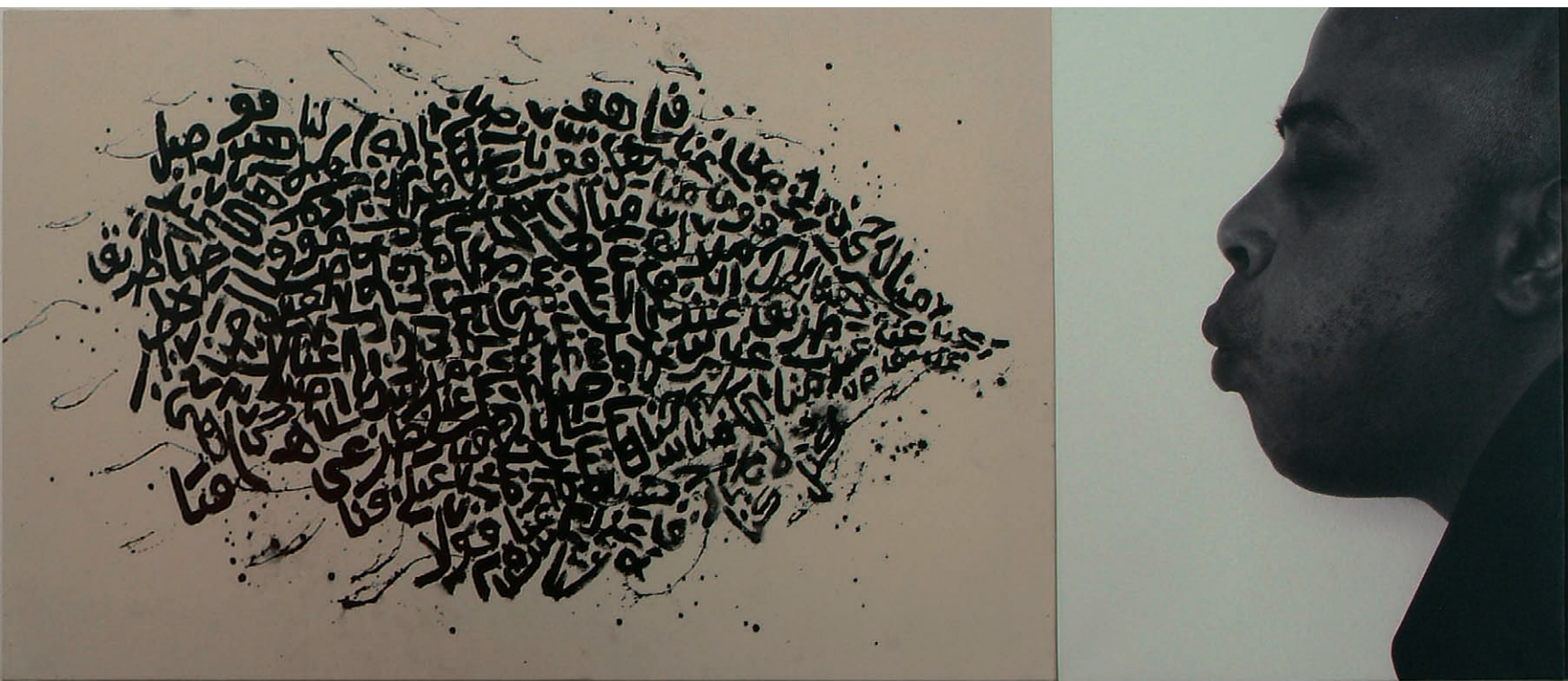




FATHI HASSAN

Inspired by lost language and hidden histories, the artist depicts forgotten tales of Nubia.

Words by Maghie Ghali



Fathi Hassan. *Blowing Memory*. 2007. Mixed media on canvas. 100 x 80 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Sulger-Buel Gallery

Nubian-Egyptian artist Fathi Hassan had not been born when his parents left for Cairo from their home in the Egyptian part of Nubia. In the years that followed, entire Nubian villages were erased, submerged under Lake Nasser following the construction of the Aswan High Dam during the 1960s. Although estranged from his homeland, Hassan was raised hearing stories of Nubia – of the traditions of oral storytelling and of a culture steeped in history and colour, rendered in symbols and sigils.

