

ArtSeen

Wassef Boutros-Ghali: A Retrospective

By Kaleem Hawa



Boutros Boutros-Ghali was an architect of the Camp David Accords. His brother, Wassef Boutros-Ghali was an architect. Wassef is also an artist. Compiling paintings and drawings from his personal collection, *Wassef Boutros-Ghali: A Retrospective* at albertz benda is a debut of sorts, the first time many of his works have been shown publicly.

ON VIEW

Albertz Benda

November 12 – December 19, 2020

New York



Wassef Boutros-Ghali, Untitled, 1993. Pen, ink, and watercolor on paper, 27 x 39 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and albertz benda, New York. Photo: Casey Kelbaugh.

A chronology affixed to the wall traces the dizzying life of the artist—from an upbringing in Cairo and France, to life in Switzerland and Connecticut and New York. That Boutros-Ghali is so clearly comfortable working in and across such disparate cultures is a product of his elite upbringing, and perhaps informs his underlying admiration for Western aesthetic practices.

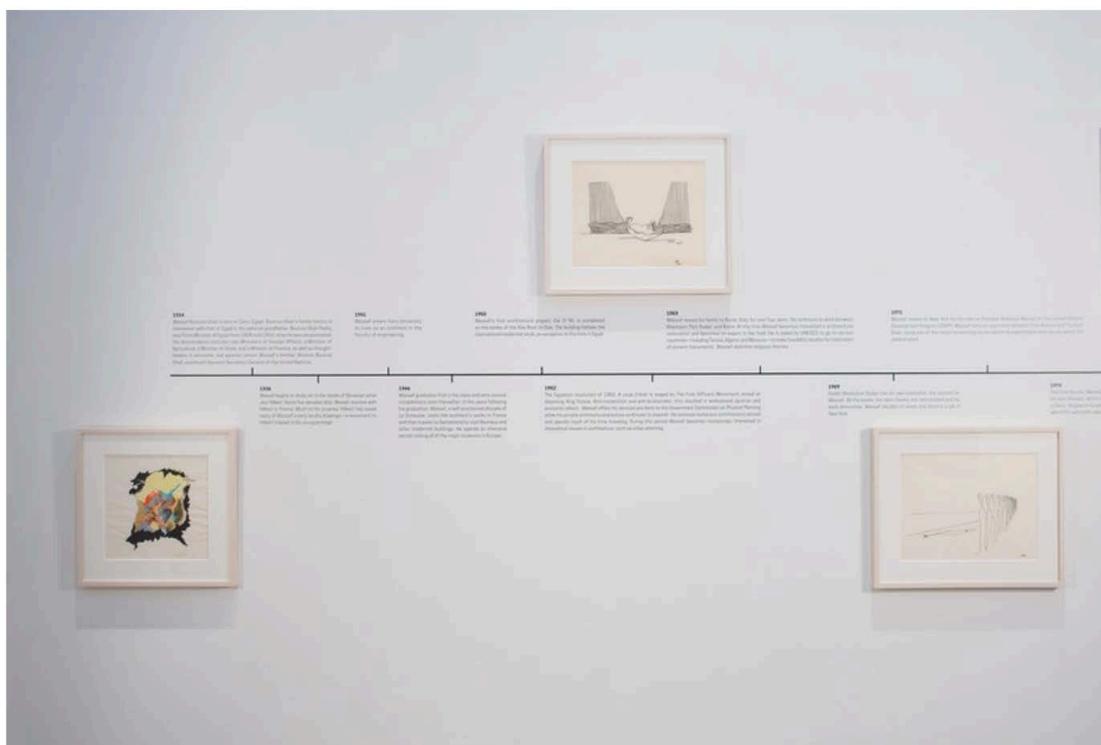
Hawa, Kaleem. "Wassef Boutros-Ghali: A Retrospective," *Brooklyn Rail*, December 20, 2020.

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He comes from a long line of Egyptian political figures who are part of the nation's Coptic Christian minority; his paternal grandfather Boutros Ghali Pasha was Egypt's prime minister for 16 months before his assassination in 1910. Frozen out as landowners and representatives of the old regime under Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism, the Boutros-Ghali family saw their fortunes reversed with the ascendance of the pro-Western Anwar Sadat, whom Wassef's brother escorted to Jerusalem in 1977 before Egypt signed its 1979 normalization treaty with Israel.¹ These political stories serve as important markers, tracing the evolution of post-WWI Egypt and showcasing the re-emergence of a typical informant upper class: besotted with Europe and complicit in their country's ongoing ruin.



Installation view: *Wassef Boutros-Ghali: A Retrospective*, albertz benda, New York, 2020. Courtesy the artist and albertz benda, New York. Photo: Casey Kelbaugh.

