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Inji Efflatoun,
Mathbah Al Kneeseh
(*The Church Altar*),
c.1940s, ink on
paper, 25 × 15.5cm.
Courtesy Barjeel Art
Foundation, Sharjah

Inji Efflatoun: White Light

– Anneka Lenssen

- 1) *It is forbidden to look at women.*
- 2) *It is forbidden for a girl to pay attention to her body while bathing, or for girls to look at the bodies of each other. Girls must wear a robe underwater.*
- 3) *Friendship is forbidden between girls, and anyone engaging in such friendship will be punished severely. Nor must one girl be alone with another.*
- 4) *It is forbidden to read alone, or to purchase one's own books. Therefore, our things will be searched continuously.*¹

Egyptian painter Inji Efflatoun (1924–89) could recall these prohibitions – just four points from the incalculably severe regime of the Sacré-Coeur school she attended as a girl – until her death. Propriety had mattered in Cairo's elite circles, and even though Efflatoun's family was Muslim, her father

some Marxist theory. Before she had even completed her baccalaureate, she had joined a communist group and commenced what would be a lifelong struggle to forsake the haute bourgeoisie of her upbringing in solidarity with Egypt's dispossessed classes.

Many writers have documented Efflatoun's commitment to crossing these worlds, and the biographical arc of her efforts to reconcile the dual path of artist and activist.³ Less considered to date is her ongoing negotiation, through painting, with the technologies of visibility that would both buttress and destabilise her political claims as a (radically) creative and female subject. Any account of her painting requires consideration of the duality of appearance in her work, including its constitution in the enforced somatophobia of her childhood.⁴ Asserting the presence of women in national life was central to her agitation against imperialism: the 1945 campaign for equal wages for equal work; her suffrage pamphleteering circa 1950; the women's protests and military drills she helped organise with the Popular Committee of Women's Resistance during the Suez stand-off in 1956.⁵ But in her artistic practice, the matter of corporeal presence often tended towards the obverse – as something like the dark psychical materials of the international surrealists, to whom she was affiliated at the start of her exhibition career in 1942. This essay examines the psychical structuring of visibility in Efflatoun's early surrealist paintings, which

Anneka Lenssen describes Inji Efflatoun's complex transformations of light and life.

sought the discipline of Catholic school for his daughters. Efflatoun could remember her first outright defiance of these rules as well. In the mid-1930s, at age twelve, she played hooky so as to indulge in the novel *White Fang* (1906), by Jack London, an adventure tale of human and non-human alliances.² Having thereby set a threshold for escape, she convinced her mother to allow her to transfer to the Lycée Français, where she studied French philosophy and

1 Inji Efflatoun, *Mudhakkirat Inji Aflatun (Inji Efflatoun's Memoirs)*, ed. Sa'id Khayyal, Kuwait: Dar al-Suad al-Sabah, 1993, pp.20–21. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2 See *ibid.*

3 The foremost account is Efflatoun's own memoir (cited above), which was transcribed from audiotapes and published posthumously in heavily edited form. Additional autobiographical statements, including some texts from her own speeches, may be found in the online archive 'Artist Inji Efflatoun Collection (*Majmu'a al-Fannana Inji Aflatun*)', in the Memory of Modern Egypt project of the Library of Alexandria (<http://modernegypt.bibalex.org/>), hereafter referred to as the MFIA archive. For biographical studies, see, amongst others, the special dossier 'Inji Aflatun', *Adab wa Naqd*, vol.18, December 1985, pp.93–122; Betty LaDuke, 'Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun: The Merging of Art, Feminism, and Politics', *NWSA Journal*, vol.1, no.3, Spring 1989, pp.474–85; and Mostafa El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia: A Life's Journey*, Cairo: Gallery Picasso, 2014.