When Hassan took up painting in his teenage years, it was second nature to transfer these stories into a visual medium. Over the decades, he has made it his mission to document and depict the often forgotten tales of Nubia. “All my work is tied to language in some form, especially the old stories of Nubia, which is my heritage,” Hassan explained in an exclusive interview for *Canvas*. “In Nubia we used to pass our history down through storytelling and people would gather to hear stories on an evening. Stories and books are how we mark our lives, the passage of time and our history, which for

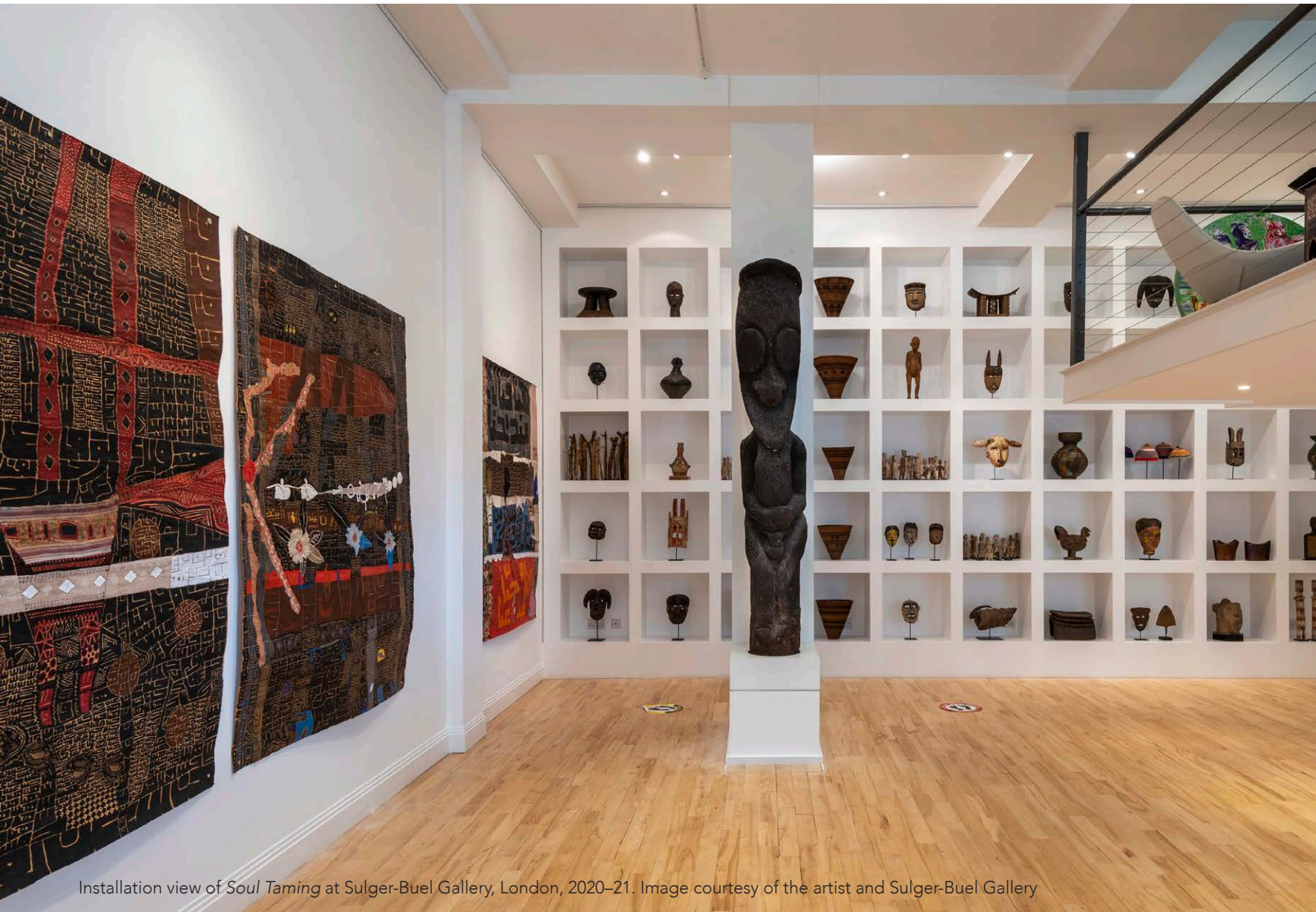
Nubia, and indeed the Middle East in general, is not always easily documented.”

