

## Mohammed Omar Khalil: 50 years of Printmaking

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### Metaphor of Blackness

If we are to attempt to understand the path, is it enough to acquaint ourselves with the steps it requires? What is the relation between the pressure of the footfalls, the distance they stride and the imprints they leave on the march of days? What are the hidden and the visible relationships between what the artist maps as carrier of material and what the observer finds in his artistic expressions? The works of Mohammad Omer Khalil stir the desires of the art lover just as powerfully as they entice the scholar to study them. They are works that attract the eye, that provide it with an assured aesthetic pleasure, no less strongly than the way in which they lure the scholar to uncover the unknown within the work, to discover its internal structures and to add new knowledge to the study of art.

### Etchings on the Sheet Time

Those who seek to approach Khalil's works may see in their meanderings, their stops and starts, the depiction of a long and open road. The titles of these works cannot summarize them, for they cannot indicate every marking on the road by way of its essential form and content. There are those who approach the work with a glance, like birds swooping down for a rest, and so both the hidden and clear intents behind the work are suddenly come to life, given that the artist doesn't hesitate to peck, to pick at the page of existence, driven by his love and his continuous desire to illuminate all that is obscure within us, all that is common between us. And there are those who approach deliberately, carefully, testing the blackness step by step, like a slow, multifaceted, ever-changing descent into darkness: in the end, the pleasure is the same, and there are other pleasures to be found. And there are those who approach with a plethora of seeing tools, not content with the naked eye of emotion, but seeking to add a historical

reading, to place the artwork within the context of an artistic journey that includes the artist and exceeds him at the same time.

The oldest of the works displayed dates back to 1960, etchings in specific, for Khalil has also produced paintings and art books. At the bottom of one of these old etchings, we might observe the fingers of the right hand as if preparing to undertake the work, just as the artist himself did. With assured resolve and variety, the artist doesn't hesitate to act on his. In the background of this etching we may also see many small squares, visible from both sides, and each square contains what seems to be a multitude of small, abbreviated works of art, discharged by the artist at his first few strokes. What we can see in Khalil's first works is akin to what we see in writers' early works of literature: an artist who stuffs the work with almost everything he wishes to say, a sign of a strict, intense intention. Also true to the form of early works, they showcase a lot of variety in terms of subject and form, of experimentations with different artistic perspectives. Those who look more precisely will notice different marks and signs, some of them used by the artist in subsequent works, and some of them abandoned. And one can also see, when looking carefully, what looks to be like geographical landscapes that evoke the map of Italy, a place where the artist has many ties, both academic and artistic: an obsession with signs and markings expressed as lines both severe and undulating. What is most apparent about these works is that they combine two different techniques in the making of etchings: one that takes a balanced, geometric approach to the elements, incorporating some decorative features as well, and a more "chaotic" or organic approach, allowing the material to seem as if it is extending and varying itself with some sort of spontaneity. Two different, or even contradictory approaches, able to live side-by-side in Khalil's open,



Baby Blue, ,1986, etching, softground, chine colle, spitbite, aquatint, 91x220cm. edition of 25. Courtesy of Al Bareh Gallery.

experimental vision. It reflects the two sides in the ongoing conflict in the artist's experience: between him and the sheet metal on which he etches, between sheet like the drawing paper, the photography paper and the drafting paper and between the obscure desires that flow in the fits and starts of the hand that draws, that photographs and that drafts on the page.

As such, the careful observer of the retrospective of Khalil's displayed works, spanning over fifty years, can notice both continuing shapes and their discontinuity in the general construction of the piece or in its internal structure. One might notice the care taken in the composition of the straight lines or the curves or the squares and the rectangles: how they sometimes look like actual engineering designs. Just as one might

notice that Khalil, in opposition to the architectural approach, draws freehand shapes as well, distinctive in their freedom and spontaneity, in the lack of recourse to the ruler or other tools, coaxed forth by the whims of the hand that drew them. But Khalil's etching is not simply a formal exercise, rather a temporal, spatial and symbolic structure at the same time. This is embodied in human markings, or in photographs, or in different shapes incorporated by the artist into the world of the etching (which is most apparent in the etchings from the 1970s, as well as some others). The etchings remain ever themselves, in a permanent and continuous state of being. These are undulations that appear as etchings on the page of time, revealing hidden desires in the invisible hand of the artist.