4 I draw here on Elizabeth Grosz's assessment of 'somatophobia', or fear of the body, in Western philosophy. See E. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

5 In addition to the primary documents already cited, see Didier Monciaud, 'Les engagements d'Inji Aflatun dans l'Égypte des années quarante', *Cahiers d'histoire: Revue d'histoire critique*, no.126, 2015, pp.73–95.

displace and condense motifs of high society, in conjunction with the later inversion of visibility in her ‘white light’ (*al-daw’ al-abyad*) paintings of the 1970s, which proffer filaments of colour within blinding fields of illumination.⁶ The pairing reveals the artist’s conceptual play with relations of subject and object across Egypt’s shifting political regimes, as well as an imagination of their eventual release into an image-space of transformed signification.

Efflatoun had witnessed the predicaments of the female political subject long before she set foot in school. Her mother, Salha Efflatoun, who had married at the age of fourteen, divorced at nineteen (in 1924, the year of Inji’s birth), precipitating great social and economic upheaval for the family. It was not until 1936 that Salha managed to claim her independence as a single mother, when she launched Egypt’s first fashion house, *Maison Salha*. The enterprise represented a new way of capitalising on social status, and was backed by Talaat Harb, a banker and nationalist entrepreneur who sought to develop the country’s cotton industries as leverage against foreign interests. As art historian Nadia Radwan has noted, modernisers in Egypt, as elsewhere, took up the notion of the ‘new woman’ as a focal point for perceived changes to the social order, with the fashionably dressed woman standing as both reflection and initiator of change.⁷ These self-consciously shifting categories, tied as they were to regimes of consumption, proved to be double-edged for the Efflatoun women. They emancipated Salha from her family’s direct patronage, but also made her dependent on the circles of the Egyptian monarchy and their tastes. From the same rarified yet conflicted position of privilege, Inji accessed her first artistic training, but

also pushed through it to more illicit images of the imagination and unconscious. As a child, she had accompanied her father, an entomologist, into the field, where she filled notebooks with careful depictions of insect morphology. As an adolescent, she studied with tutors drawn from the country’s large and disparate pool of Francophone intellectuals, as was common for privileged Egyptians. In 1940, her mother hired Kamel el-Telmissany, a writer, painter, film-maker and founding member of *Art and Freedom*, the coalition of Egyptian avant-gardes who espoused international surrealism as a model of anti-fascist resistance.⁸ Telmissany’s ‘bewitching’ pedagogy focussed on the possibilities for integrating art with life, and for expressing self and society.⁹ Efflatoun would work through the jolt of these lessons in her painting, expressing the interior subjects of gendered, classed anxieties: dream imagery of vengeful trees, creeping vegetation and serpents that grasp at other beings – including frightened young women.

Efflatoun later described how socialism had, in the 1940s, proposed a solution to the problems posed by Egypt’s grave social inequalities that seemed at once rational and just.¹⁰ Telmissany’s avant-garde circle agreed, but added the provision that the irrational be understood as liberating – that images, whether in dreams or paintings, be recognised as a productive non-rational interior to the exteriorised capitalist economy. Ramsis Yunan’s important 1940 essay ‘The Dream and the Reality’ articulates the political potential of surrealism’s Freudian materials with great clarity.¹¹ An exploration of the imperial origins of modernity and its stakes for the role of art and beauty in a new society, it outlines the deep contradictions of the time, even charac-

6 Efflatoun seems to have developed the term ‘white light’ in cooperation with the critic Naim Attiya, who contributed the essay ‘al-Hawa’ wa-l-Nur fi Lawhat Inji Aflatun al-Jadida’ to her 1977 exhibition materials, held in the MFIA archive. My reading of the notion here also draws from Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’ (1929), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927-1934* (trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith), Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999, pp.207-21.

7 Nadia Radwan, ‘Inji Efflatoun: Multiple Idioms of an Egyptian “New Woman”’, in *FOCUS, Works from the Mathaf Collection / Mother Tongue: Selected Works by Inji Efflatoun* (ed. Leonore-Namkha Beschi), Doha: Mathaf - Arab Museum of Modern Art, forthcoming in 2017.