Through photographs, paintings, installations, drawings and, often, directly working on walls, Hassan uses a medley of illegible text and symbolic imagery to highlight the plight of vanished languages and oral history, lost as a result of colonial domination. Building a knowledge bank of this cultural heritage was helped by his childhood setting. “We lived in the middle of Cairo and near our home was a library where I used to work. I was lucky to live in that neighbourhood – it was full of cinemas, bookshops and theatres,” he recalls. “I learned so much through this library. An artist’s work is, after all, just a culmination of everything that has made up their life, and my life has been filled with tales and pieces of history. My works seek to give life back to these little-known stories of Nubia, both modern and ancient.”

In 1979, in his early 20s, Hassan received a grant from the Italian Cultural Institute in Cairo and moved to Naples, Italy, where he enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti and



Fathi Hassan. *Stairway to the Unknown*. 2020. Mixed media on paper. 190 x 149 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Sulger-Buel Gallery



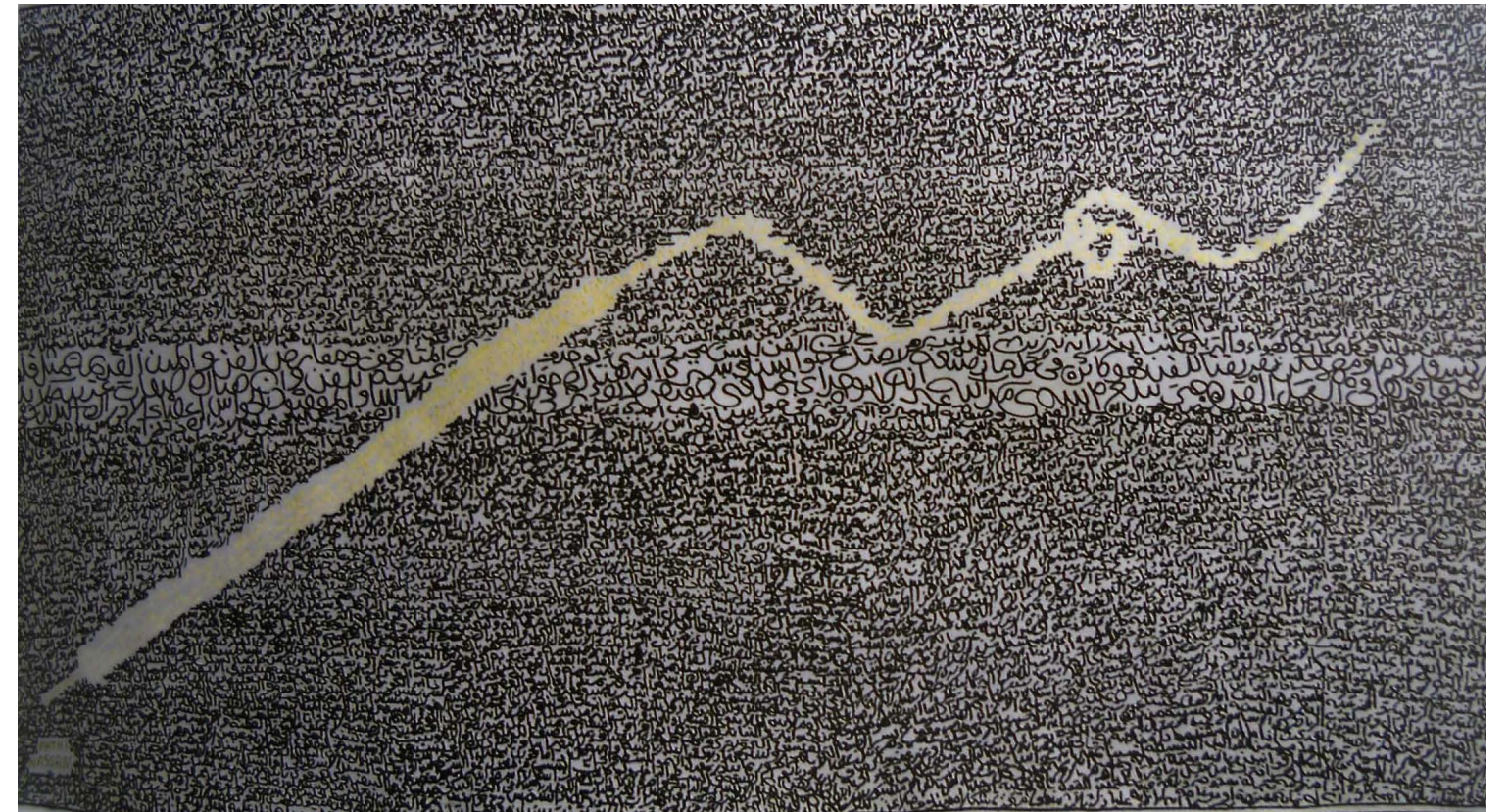
Installation view of *Soul Taming* at Sulger-Buel Gallery, London, 2020–21. Image courtesy of the artist and Sulger-Buel Gallery

graduated with a thesis on the influence of African art in Cubism. He spent almost 40 years in Italy, before moving to Edinburgh, where he is currently based. In 1988 he was one of the first African and Arab artists to exhibit at the Venice Biennale, showing a series of paintings and an installation on the Nubian desert, which helped catapult him into the international spotlight.

