

Najlaa Elageli and expanding the perception of contemporary Libyan art

MEMO speaks to London-based Libyan gallerist and curator Najlaa Elageli



Image from the exhibition "Retracing A Disappearing Landscape", held in Madrid and Cordoba, in 2018 and 2019 [image: Najlaa Elageli]

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According to London-based Libyan gallerist and curator Najlaa Elageli, the word "Libya" always makes people jump, so she decided to channel that negativity in the opposite direction by curating an alternative cultural narrative. "I wanted to surprise people by showing that besides strife and conflict, a unique beauty exists in Libya."

Elageli's mission in life is to spot and nurture the work of talented Libyan artists and bring them to the international stage. She is doing this through her foundation, Noon Arts.

"The young Libyan artists are experiencing numerous obstacles," she explains. "These vary from basic daily struggles such as a lack of electricity to a lack of cultural venues and political instability. They are restricted in every aspect, socially, politically and physically."



The Hanging by Yousef Fetis 2011 – an iconic piece that was produced while NATO forces was bombarding Tripoli and the image depicts the fall of a dictator and also the state of the country and it's fate just

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hanging. It was one of the artworks exhibited at Noon Arts first exhibition in London at the Arab British Centre 2012 [image: Najlaa Elageli]

Libyan artists working outside the country are clearly favoured, she says, as they are exposed to more information and creative tools. They end up becoming much more aware of what is happening artistically in the world, having access to alternative ways of seeing and thinking.

However, she also sees the resilience of Libya-based artists who, by leveraging social media, are finding new ways of dealing with difficulties and creating new ways of working and presenting their work. "I am impressed by their willingness to create their own narrative and hunger to learn from the outside world," Elageli tells me.

The main hindrance to art development in Libya, she points out, is a huge disinterest in the arts and education generally. "So many small and very beautiful initiatives by artists and cultural practitioners have been attacked on moral and conservative grounds which have led to their closure. Yet there is hope, as some seem to have found a communal language to engage with the public, like the Ali Gana Foundation."

From Elageli's first exhibition in London in 2012, "The Libyan", featuring a collective of eight contemporary artists from Libya, to "Retracing a Disappearing Landscape" in 2018 — an ambitious travelling group exhibition tackling collective Libyan memory — Elageli has seen a change of perception in Libyan art.

"The artists' trust in me gave me confidence that Libyan art is worthy of focus and appreciation at



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the highest level and deserving of attention which it never had before but does now. We have finally managed to leave a thread of light that will enable Libyan artists to be seen and sought after."



Over the years, Elageli's work has engaged her within and beyond Libya. In Tripoli, she has long been considered an outsider, as she was working independently without any political agenda.

Security has been a major issue. "Once I had a difficult encounter with a conservative young man who walked into one of my exhibitions in Tripoli. He literally bombarded me with questions to justify exhibiting images and paintings of women. My solution was to talk with him for almost two hours about the artworks. Eventually he thanked me and left."

One of her most bizarre experiences was a visit to the same Tripoli show as the US Ambassador, who turned up with a huge security entourage. Just 1km

away, a firefight broke out between two militias. "The Ambassador stayed for two hours looking around, observing and talking about art whilst hearing shooting outside. The upside was that the Ambassador ended up purchasing almost twenty pieces of art."

In 2015, Elageli left Libya due to the civil war, and opted for London as her base. From there, she started to take on a number of projects, ranging from Libyan artists dealing with the region post-Arab Spring, to street artists and a retrospective of the late Libyan-Canadian artist Arwa Abouon.

A turning point for the promotion of Libyan art has been curating the Benetton Collection's "Imago Mundi Project" for Libyan work. She was approached by the Benetton Foundation to take on the project after the organisation failed to make any connection with the then Libyan Ministry of Culture. "I informed them that I cannot promise delivery of the project as the country was split back then, and the project needed to cover 140 Libyan artists, which was almost impossible."

Undaunted, however, Elageli turned to "her" Libyan artists for help and used social media to facilitate the project from her side. "It actually became a fun project as family and friends put efforts together and smuggled the blank canvases to Tripoli and Benghazi for the artists to use and then they would return them to London," she recalls. "My mother literally brought the canvases of 80 artists in her luggage. Against all odds, we succeeded in the end. It was done really organically with lots of dedication and love from friends and artists, showing how teamwork can achieve the impossible."

Elageli points out that if in Libya artists are operating in a very volatile space, this is because art is seen as an unnecessary commodity. "People do not really understand the importance of collecting and preserving important artworks."

Being based in Europe, and because of her international background, Elageli has started building ties with European collectors. She noticed that they are much more flexible than Arab collectors when approached. "I was surprised by the interest of European collectors and their eagerness to acquire art from Libya. Arab collectors are different, they want a bargain and love to haggle."



Through her curating and links with artists, Elageli is now a collector herself. For the past two years she has been focused on collecting contemporary and modern Libyan art which is rare and unique. There are, she notes, only two or three collectors who are serious about collecting contemporary and modern

Libyan art exclusively. From my perspective, I think they are doing a fantastic job to preserve Libya's cultural identity. Indeed, Elageli's own patronage is contributing to the increased visibility of Libyan art.

Among these collectors we find prominent Libyan investment banker Abdul Magid Breish, who has an extensive collection of Libyan art and is an important patron of Middle Eastern and North African art in general. "He is known for his huge collection of the Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi and Iraqi artist Dia Azzawi," says Elageli. "His Libyan collection is extensive and important. He recently published a book called *In Vested Interests: From Passion to Patronage*, where you can find and read an important section about Libyan art which I believe is an important and brilliant step forward."

Najlaa Elageli's efforts to expand the way that the art world looks at Libya will come to fruition this year. She is working on "The Green Book", an exhibition in cooperation with Tewa Barnosa, a young Libyan artist and curator, which is envisioned to be a collective of Libyan and International artists approaching the legacy of [Gadhafi's] *Green Book* and Libya post-Arab Spring."

She is also working on an exhibition with artist Hadia Gana in Tripoli about the collective memory of Libyans and industrial modernity titled "Made in Libya". "It is a project that I am eager to produce to a Libyan audience. What's more, I am also co-curating a wonderful project in relation to the decolonising of postcard images of women from the Middle East North Africa region with artist Salma Ahmad Caller."