

Hamed Abdalla (1917-1985): ARABÉCÉDAIRE



Installation view of Hamed Abdalla: ARABÉCÉDAIRE Courtesy The Mosaic Rooms Photo: Andy Stagg

29 April 2018 [Ekin Kurtdarcan](#)

As part of their 10th anniversary exhibition programme, The Mosaic Rooms, a non-profit art gallery dedicated to promoting contemporary Arab culture in London, brings the first of a three part series titled Cosmic Roads: Relocating Modernism, which aims to introduce significant modernist artists from Egypt, Iran and Morocco. Curated by Morad Montazami, Arabécédaire is an exploration of the art and previously unseen archives of the Egyptian painter Hamed Abdalla, which traces the artist's transnational and cross-cultural journeys that shaped his aesthetic vision.



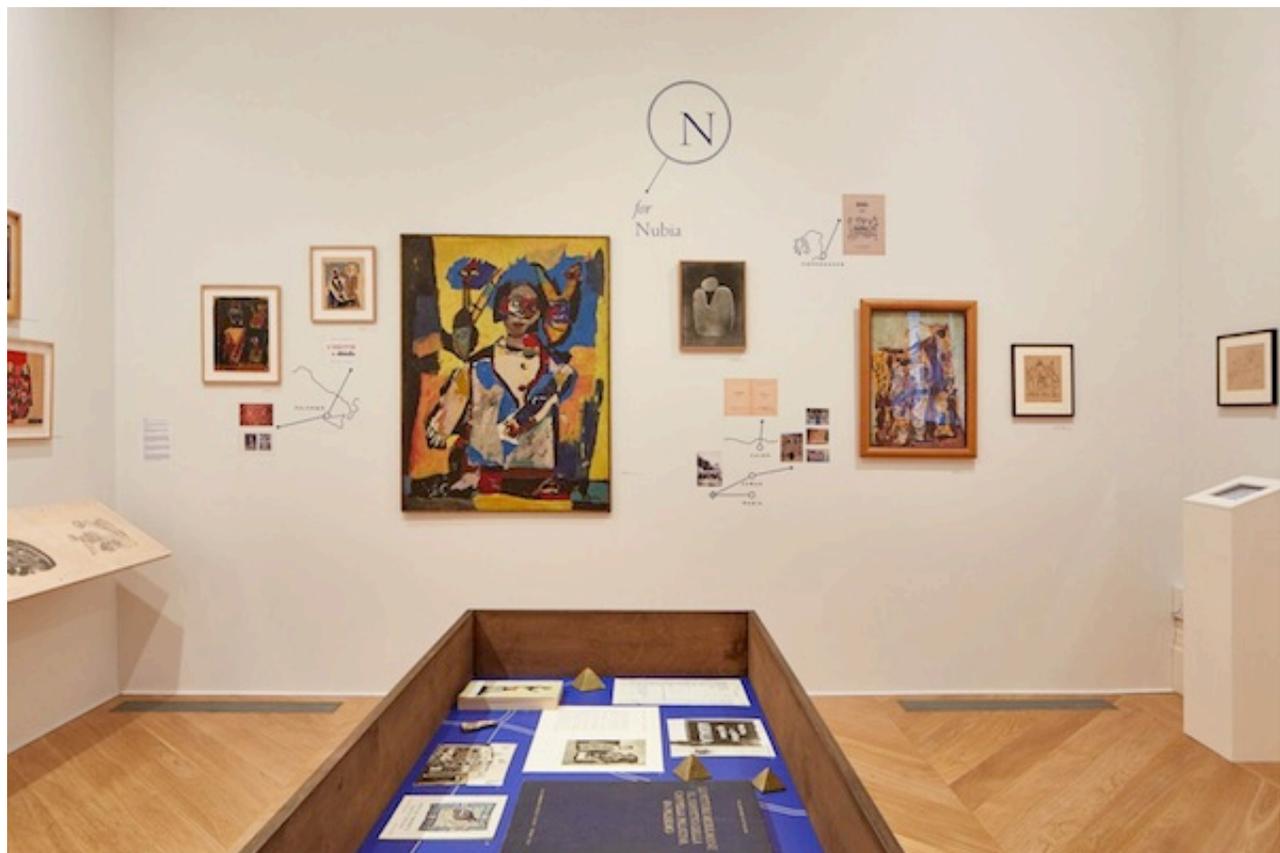
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Born in Upper Egypt to a modest peasant family, Abdalla was a self-taught artist who trained as a calligrapher before moving into the visual arts. His work was exhibited extensively not only throughout Egypt but also in the Middle East, North Africa and in various other cities such as Paris, London and New York. Considered a pioneer of Egyptian modernism, in his art Abdalla was mainly concerned with the concept of the 'creative word' - how letters and word forms can be explored through paint and abstraction to create a new visual language. Consequently, the exhibition takes its name from the French word *abécédaire*, which stands for visual alphabet primer. By taking six words - Lovers, Nubia, Revolution, Caves, Letterism and Klee - as focal points for Abdalla's art, the exhibition displays posters, brochures and magazine articles alongside the paintings to map the artist's sources of

