didn't typically go



**LEFT** Installation view, Art et Liberté, Reina Sofia Madrid, 2017  
**ABOVE** Untitled, 1942, Inji Efflatoun **BELOW** Untitled (Underwater Skeleton), 1943, Amy Nimr

together and drawing from their dreams to write, paint, sing, and so on, artists like Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy, and René Magritte sought to present alternative configurations of objects and settings in their work that challenged previously accepted norms. This is why some of the most iconic images of the movement are those of an apple hovering in front of a man's face (Magritte), melting clocks (Dalí), and women with birds as headdresses (Ernst). These examples put the contradictory states of dream and reality in cultural dialogue that was later picked up by Art et Liberté in Egypt, as well as in places like Mexico, Japan, Martinique, Sweden, Denmark, and beyond.

"Everybody felt that they could contribute and adapt the main tenets of that movement to fit the requirements of their immediate socio, political, cultural, and artistic context, and this is where Art et Liberté adapted, adopted, and negotiated surrealism as a platform through which they could then go in other directions and develop their own language," Bardaouil says. When Art et Liberté first assembled in 1938, poverty was rife in Egypt while a second World War was on the horizon. The group served as a platform to call for political and social reform, and members rebelled against the expectation that art should function as political propaganda. Instead, they published a manifesto titled "Long Live Degenerate Art," named for the label the Nazi party gave to art they did not approve of. It was a public rejection of fascism, nationalism, and colonialism, and an invitation for artists who were being persecuted in Europe to seek refuge in Cairo.

Though the document called on fellow "men of art, men of letters" to refuse any limitations put on art under the guise of moral righteousness, its signatories and supporters were not exclusively male. Women played an essential role allowing for surrealism to take hold in Egypt.



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The photographer Ida Kar (born in Russia to an Armenian family and who moved to Cairo) made photo collages that subverted nationalistic imagery of Egypt's famous temples and pyramids. Painter Amy Nimr's hazy depictions of floating skeletons expressed her grief over losing her young son in a bomb blast. Inji Efflatoun, the feminist activist and painter who separated herself from her aristocratic upbringing in Cairo and instead advocated for working-class Egyptians, women, and children, is one of the most well-known women affiliated with the group. She was ultimately incarcerated for her communist activities and used the opportunity to paint about her experience behind bars, exposing the inside of a women's prison in a way that had never been done before.

"At the young age of 15, Efflatoun trained with [artist and filmmaker] Kamel El Telmissany, who introduced her to the Art et Liberté group. Her activism, many writings, and phenomenal body of work extended considerable influence beyond the surrealist movement," says researcher and cultural practitioner Nadine Nour el Din. She points to the renowned American photographer Lee Miller as another seminal female figure in the movement due to her ties with international networks. "Miller was the Cairo group's mediator between the British Surrealists in London as well as with the artistic collective of the Paris Villa Seurat circle."

This global nature is arguably surrealism's most significant cultural contribution because it set the stage for a contemporary art landscape without borders – be that the kind that separates countries or consciousness. It is the reason art made in one

hemisphere can be studied, displayed, and challenged in another so that a viewer's capacity to think is expanded rather than restricted. It's the reason a young artist like Rashed can not only define and identify her inner cyborg, she can set it free for all to see. "Today artists are using and working with art outside and beyond the realm of nationality and geography," Bardaouil says of surrealism's lasting impact. "They're thinking about it as a tool to deconstruct these rigid notions in order to find a way through which we can address historical injustices, create a kind of revolution to challenge what we've inherited as givens, and imagine new possibilities of being in the world." □





**ABOVE LEFT** *Untitled (Anatomical Corpse)*, 1940, Amy Nimr **TOP** The manifesto "Long Live Degenerate Art," named for the label the Nazi party gave to art they did not approve of **ABOVE CAN** *Your Mirage Become My Savior (I Long for You) III*, 2022, Alymamah Rashed **BELOW, FROM LEFT** *Boy and Lamp*, 1941, Inji Efflatoun; *Surrealist Study*, circa 1940, Ida Kar/Idabel; *Do Not Search for Me Above Your Skies I Hang My Past Love in Your Sedra*, 2022, Alymamah Rashed