Harlem # 3, 1999, etching, softground, aquatint, scraping, 60x90cm. edition of 5. Courtesy of Al Bareh Gallery.

### Etching: Art with a Capital “A”

Though it is no easy feat entering into this artist’s world, the observer would be mistaken to look at the works fleetingly, to stop merely at the titles, for titles are sometimes amusing, referring to a “monkey” or a “hat” while the structure of the work reveals a far more mysterious game. In this, Khalil is akin to the surrealists, both the writers and visual artists amongst them. Just as other titles, referring to specific cities, for example, do not refer to the city itself but rather to the sensual observations or experiences that the artist underwent there. Thus the work represents an aesthetic account for the observer, and an intimate, emotional one for the artist. This requires one to explore the etchings in chronological succession, to follow their continuities and discontinuities. For they are the result of trials and experiences, and the result of a continuous practice that has built up the artist’s considerable skills, turning

him into one of the top Arab authorities on etching, deeply influential in the initiation and training of other artists, both emerging and established. And while some of them may have given up on etching as an art form, Khalil never did, despite varying his artistic repertoire with oil paintings and art books.

That’s why exploring his work is like entering the workshop one of the grand masters: each work stands like a monument that summarizes the history of etching and dates Khalil’s visual experimentation. In his etchings on sheets of copper or zinc, the artist returned to a technique dating back to 1700 called aquatint. This process—whose name refers to the effect it creates, which looks like ink or watercolor washes— involves using acid and a ground on acid-resistant metal sheeting in order to create large tonal shadows in the print, each time resulting in a print just as clean and clear as the original. Khalil also innovated in his etching, sometimes

producing a limited number of prints from a single etching, and other times working to make each print slightly different and therefore unique.

His works range from large-size formats (48 to 52 inches) to much smaller ones, but no matter the size, they all share the same rich, layered structural intensity and are similar in the delicate network of formal details contained therein. They reveal an artist with great patience, precise focus and of great generosity, if one may say so. For Khalil's etching is art with a capital A, requiring equal measures of experience and dedication; it is not a hobby for one's spare time, not something one can do on a Sunday (as the French expression goes). Khalil's etchings are not mere experimentations in a different medium (as Picasso, for example, resorted to etching) or an attempt to exploit the commercial potential of the medium, just as many artists have done, promoting themselves by making postcard prints of their work. What adds to the "honor of etching" that Khalil has pursued is something he gravitated towards after arriving in New York, where the experimentation at the time, in both the city and elsewhere consisted primarily of relying on color—bright, joyous, festive color—to create form, a school of art that later became known as American abstract expressionism and was exemplified by artists such as Jackson Pollock and Frank Stella. Khalil never abandoned his etching or his reliance on darker shadows and shades, which made things quite difficult for him during that time abroad, as he once narrated to an audience of listeners. "In Sudan, I taught drawing and color, but when I got to New York in 1967, I couldn't find any work teaching. It was impossible, especially because I didn't have either an American or British degree, but one that was Sudanese and Italian, which didn't count for much in their eyes. I managed to find work in commercial trade carpentry and printmaking, and worked there for a year. Then I happened on a job in a national center for etching, where I met many etchers from around the world. My work consisted of cleaning the etching studios after the work was done, and I had only one day a week on which to work on my own art. After a year of this, I found my own studio, bought a printmaking machine, and began to work on my own for myself." The difficulties Khalil encountered in work and teaching would be repeated