inspiration and to immerse the viewer in his international historical context.

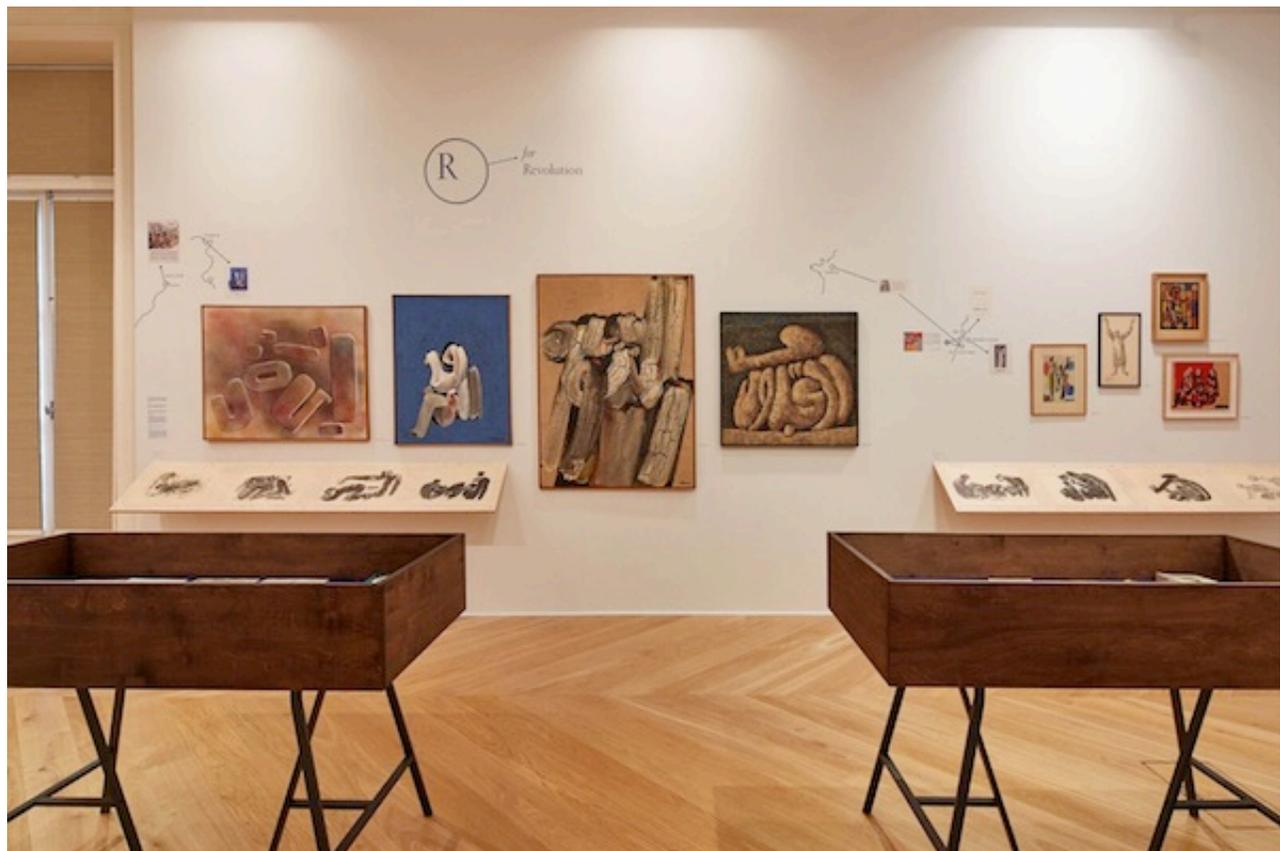
Starting with the letter **L for Lovers**, the viewer is presented with Abdalla's paintings centred around the word *Hob*, or 'desire'. The figures in both of his works *Lovers from Sham Ennessim* (1953) and *Desire* (1963) create an interesting contrast to each other; the former shows a man and a woman facing each other, whereas the latter seems to transform the human figures into the word itself. While the visuality of the word abstracts the two figures, the texture of the painting, made with blow torch on silver paper, almost creates a sense of aggression attached to the meaning of the word.