“When I first moved to Italy, I found myself clinging to my own heritage even more, because Italy itself has such a rich history in art and culture already – which was wonderful, but also confusing at the same time for a young artist,” Hassan reveals. “Pop art was making its way over from America and Europe was full of experimental styles. I said to myself ‘How can I, a young Egyptian with little connection to Western culture, create art here?’ so I decided that I would instead tell the West about my own culture and create art about Nubia and Egypt.”

It proved to be a gateway opportunity for Hassan, as he started to mix European techniques with the stories and symbols of Nubia. “This was new for my teachers too,” he remembers, “and they encouraged me, helping me to improve my carving and how to draw the symbols or marks.”

Since then, Hassan has participated in exhibitions and fairs around the world, with his work now held in the permanent collections of London’s Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum, as well as in Washington DC’s Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. Such international stature sits at apparent odds with his ongoing personal endeavour to find his own place in the modern world, his creative inspiration often centred around identity, contextualised through historical events and the theft of a homeland of which only traces remain. Having grown up during a time when Egypt and other Arab countries were gaining their independence from colonial powers, Hassan is highly sensitised to the disruption caused to local culture and traditions.

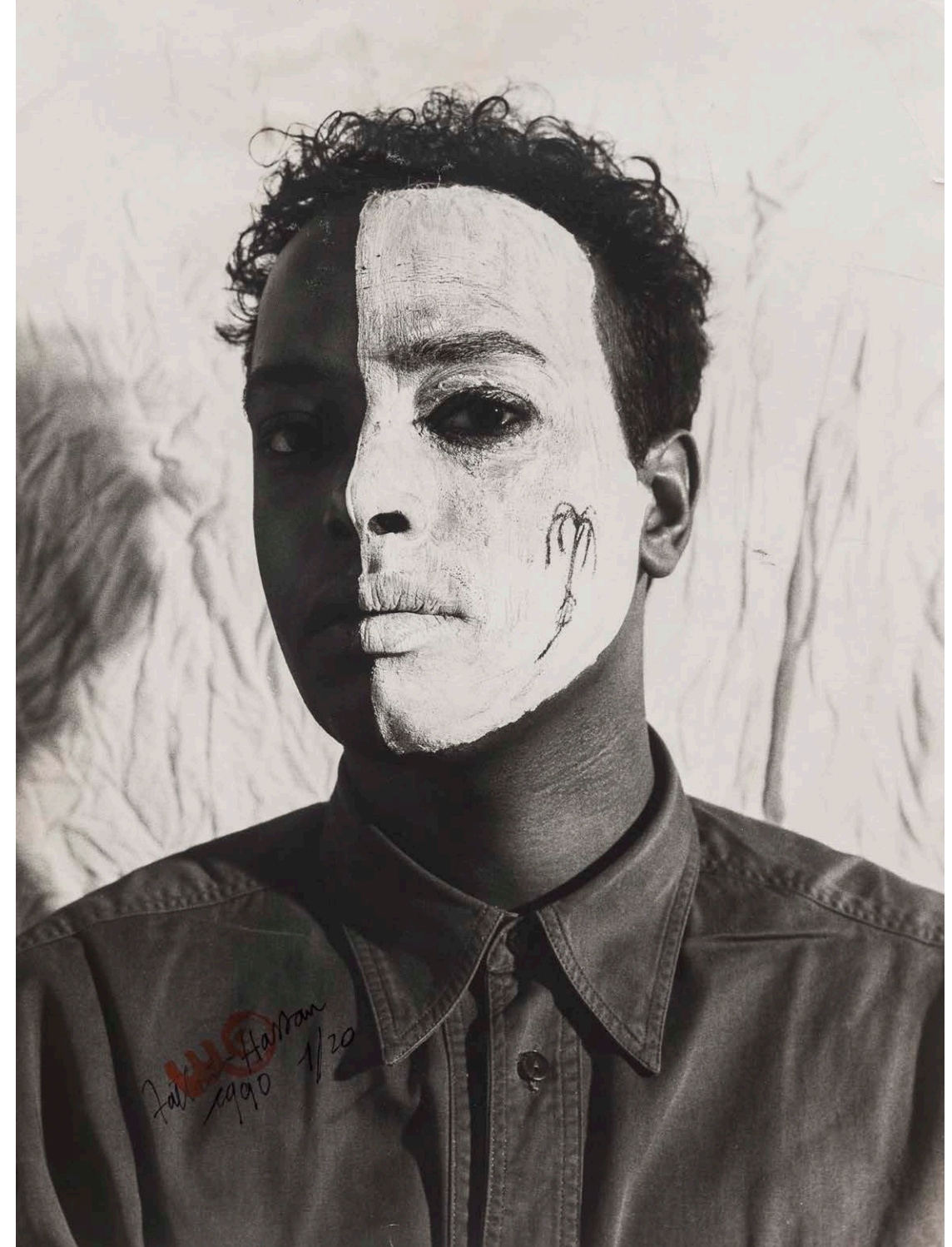


Fathi Hassan. *Orfeo*. 1983. 274 x 151 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Sulger-Buel Gallery

“The whole of the Middle East has a colonial past and those of my generation saw at firsthand how our culture and traditions were often put behind those of the Western powers,” he says. “Egypt has had many stages of colonialism, from the Ottomans to the British, and I was still a child when it gained its independence. The colonial powers were not interested in local culture and art, so this took a back seat for years, and many of our histories and stories were erased, both during and after the colonial occupations. Many Middle Eastern artists have left their countries and lived abroad, yet all the while attempting to pursue artistic endeavours. There seems to be no interest in bringing back these talents to teach the new generation of artists in their home countries and to improve the local artistic scenes there. It has become a sadly divided situation.”

Hassan’s 2021 solo show *Soul Taming*, shown at London’s Sulger-Buel Gallery and curated by Najlaa El-Ageli, was