during his experience trying to exhibit his work. For he is not a traditional, folkloric artist, easy to categorize as a "Sudanese artist" representative of his homeland, nor is he a typical etching artist who might be simply characterized as an artisan. Nor does his work follow the usual trends, so he couldn't be lumped in with the American school either. "No one works in black and white, let alone the fact that the Americans don't even go near the color black, almost as if it didn't exist, preferring bright, warm colors instead. And so what of my colors: gray, gritty, washed-out?" he asks. "How were they to find a place amongst Stella's rainbows?" After that, Khalil moved away from all commercial work, where the primary question about a work of art, at least in America, was always: "How much will it be valued at after ten years?" The Essence is the Line Khalil's etchings, above all, are "syntheses," collages built of various elements, a technique that can be seen in many of his works and something suggested by the titles themselves. He synthesizes elements both convergent and divergent, gathering them from various sources both public and private: symbols of individual and collective history, deliberately gathered or unconsciously summoned by his hands as they go about their patient work on the sheet metal. He creates as he sees fit, much as a writer gathering words onto the page. He uses existing symbols or composes them himself, using both public symbols and personal images, pulling them from street scenes or dreamscapes, evoking the joys of the body to illuminate its dark mysteries. As such, the essence is all contained within the line. The observer might choose to follow the titles of the works, seeking clues from the elements they denote: bird, mother and son, man and woman, the faces of the assassin, dance, mountain, marriage, etcetera. Places, people, objects: together they form a human and geographical map, above all personal in nature. Khalil often incorporates photographs into his work, in bits and pieces, almost like a personal album of some sort, except he uses them as signs and symbols, never to limit or constrain the larger work. They are simply raw materials, and he uses them not as mere images but as catalysts for transformation. He transforms them by equating or contrasting and linking them to other elements, surprising to the eye. This is why his etchings have a cumulative effect, the result of



Reflections from the world fair, 1965, etching, aquatint, scraping, 30x25cm. Courtesy of Al Barch Gallery.

synthesis: a synthesis of material, a synthesis of different treatments and effects, coming together through his mysterious processes: shadowy, dark and vital. The result of all this, apparent in the works from the 1970s and onwards, is a searing honesty deriving from the use of these different materials, elements and effects, molten and complex, with each etching displaying a touch both light and sure at the same time.

At first glance, Khalil's works impart a clear sense of construction, and yet some final movement, quick and complex, muddles this clarity, giving the work its vitality, its immediacy, its obscurity, ultimately, its mystery. His works are singular and of the moment: "It is impossible for my mind today to be what it was yesterday. I look to what is happening around me, and while my hand might move with the same need, it is also always necessarily different." A solid, clearly envisioned structure, built methodically, whose solidity is then broken with a single, surprising gesture. A spontaneous crafting, rooted in and shaped by the

instant. A contradictory construction, with some vastly detailed areas and others left open and empty. Black and white, strength and weakness, together creating an internal tension that is also embodied by the fact that he uses two plates in his prints. This structure suits Khalil's technical choices and artistic plans, for it allows him to absorb and incorporate a number of singular elements: vocabularies, shapes and bodies, making them, in turn, more absorbent through the use of many squares, which themselves incorporate a number of different elements. This also suits the nature of the work, which requires intense focus and patience, making it both easier and more tempting to create the whole element by element. Another noticeable feature of his work is that his etchings manage to incorporate different styles or "schools" of thought without modifying them or equating between them, but rather by absorbing them all to create something entirely new. His etchings appear as both records and crystallizations of the figurative and the abstract at the same time, a style based on the collection of various elements such as found materials, as in the Italian school of "Arte Povera" (literally: poor art), or elements deriving from a Sudanese artistic tradition, or the use of the name of God. Khalil's etchings are places of encounter, of dialogue, in art especially. This is the result of the vision of an artist who doesn't hew to single movements or schools; rather, he is aware of them, their ideas and techniques, using and transforming them all, incorporating certain elements and abandoning others in order to create a work entirely his own, his etchings like the queen of the manor, enthroned in a wide, bright hall with open windows.

One of the titles from a 1969 work reads: "The Subject Was Roses," a title that refers not to the artist's content but rather to his technique, departing from a materiality not to ultimately depict it, but to treat it. And the treatments are varied, with the form used as both the starting point and the end point of the work (the treatment of the form is varied), although the form sometimes retains a certain human element. For the material, as it eats into the surface of the sheet, takes on the attitude of the artist, remains under his authority, like construction materials, like a gesture of human creation.