8 For more on Art and Freedom, see Donald LaCoss, ‘Egyptian Surrealism and “Degenerate Art” in 1939’, *Arab Studies Journal*, vol.18, no.1, Spring 2010, pp.78-117. LaCoss details the international aspects of the network; the Cairo group was proclaimed on January 1939 in alliance to the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art (FIARI), which André Breton and Leon Trotsky had established from Mexico in 1938. On the simultaneity of the connections between surrealist nodes, see also Sam Bardaouil, ‘Dirty Dark Loud and Hysterical: The London and Paris Surrealist Exhibitions of the 1930s and the Exhibition Practices of the Art and Liberty Group in Cairo’, *Dada/Surrealism* [online journal], vol.1, no.19, 2013, available at <http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1273&context=dadasur> (last accessed on 2 August 2016).

9 I. Efflatoun, *Mudhakkirat Inji Aflatun*, op. cit., p.30.

10 See the speech ‘La Femme Créatrice de Valeurs’, which Efflatoun presented to the PEN Club in Paris in 1975, in the MFIA archive.

11 ‘Al-Hulm wa-l-Haqiqa’ first appeared in March 1940 in the short-lived journal *al-Tatawwur*, and is reprinted in Ramsis Yunan, *Dirasat fi al-Fann*, Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 1969, pp.36-42.

Archival document showing the Egyptian delegation to the Congrès International des Femmes, Paris, 1945, with Inji Efflatoun in centre. Courtesy © MoME* - Bibliotheca Alexandrina



terising the ‘consumptive workers’ in Talaat Harb’s urban factories as sacrificial subjects of modern plenty.¹² As Yunan knew, the preceding years had been marked by the rapid expansion of labour in the textile sector, with recent strikes, a bank crisis and depression. Against these structural crises, he argued that the fact that workers still dreamed unbidden visions could be understood as the human capacity for revolution. The essay’s metaphors of haunting and spectral inhabitation – it describes the fear of hunger perching over the city like a ghost, holding its inhabitants down until nighttime – offer an interpretive key to Efflatoun’s early imagery. The painting *Girl and the Beast*, for example, which she exhibited with Art and Freedom in 1942, is a landscape of heavily outlined bushes and cacti beneath a ‘sulphurous’ night sky populated by alienated beings, including a large, transmogrifying bird and a tiny, flying girl.¹³

Images commanded real powers, in other words. They were also highly mediated: as Georges Henein, a leader of Art and Freedom, declared in a 1939 speech, artists

had been thrown open to social melee, with even the most distant signs of distress reaching them instantly by ‘radio, cinema, the press – wonderful, unexpected means of human communication’.¹⁴ Critical vocabulary also crossed between these media. Responses to Efflatoun’s painting, which employed a colourisation technique of outline and tone resembling glass painting, often mobilised cinematic concepts, describing the images as a kind of light projection. Henein described *Girl and the Beast* as communicating by means of an ‘expressive transparency’ achieved by Efflatoun’s composing dream elements in spaces that seem to emit light from underground.¹⁵ Telmissany’s renderings in the period also display glints of colour from beneath a heavy black tone, which his colleagues read by allusion to stage and film actors, for whom external roles might overtake the body (as in, for example, his portraits of hashish eaters from the Egyptian underworld).¹⁶ Efflatoun’s protagonists can seem to appear in a state of possession as well: trees glow with colour from within and the titular ‘girl’ of *Girl and*

¹² *Ibid.*, p.37.

¹³ See Marcelle Biagini’s review of the exhibition, translated into Arabic and reprinted in ‘Inji Aflatun’, *Adab wa Naqd*, *op. cit.*, p.97.

¹⁴ Quoted in Marc Kober, ‘Georges Henein, Reporter de l’Universel’, *MéluSine*, no.15 (ed. Myriam Boucharenc), 2005, p.197.

¹⁵ Georges Henein, review in *La Semaine égyptienne*, May 1942, translated into Arabic and reprinted in ‘Inji Aflatun’, *Adab wa Naqd*, *op. cit.*, p.99.

