

Aly Ben Salem

A Perfect World

28 February – 20 May 2023

Elmarsa Gallery, Dubai



Le jardin d'Eden, circa 1940s, Watercolour on paper, 56 x 70 cm

Elmarsa Gallery is delighted to present *A Perfect World*, the first solo exhibition by leading Tunisian modernist Aly Ben Salem (1910-2001) at Elmarsa Gallery, Dubai, offering viewers a perspective on a pivotal moment in North African art history. Ben Salem represents the first generation of artists to emerge out of Tunisia as the struggle for independence from French rule comes to its successful conclusion. He was initially trained in the

academic style of painting at local art schools during the colonial period before rejecting that formal training as part of a generational political shift to exploring more authentic representation of his native culture. Ben Salem then moves to Paris in his early career and encounters a wider range of eastern and western painting styles before developing his unique style. At first glance, Ben Salem figurative visual language, like most of his Tunisian

contemporaries, presents a sharp contrast to his North African peers' abstract style who contested the figurative and narrative vision but, upon closer scrutiny, they share an expression of a plural Maghrebi identity and something inherent to their history, memory, identity, cultural heritage, authenticity. Somehow, by incorporating the various influences he encountered in his academic training and travels abroad, Ben Salem arrives at a modern painterly practice that is universal yet recognizably North African and continues to be visible in later artists work from the late 20th century.

Aly Ben Salem was born in Kalaa al-Kebira (Tunisia) in 1910. His art is unique by its difference and its continuities. Despite the great diversity of materials and modes of expression, the originality of his graphic line and his colours and the specificity of his imaginative universe have remained constant to the extent that one may talk about Aly Ben Salem's style. He admits that he was first influenced by Persian miniatures, and that his passion for traditional crafts was confused in his earlier period with his rebellion against the kind of Orientalist pictorial identification that favored palm trees and Bedouin women. The series of works painted between 1930 and 1936 have captured in a poetic and none the less precise manner the crafts and gestures of artisans. From the Persian tradition he learned the bold curve and the taste for detail and precision, and from classical figurative techniques the perspective of depth, which is often represented in the backdrop through the intricate lines of mural tiles and wrought ironwork. He has managed to overcome genres thanks to his original style which distinctly mingles harmoniously figures with oval faces and eloquent postures with traditional artefacts carefully delineated. His scenes often bathe in a unified continuum of diaphanous light dominated by ochre.

Equally inspired by the decorative nature of Tunisian craft as Persian and Indian miniature tradition, Aly Ben Salem's figurative practice, is represented by a group of paintings that offer insight into the dual influence of Fauvism and miniature painting in the evolution of his recognizable romantic style and composition.



Portrait of a woman with dog, 1938, Mixed media on paper, 53.5 x 76 cm

Primarily focused on a key period from the late 1930s through the 70s, viewers can see the development of his narrative compositions and representation of idealized female figures shift from recognizable eastern influences in "Portrait of a woman with dog" (signed and dated 1938) and "Le jardin d'Eden" (Circa 1940s) slowly shift to the less ethnically specific figures in the foreground while the

more traditional decorative motifs move to the background in “*Les Ondines*” (Circa 1960s) and “*Woman with deer*”, (Circa 1970s).



Woman with deer, circa 1970s, Gouache on paper, 27 x 22 cm

The first Tunisian to attend the Tunis School of Fine Arts, Aly Ben Salem belongs to a generation of Tunisian modernists who grew up during their country’s long struggle for independence and expressed their patriotism through their art, thereby establishing the Ecole Tunisienne. He merges his strong foundation in painting and composition he received from his training under Armand Vergeaud with a passion for traditional Tunisian craft, and, just one year after graduating from art school in 1933, holds his first exhibition at Colisée Rotunda in Tunis. Soon thereafter, Ben Salem is awarded the Tunisian Government Prize of Fine Arts in 1936, becoming the first Arab Tunisian to receive the

distinction, and also wins an award by the Ministry of North African Affairs enabling him to spend 1937 to 1940 in the heart of the Parisian art world in Montparnasse. Ben Salem’s distinctive style begins to emerge as he comes into contact with a wider world of ideas about art and politics. This is also the period when he makes his first contact with Sweden, the country where he would emigrate in 1950 and spend the rest of his life. Upon his return to Tunisia at the onset of the Second World War, he founds the School of Fine Arts in Sfax where he teaches there until the school is bombed during the war.

He moves to Sweden soon thereafter where he continues to tirelessly campaign for Tunisian independence throughout his life and to support the revitalization of Tunisian crafts. In addition to painting, Aly Ben Salem also devoted his creative energies to collecting mosaics, tapestry and enamelled glass. These works were shown in Tunisia, Sweden, the United States, Norway and Germany. He received numerous distinctions and honours throughout his life, including the rank of Officer of the Swedish Royal Order in 1973, La Médaille de la Villa de Paris, Le Mérite National des Lettres et Arts de France in 1976 and is made an officer of the Tunisian Republic in 1980. In 1992 he was promoted by the Tunisian Government to the dignity of the Grand Officer of Arts and Letters, and receives a medal from the Tunisian Association of Aesthetics and Poetics in 1996. Ben Salem’s collection of Tunisian ethnography is eventually donated to the National Ethnography Museum in Stockholm after his death in 2001 and, on what would have been his 100th birthday in 2010, Tunisia celebrated Aly Ben Salem’s contribution by declaring it the National Day for Culture.



The bride, 1946, Watercolour and gouache on paper, 77 x 57 cm



Portrait of a woman, circa 1950s, Mixed media on panel, 96 x 72 cm



Paysage onirique aux femmes et animaux, circa 1950, Gouache on paper, 74 x 98 cm



Subjects with women and white horses, circa 1960s, Gouache on paper, 56 x 76 cm



Les Ondines, Circa 1960, Acrylic on paper, 56.5 x 77 cm

About the gallery

Founded in 1994, Elmarsa Gallery has galleries in Tunis and Dubai, and an expanding European presence in Paris. Specializing in both modern and contemporary art, the gallery represents and supports the career of some of the most influential and recognized artists of the 20th and the 21st century from North Africa and the Middle-East, with a wide-ranging exhibition programme at its two gallery spaces. Active in both the primary and secondary markets, Elmarsa also represents its artists at major international art fairs focusing on African and Middle-East art in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Paris, London, Marrakech, Miami and New York.

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