### Etchings as an Instructional Book

In one of Khalil's etchings, a figure enters Asilah riding on a donkey, someone Khalil used to see daily during his summers in the Moroccan city, especially on rural crossings. He also observed one of the Tunisian writers thus: entering Asilah in turn, after arriving at the train station from the nearby Tangiers international airport, riding on a wooden cart pulled by a donkey, carrying a leather satchel and a Samsonite bag. Then there is Khalil's entry into Asilah, dating from his launch of the "cultural Moussem" in 1978, and his established residency there summer after summer, which made of him almost a second citizen, especially that he oversaw the work of some practicing artists as well as some of the students as they trained yearly at the Etching Studio. This is how he influenced the city, its artists, its citizens and visitors, always distancing himself from any sort of "stardom" and never exploiting the city or his relationship with it in any way. What he received from Asilah in return was a great leap in his work: his lines come thicker, his markings are denser and denser gradients of blackness, almost as if experimenting with different rhythms and sounds, and he's incorporated splatterings of dots, decorative motifs, giving the work a completely different look than a usual etching. The work seems to be playing with some of the decorative aesthetics of Islamic art, especially on the frescoes, some elements of which can be found on the walls of the Raissouni Palace. A number of Khalil's works refer to Asilah in their titles, denoting experiences, moments and feelings he lived there, experiences etched into his consciousness in the same way they were etched into his work. Other works refer to different cities: Fez, Marrakesh, Petra, Baghdad, Harlem (New York), Odysseus and others. Here and there the artist left his workshop and took to the streets, gathering archaeological material from the outside world, measured in his own steps or the travels of his own mind, but he always returned to his workshop, coming back with treasures to enrich his unceasing research on how to coax form from shadow. Many works, dating back to different periods in Khalil's career, explore the topographical elements of a certain place, from Italy to Sudan, passing by a number of different countries on the way. These works are characterized by an architectural approach that



Still live, 1964, etching, 7x10. Courtesy of Al Bareh Gallery.

foregrounds the lines and structural elements in terms of importance, representing place through the use of a more graphical aesthetic. There are other certain works, such as *Café in Rome*, whose particular aesthetic depends on a deconstruction of shape, on chipping it down and reconstructing it in a way entirely dependent on the artist's aesthetic and structural choices without constraint from the original shape whatsoever. These take on the form of light lines, or larger swathes of blackness, or areas of shadow relieved by cross-hatchings of white. We also find etchings that clearly suggest Arabic calligraphy, both Quranic and freehand. And we cannot perform an overview of his work without mentioning one devoted to Bob Dylan (1986): in this piece, Khalil uses colors other than black and white, indicating a shift to come in a number of works, particularly in the image. In this piece, we may observe the beginnings of elements and visuals that will find their way into other subsequent works in later years. It behooves those who are interested in a deeper look at Khalil's work to pause at a rare grouping of his early works, those undertaken during his studies in Italy. Here we may see the first emerging shapes of his artistic oeuvre, where the external world enters through a particular treatment of realism, naturalism, humanism, as we may particularly observe in a rare piece about Khartoum (1965). The other works of note from that period include the several *Nudos*, which reveal the delicacy of his etching aesthetic and his particular treatment of the coy outlines and curves of the female body, where his light, deft lines are enough to suggest the hidden, exciting world of desire.

### The “FREE” Artist

Mohammad Omer Khalil is an artist in a place and position all his own. It is a place strange and distant, and cannot be reached by the usual roads. There will be no one who helps you on your journey. Almost as if you were plunging into the dense thickets of an overgrown forest without maps or compass. And should you reach that place, you will find him there alone, surrounded by his own borders, guided by his own unique outlook. If you were to find out that he is Sudanese, living in New York now for over fifty years, it would not help you to discover his true identity, but only to understand some of its components and implications, for it is entirely caught up and contained within the artist’s personal, emotional language. Khalil is open about narrating the milestones of his life: born in Sudan, his homeland and place of his childhood, he traveled to Italy, where he studied international art, then to New York, where he lives and works, but the narrative largely wipes away tensions with a certain Sudanese gentility: you may guess at hardships, at obstacles in this twisting journey, but you will see them only dimly, as if peering at uncertain shapes in a thick forest.

We may call Khalil the “free” artist, an expression I borrowed from a historical book on etching and its European traditions. Apparently there were conflicts between photographers and etchers over their “rank” or place, since by British law they were not allowed to be categorized among the fine artists, while French law granted them the distinction of being called *freec* (or “liberal”) artists. Above all, Khalil is an immigrant artist. His art remains with him, wherever he roams. He finds it wherever he finds himself: on the street, on a sheet of paper, in a found object or discarded form. I spoke earlier about the “honor of etching,” but I may also talk about the “honor of being” as well. “I dislike the atmosphere of art and artists in New York,” Khalil says to me. “There is a competitiveness elevated to a sort of disease, a suspicion of the other, a stealing of artistic ideas.” The artist looks for himself in comparison with others, measuring trends, styles, themes, popular color combinations, while Khalil is, as his native country (Sudane) proverb goes, like “the one who enters the oven and emerges unroasted.”