¹⁶ The description is Ramsis Yunan’s in response to Telmissany’s illustrations to Albert Cosseray’s short story collection *Les Hommes Oubliés de Dieu* (1941), quoted in Samir Ghareib, *Surrealism in Egypt and Plastic Arts*, Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 1986, p.52.







the Beast looks mummified, as if returning from the dead. Her blue party dress signals the cinematic role of the damsel in distress. Understood as a psychic projection, she also signifies the gendered shame of her appearance within a field of spectatorial desire.

Another member of Art and Freedom, the photographer Hassia, described, in 1941, the capacities of her camera in terms of inverted power: 'photography allows me to escape one man and possess all men'.¹⁷ Within their group, it was possible to ask whether the one who commanded the picture might also master the (female) self. These were the questions that Efflatoun, in the same decade, began to inflect into a social register, including in a suite of ink drawings on paper that probe both the glittering duplicity of modernity and the false consciousness of religion. As a set, they comprise parables of the hollow progress of civilisation. One shows a mendicant leaving a ruined forest to approach a housing development defined by hostile interiority,

a tragedy witnessed by a young woman's head depicted in sightless profile. In another, a young woman sits in a modern living space, shielding her face from an unholy apparition of gnarled roots and hair. And one drawing makes use of outright Christian imagery, of supplication to a creator: a forest chapel becomes an interior choked by votive smoke converging upon a crucifix. Again, the question of looking at another woman is paramount, as the viewer sees only the backs of the women kneeling in prayer, their eyes presumably shut to the profane world of the living.

The Art and Freedom group, as Henein and others saw it, was to be defined by a transnational élan recognising neither religion nor government statutes as barriers.¹⁸ This was not the model of solidarity Efflatoun adopted in her subsequent political work, however. As a leader in the Egyptian women's movement, she relentlessly petitioned the Egyptian nation-state for rights.¹⁹ In 1945, she

17 Quoted on the handbill to the Second Exposition de l'Art Indépendant, Cairo, 10-25 March 1941, in the MFIA archive.

18 See G. Henein, 'L'Art en Egypte (X): El Telmissany', *Don Quichotte*, vol.17, 29 March 1940; cited in Patrick Kane, *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt: Aesthetics, Ideology and Nation-Building*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2012, p.202, note 51.

Inji Efflatoun, *Girl and the Beast*, 1941, oil on canvas, 70 × 55cm. Courtesy Museum of Inji Efflatoun, Sector of Fine Arts, Ministry of Culture, Egypt

Previous spread:
Inji Efflatoun,
Abo Sella Valley in Sinai, 1985, oil on canvas, 56 × 41cm

attended a much publicised conference in Paris organised by the Women's International Democratic Federation, which consolidated her position as a communist in the eyes of the Egyptian intelligence apparatus.²⁰ She subsequently stopped painting for several years, finding herself unable to reconcile her artistic pursuits with her activism, while concomitantly facing public judgment from journalists and colleagues who doubted her commitment to class solidarity, branding her 'the communist who owns forty dresses'.²¹ She got married in 1948, to a leftist lawyer (who would die unexpectedly, in 1957). Importantly for my considerations here, when Efflatoun did return to art, in 1949, it was by a plunge into the outdoors, painting under the blazing sun of the Nile Delta, at the nexus of the earth and labouring people. In her recommitment to painting as a framed expression of the social self, Efflatoun split from the surrealists' dream image to accord her work a capacity to rally political awareness. For example, her memoirs describe this potential at play in her first solo exhibition, held in Cairo only four months before the 23 July 1952 Free Officers' coup d'état to oust the monarchy. She had depicted the angry anxiety of the times, painting martyred sons and clashes with British occupying troops as well as subsidiary struggles in the patriarchal home.²² Efflatoun then donated the set to the University of Cairo, where they were hung as a tool for 'cadre building'.²³ Once in situ, however, to Efflatoun's gratification, they became signs of continued volatility as students photographed the images for use on protest posters. Government investigators came to cover the paintings, a move that was momentarily reversed after the July revolution, only to be instituted once again when the works continued to cause 'problems'.²⁴