Furthermore, the video installation of Abdalla's first wife, the Egyptian artist Tahia Halim's 1956 dated letter accompanying the paintings create a backdrop for Abdalla's art, contextualising his work in relation to his personal life.



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The exhibition continues with **N for Nubia**, the region of Southern Egypt whose villages and landscapes proved to be an important source of inspiration for the artist. The paintings in this section consist of a mix of different materials and natural colours such as green, brick red and sand yellow, recalling images of rural life, which, for Abdalla, represented a sense of belonging in his later years in exile. What is quite striking in this section is the painting of the letter *Nun* (1980), made with stencil and acrylic on paper. The bold letter appears fixed on the dark grey backdrop, almost like a rock, and creates a strange contrast to the letter itself, considering that it is thought to be derived from a pictogram of a serpent or a fish.



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Rooms Photo: Andy Stagg

Perhaps the most extensive section of the exhibition is under the letter **R for Revolution**, which reveals many of the political resonances in Abdalla's work. Here, his paintings contain references to international struggles for freedom, namely, to post-colonial nations seeking independence as seen in his painting titled, *Homage to Djamila Bouhired, 'The Algerian'* (1957). In these paintings, the visualisation of words appear to be closely tied to the configuration of the human body. This is perhaps most evident in his painting *Slavery (Al-zoboudeya)*, where the shape and form of the word brings to mind a human figure that appears to be crouching, enveloping his body with his arms in protection. Moreover, the artist's series of monotypes depicting the words Zionism, Slavery, Humiliation and Fornication further poses the question on how bodies come to embody the meaning of words. Within this framework, Abdalla's work is further supplemented by various press clippings, maps, exhibition posters and articles referring to the Palestinian struggle. More than establishing a historical framework, these pieces that are set up to literally frame the paintings almost become constitutive of Abdalla's artwork, becoming a part of the 'creative word' themselves.

The artist's tone becomes more mystical in the following section, **C for Caves**, as he turns to natural history and the 'spontaneous beauty' of caves in southern France for visual stimulus. As this section is displayed next to the images of Nubia, it enables the viewer to compare the structures of these natural phenomena to the various textures of Nubia's landscapes, and therefore see the visual dialogue Abdalla creates between these two different geographies. His *Cave People Series* (1975-76), based on the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, incorporates fragments of several suras from the Quran to portray the cave as a place of refuge from exile. Made with acrylic on a black paper, Abdalla experiments with the paint to visualise different textures of

cave rocks. As these bright, abstract visuals blend in with the fragments of the suras, they create a contrast with the darkness of the cave, highlighting the mystical atmosphere that seems to elevate the natural into the domain of the sacred, establishing place of spiritual refuge.



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In the downstairs gallery, the final sections **L for Letterism** and **K for Klee** trace the artist's western and formal influences, specifically, his research on the way European artists perceived 'exotic' and 'oriental' signs in art. Here, the viewer sees the strong influence of Swiss German artist Paul Klee, especially in the painting *Soil Consciousness* (1956). As Abdalla visually engages in dialogue between European modernist styles and local figures, he maps out and re-appropriates a transcultural language of images, using

various forms as lenses through which he evaluates his own visual cultural roots.

Arabécédaire is an insightful retrospective on the art and times of Hamed Abdalla. More than the way it sheds light on a crucial historical and artistic era, what makes this exhibition truly interesting is how it engages with the relationship between word and art to present an alternative visual language in capturing transnationalism.

[Arabécédaire](#) is at *The Mosaic Rooms* until 23 June and is free.