During our conversation I ask: “How do you know that

you’re advancing without measuring yourself against other people’s work, even just to see that you’re doing something different?”

He answers: “Honesty and self-reflection above all. I learned this right when I was starting out, I practiced dialoguing with the self, discovering the self, until the practice became second nature to me.”

No discussion about the “honor of etching” is complete without talking about what this art form has brought to the art world since its centuries-old inception: the birth of etching was a historical moment, bringing art out of its narrow, elitist confines and disseminating it to the outside world, allowing it to be shared and seen more widely. Etching wrenched art out of the ownership of exclusive hands and brought it to the public, making it both mobile or portable and commercially viable. Etchers benefitted from being able to disseminate their works, sharing their ideas and themes and visions through productions and reproductions of the image, and that benefit spread to others and created a broader category of art lovers and those able to enjoy art, allowing more people to collect and be touched by it: for less money, but with more dignity. And so Khalil raised the profile of etching as a form, evolving, innovating and re-inventing it, removing it from the realm of service to other art forms - books, posters, promotional work for other artists - and raising it to a level of excellence all its own. The Al-Bareh Fine Arts gallery mounted a solo exhibition of Khalil’s work in 2012, entitled: *A Bridge Between Two Worlds*. And we may talk about how his art connects between multiple worlds, given that the artist gathers, or “synthesizes” into his etching all his passion for life that it may absorb, offering it out as an explicit call for human participation: a call away from borders - the borders between races and peoples, between cultures and art forms - a summoning of its pure aesthetic power.

For he who was born in the village of Burri, close to Khartoum, in the year 1937, who studied at the Applied Art Institute in Khartoum, who left for Florence in 1963 to study fresco art, then moved to studying mosaic in Ravenna, still in Italy, then immigrated to study in New York, does not hesitate to present his art as a marker of his own unique identity, offered out for the purpose of dialogue with others.



Self Portrait, 1968, etching, 2x2cm. Courtesy of Al Barch Gallery.

### Black Color, Bright Soul

Blackness is a mood, a metaphor, before it is a color or a description or a race or continent or anything else: a metaphor, for it contains all these other things and is still able to surpass them. Blackness is an abbreviation of all these elements, compressing them down into a constructed symbol, illuminating all the connotations and radiations. Black is a color that contains all the others within. It may, in its density, its thickness, its contours, evoke a colored world. To contrast with white: face to face. To draw a colored map in its path, containing dark and bright, thickness and lightness, straight and curved, stable and broken. Black on white. White on black. Black contained within white, and white within black. There is more than a passing correlation between blackness and etching, a relationship of production: for what is etched in negative emerges in positive, the markings made on the sheet metal, then treated with acid and filled with ink, or with color over color, then printed onto the page. A bright image emerges from the darkness of production. It is the blackness of Sudan,



Piccadilly - London, 1964, etching aquatint, 25x30cm. Courtesy of Al Barch Gallery.

of Africa that evokes its particular beauty, breaking the dominion of whiteness (in every sense of the word) over aesthetics, art, and culture. And blackness has its own particular history in the symbols and bodies of the United States of America. Standing before Khalil's pieces, it is as if we are invited to peer into the heart of the night. We can see shapes in the shadows, but we can barely see them, used as we are to looking at everything flooded with light: "In blackness, I see degrees and shades of rich, complicated color, more intense than in other colors, roaring and loud." He taps into the blackness, distilling its light. Its dim, quiet light, like peering into a tunnel or a nighttime jungle. "As if you were a musician, coaxing various, different melodies out of only two notes?" I ask him. "Someone once asked me," he answers, "what I would have done had I not become an etch artist. And I said I would have been a musician. I find music almost shocking in its expressiveness. Nothing reproduces the same emotional punch like a piece of music. In my work, I try to bring forth that capacity for emotional reaction, to explode it outward." After all is said and done, Khalil's work has a secretiveness about it. Powerful in its muted revelations, shocking in the gloom. I find it akin to a wink. The work doesn't present itself directly, it is rather up to us to find our way to it. There is a mystery we cannot see immediately, that we must discover for ourselves. It is a blackness of color and a brightness of soul.