And yet, as we also understand from Efflatoun's autobiographic narration, she formed her lasting sense of self as an artist within Cairo's women's prisons – a radically contracted space representing, in turn, the inside of the Egyptian regime. In 1959, the security apparatus of then-President Gamal

Abdel Nasser began to pre-emptively clamp down on communist activists, including, for the first time in Egyptian history, incarcerating women as political prisoners. Efflatoun spent four years in jail. She would speak of the experience subsequently as an enrichingly *human* one, wherein gender and class differentiation was levelled.²⁵ She also came to claim that the reduction of her liberties enhanced her capacity for aesthetic apperception, intensifying the wonder of even the smallest quantum of nature available to her gaze.²⁶ Prison even enacted a revaluation of Efflatoun's celebrity as an artist, for she was able to use her status as a recognised Egyptian painter as exchangeable currency: she struck a deal with her prison warden to bring her paints if she promised to sell the finished works (via her sister) for cash. The resulting paintings offer a poignant amalgam of her romantic regard for nature and the materialist dimension of her hustle. They show windows but not openings. Cardboard supports are filled with the heavy impasto presence of blossoms and trees, blocking in the painting-as-window with the pigments she had so carefully procured.

When Efflatoun was released in July 1963, she was taken by family to the countryside – to its immersive outdoor territories of farms, fruits and palms, as well as the continuous labour of cultivation. The landscapes she painted at this time negotiate the open air as optical experience rather than as touchable stuff. They appear as vibrating braids of primary colours, the light-filled after-images of her imprisonment. The stakes of such an immediate inversion – from interiority in the carceral sphere to an unbounded exteriority – must have felt uncertain. Efflatoun's work from this transitional moment again negotiates the problem of the support in relation to its object. If 1940s paintings such as *Girl and the Beast* appear almost as a celluloid frame, where the fleeting perception of contradictions is given black illumination, then Efflatoun's post-prison paintings use surface as a sheet of unifying light. This is quite

19 Again, Efflatoun's work in this sphere has been well documented. Consider, for example, her newspaper editorials, such as 'The Role of Women in Production', which appeared in *al-Masa'* on 29 October 1958. A French typescript is in the MFIA archive.

20 See D. Monciaud, 'Les engagements d'Inji Aflatun', *op. cit.*

21 I. Efflatoun, *Mudhakkirat Inji Aflatun*, *op. cit.*, p.98.

22 See 'Inji Aflatun', *Adab wa Naqd*, *op. cit.*, p.102.

23 Letter from the General Director, University City, to Inji Efflatoun, 19 March 1952, in the MFIA archive.

24 See 'Inji Aflatun', *Adab wa Naqd*, *op. cit.*, p.102.

25 See B. LaDuke, 'Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun', *op. cit.*, p.479.

26 See I. Efflatoun, 'La Femme Créatrice de Valeurs', *op. cit.*



Inji Efflatoun, c.1969, in front of *Afternoon at the Village* (1967). © Bruno Barbey/Magnum Photos

literally the case in a series of sketches she completed on glass in 1964, each showing a female labourer amid flecks of colour.²⁷ These works become fully visible only when placed against a white backing, which, through its opacity, serves to reveal the positive image. Made brilliantly white against the dancing colours, the backing becomes reminiscent of cotton, the ‘white gold’ of the Egyptian economy; equally, it proffers a visual reminder of Efflatoun’s concern for vision as a field of intersubjective connection. She made similar sketches on cream paper in the same period, and these convert bodies into touches of pigment, connoting a tactile experience of cotton flocking or even electrical filaments.