a classic example of the many layers he includes in his artworks. The paintings are deeply personal, yet also share the plight of the Nubians in general. Bold blocks of colour are blended with detailed patterns, with blacks, reds, blues and whites especially favoured, and splashes of orange and yellow. Calligraphy is crammed between the roads of map-like paintings, with animals, the Nile, palm trees and henna-covered hands common symbols in Hassan’s work. “One of my favourite pieces from that show is a painting called *Stairway to the Unknown* (2020), because it speaks about the story of Nubia over different periods of time,” the artist admits. “My grandfather’s land, like most of Nubia, is now underwater, so this work is about the loss of the land and my grandfather’s grief over the loss of his home. He died shortly afterwards.” Another work, *Polyphemus Foot* (2020), is about the use of the Nubian people as workers and slaves, and shows people trapped under the feet of others. The painting’s



Opposite page: Fathi Hassan. *Magic Window*. 2014. Mixed media on paper. 150 x 100 cm.
Above: Fathi Hassan. *The Division*. 1990. Photography on paper. 40 x 30 cm. Edition of 20.
Images courtesy of the artist and Sulger-Buel Gallery

title is a reference to the Cyclops Polyphemus, son of the sea god Poseidon in Greek mythology, who in this instance has crushed Nubia with a watery footprint. Throughout are the small traditional symbols that have become emblematic of Hassan's work. Many are deeply personal, down to the patterns on clothing, which in one case is derived from a garment his grandmother used to wear.

Hassan's powerful visual story-telling is attracting increasing attention. "Fathi is one of the most significant artists working today, and a key figure in the emergence of artists of African heritage to their current position of international prominence," says gallery owner Christian Sulger-Buel. "He is a pioneer in his chosen field of work, the interface between language and

visual imagery, and in addressing the relationship between the oral and written word in compelling and innovative ways."

2023 is set to be a busy year for Hassan, with several shows scheduled around the world. February sees the publication of a monograph of his work by Italian publisher Benciv Art, detailing his life, career and offering a comprehensive retrospective of his artwork. Meanwhile, Sharjah Biennial 15 has commissioned him to create a large-scale painting called *Nubian Memory*, which includes elements of collage and lace and stitching on the canvas. It shows a volcanic eruption over Nubia, which Hassan says symbolises the explosive tragedy still felt by the Nubians at the loss of their homeland, as the Nile winds its way across the canvas. ■