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This Egyptian history pervades Boutros-Ghali's practice. In the 1960s and '70s, while he lived in Khartoum and Rome, his drawings were often ink-on-paper, and inspired by the mythology and oral record of his home. These early works feature asymmetrical geometric shapes depicted in figurative arrangements, showing weapons and limbs. *The Fish* (1975), for instance, is a black and white drawing featuring a row of silent guardians staring down at the carcass of a fish washed ashore. There is a pharaonic nationalist undertone to the construction; like a scene out of Shadi Abdel Salam's 1969 film *Al-Mummia* [The Night of Counting the Years], one imagines this to be a line of witnesses to an old Egypt's death rattle—all of which Boutros-Ghali depicts with startling estrangement.

After moving to New York in 1971 to serve as a consultant on urbanism for the United Nations, Boutros-Ghali's practice changed considerably—he began to paint in acrylic and on larger canvases, his art becoming, as he puts it, less “descriptive” and more “abstract.” The resultant contemporary paintings resemble the topography of the Mesopotamian landscape: they are bright and smooth, and in some ways employ Hans Hofmann's “push and pull,” focusing on the use of opposing primary and complementary colors to create space. One of the most arresting works on display is *Untitled* (2009), which is comprised of orange and brown forms on blue acrylic background. From one perspective, the painting seems involuted and cavernous, an entryway plays host to a giggling pentagon. But from a different vantage, it is defiant and angular, its subject in an active state of resistance. Boutros-Ghali's background-foreground relations are often disturbed, creating an uneasy interplay between society and individual life.

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This spirit is imbued in some of the other contemporary Levantine abstraction, if this can be described as a phenomenon—Etel Adnan (Lebanon) and Samia Halaby (Palestine) come to mind. There is something fascinating about a select caste of Christian Arab artists who lived through major societal upheavals—the Lebanese Civil War of the '80s, the Palestinian



Wassef Boutros-Ghali, *Fish And Bird*, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist and albertz benda, New York. Photo: Casey Kelbaugh.

Naksa of 1967— becoming convergently sensitized to structure in this way. And one need look no further than the stark borders with which the imperial powers carved up “the Orient” to understand why structure would be important to an Arab artist; the post-colonial subject is, after all, abstracted. This develops as a distinct subjectivity, not as some derivative of a Western avant-garde, but as a practice with autonomous roots in the Arab experience of colonialism, a response to what is inscribed by one of the purest forms of domination.

Yet, despite some of the similarities, I am unsure that Boutros-Ghali stands in this lineage. His approach to abstraction is an idiosyncratic one, in its

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possession of an essentially figurative impulse—we have rivers, trees, crests of a desert locale. It does not recapitulate any distinctly American precedents; his is not a Frank Stella-inflected focus on the logic of the support nor an Ad Reinhardt project of the climax condition. This leaves Boutros-Ghali a complicated artist to place in the conventionally-described divisions between the aesthetic practices of the Arab nationalists and the internationalist modernists who embraced abstraction. As a child, Boutros-Ghali studied under Jaro Hilbert, the Czech-born realist, but what stands out in his practice is his abiding interest in Le Corbusier, the Swiss French architect and painter. In 1950, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru hired Le Corbusier to design Chandigarh, the administrative capital of Punjab and Haryana, ironically selecting a European for a utopian urban planning project celebrating a newfound freedom from the country's economic and cultural subjugation to Europe.

However neuralgic, it is worth asking: what would lead a man from a colonized nation to be a self-proclaimed “disciple” of Le Corbusier? The easy interpretation is Boutros-Ghali's practice as an architect and his commitments to simplicity and equilibrium. In *Fish And Bird* (1985), for example, the yellow and brown shapes foregrounded by taupe and blue, suggest a spout of a ship, or its ballast tank, the rivets and columns of the hull. If modernist aversion to figuration is still considered a reaction to the social cataclysm of WWII—after which, there was nothing left to say “with” the figure—then Boutros-Ghali's obsession with these infrastructural ephemera only years after the 1956 Suez Crisis is striking. That great canal looms large in the works.

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This Le Corbusierian vision of architectural precision may also suggest something else, putting Boutros-Ghali more in the order of those who built the system than those who, when faced with it, took up the brush. Among all the neat channels, clean lines, Boutros-Ghali's end result is sinister: a sort of nostalgia for Egypt's liberal age (1923–1952), for an Arab nation that does not exist, all expressed by a



Wassef Boutros-Ghali, Untitled, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 59 x 51 inches. Courtesy the artist and albertz benda, New York. Photo: Casey Kelbaugh.

deeply privileged Cairene internationalist who winced, spending decades in Europe and America. Today, Coptic churches go up in flames, Egypt arrests dissident journalists and activists and gay Arabs. Having returned in 2007, Boutros-Ghali, now 96, remains at work in his home studio in Cairo.

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