Following her release, Efflatoun was restored to the national cultural apparatus with an almost breathtaking speed. In 1965 she received a government fellowship to support her painting full-time, and by 1967 her work was being presented in solo exhibitions in Rome and Paris. By then, her paintings on canvas were tending toward spare landscapes: rock formations in Aswan, banana groves, small villages perched upon cliff faces. These were not easily reconciled with her previous status as an oppositional figure, and Henein, in fact, voiced his doubts. By then he had left Cairo for Paris, where he was editor-in-chief of *Jeune Afrique*. When Efflatoun’s exhibition opened in Paris in July 1967 the magazine published a short review;

although unattributed, its reference to Art and Freedom as the ‘first avant-garde movement in Egypt’ makes Henein’s authorship obvious.²⁸ Hardly managing even a tepid endorsement, Henein casts Efflatoun’s turn to the artistic concerns of light and colour as an obdurate one. Looking at the dashed colours of paintings such as *Afternoon at the Village* (1967), a vibrating landscape of horizontal rock flows, he

Efflatoun split from the surrealists’ dream image to accord her work a capacity to rally political awareness.

supposed that they were offered as stand-ins in for the euphoria of Arab dance and pattern.²⁹

Strikingly, this particular painting is observable amid a second set of images: a portfolio of photographic portraits of ‘Arab intellectuals’ shot by Magnum photographer Bruce Barbey in the restive Middle East of 1969. One photograph by Barbey captures Efflatoun, in a crisp houndstooth dress and pearl earrings, talking in front of three recent works, all framed. *Afternoon at the Village* hangs peculiarly low on the wall, at hip height. It would have occupied the artist’s peripheral vision, flashing into view from time to time as a kind of counter-image or opening to a tactile environment. Quite

27 I wish to thank Ms. Sherwet Shafei for speaking with me about Efflatoun’s small group of glass paintings from this period.

28 ‘Expositions: Inji Efflatoun’, *Jeune Afrique*, 30 July 1967, pp.59–60. A feeling of political disappointment would have been pervasive at the time of Henein’s writing, for the Egyptian and other Arab armies had just suffered defeat at the hands of the Israeli army in the Six-Day War of June 1967.

29 *Ibid.*

Inji Efflatoun,
Collecting Eggplant,
c.1960s, oil on glass,
16 × 9cm. Courtesy
Safar Khan Gallery,
Cairo



rightly, Henein had focussed on the question of *how* the artist had regarded and possessed her objects in completing a painting like this, noting that Efflatoun took the downtrodden labourers of the countryside as her beloved subject, yet manipulated her new medium, light and color, with a feeling of joy. In Henein's estimation the landscapes show nature as a manifestation 'to a woman', which is to say, present nature in its almost oppressive, fructifying plenitude.³⁰ Henein's characterisation, however absurd in its sexism, carries the resonance of Art and Freedom's concern for subject-object inversions and for the interpenetration of

the technological and biological in the image. This landscape had imposed itself, demanding registration by another body. But, with that openness, might there be transformation; might worldly light have flooded Efflatoun to the point of visual impairment?

A professional culmination of this process – a kind of *self*-negation in contemplation – would be declared in 1977, when Efflatoun showed three years of new work in a solo exhibition in Cairo titled 'White Light'.³¹ The paintings made openness to nature a stated goal, and used the canvas support – formerly accorded the role of a medium – as a readable participant in

30 *Ibid.* The author says the views are 'heavy with sap', which may have been meant as a reference to cotton production in particular.

31 Efflatoun's tenth solo exhibition, 'White Light: 1974-1977', was on view at the Egyptian Center for International Cultural Cooperation, Cairo, 7-17 March 1977. Photographs and additional documentation are in the MFIA archive.



allegories of illumination and need. In an essay written for the exhibition, Naim Attiya described the pictorial effects as ritualised compositions restoring politics to intersubjective relations – a new spirit drifting over villages, making workers in the field conscious of their central political roles.³² Other critics saw nationalist emblems, such as Arab writing, or the spiritually significant two-dimensionality of Eastern aesthetics.³³

But the most rewarding reading of such a valorised openness, I propose, would come much later, at the 2015 Venice Biennale. There, a series of Efflatoun sketches from the 1970s and 80s – a marker drawing of an orange harvest, a watercolour of bricklayers emphasising the tactility of colour in a white void, and so on – were exhibited in a single display case, where they faced several directions, as if in mid-activation. This had

the decisive effect of shifting attention to the margins of her practice, the points at which one image links to all the others – as apertures, or as film cells, or as mock-ups for a poster. Indeed, other material from Efflatoun’s personal archives may be added to the ad hoc musée imaginaire of the Venice installation, allowing further exploration of the porosity of the distinction between looking and using in her composition process.³⁴ Among the paintings, drawings

biography. Some help in this regard may be drawn from Walter Benjamin’s writing on surrealism, circa 1929, which conjures a transformative image-space to be achieved by profane illumination – a materialist, anthropological process of corporeal reconfiguration in image. Benjamin’s essay moves through a series of problems that Efflatoun had also recognised in her surrealism: the destructive power of Catholicism; the need to overcome (bour-



Inji Efflatoun, undated preparatory photographs. Left, courtesy MoME* - Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Right, courtesy Hassan Mahmoud

Opposite: Inji Efflatoun, untitled sketch on paper, 1964. Courtesy © MoME* - Bibliotheca Alexandrina

and clippings she had accrued, there are also photographic images of orange and cotton harvest, showing women working in a dappled grove of backlit trees. Unlabelled and undated, their colour saturation is suggestive of 1970s commercial processing, and their compositions – suppressed horizon lines and attenuated rather than abundant volumes – recall the preoccupations of ‘white light’. That Efflatoun kept them must be significant. Did she take them herself? They seem to offer evidence of a continued effort to invert viewer privilege, here in photographic documentation of spaces composed from shared, interpenetrating light.

I do not wish to conclude this essay by evaluating Efflatoun’s success in what was, from the start, a vexed and lonely exploration of visuality. I hope to have succeeded in showing the multiform openness of her work as it persisted against the crushing weight of both personal and national

geois) discretion concerning one’s existence; and, of course, the forever-vain efforts of the intelligentsia to make contact with the proletarian masses.³⁵ The alternative was the image-space – at issue in Efflatoun’s later paintings – where political materialism and physical creatureliness share a psyche with dialectical justice.³⁶ In repurposing light as an unpainted pictorial immanence, she took another turn against the original sin of somatophobia. In the eye, which is to say inside the look, the representational image is collapsed into the body. And this body, peculiarly, ceases to be gendered because it cannot be seen. These are the uncomfortable provocations of Efflatoun’s work, and they are destabilising precisely because they escape the painterly frame of expression and demonstration.

32 See N. Attiya, ‘al-Hawa’ wa-l-Nur fi Lawhat Inji Aflatun al-Jadida’, *op. cit.* The political subtext of Attiya’s text is difficult to parse, as it refers to elections and to agricultural workers finding their voice. This, and the use of terms like ‘opening’, may constitute a response to the Egyptian bread riots of January 1977, which had succeeded in changing then-President Sadat’s plan to eliminate food subsidies.

33 See Fatima Ali, ‘Fannana Tarsumu ... al-Faragh’, *Akhir Sa’a*, 30 March 1977, in the MFIA archive.

34 I do mean to invoke André Malraux’s notion of a photographic collection of formal affinities, an idea that was very much a product of the 1930s, and which had been of interest to members of the Art and Freedom coalition.

35 See W. Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, *op. cit.*

36 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

* The Bibliotheca Alexandrina ‘Memory of Modern Egypt’ (MoME) project is a collaborative effort between the International School of Information Science and the Special Projects Department. It is a digital repository documenting the last 200 years of Egypt’s modern history through tens of thousands of varying items, such as documents, pictures, audios, videos, maps, articles, stamps, coins, etc. organised in an index of fourteen different material types. See <http://modernegypt.bibalex.org>