

DISTANT SHORES

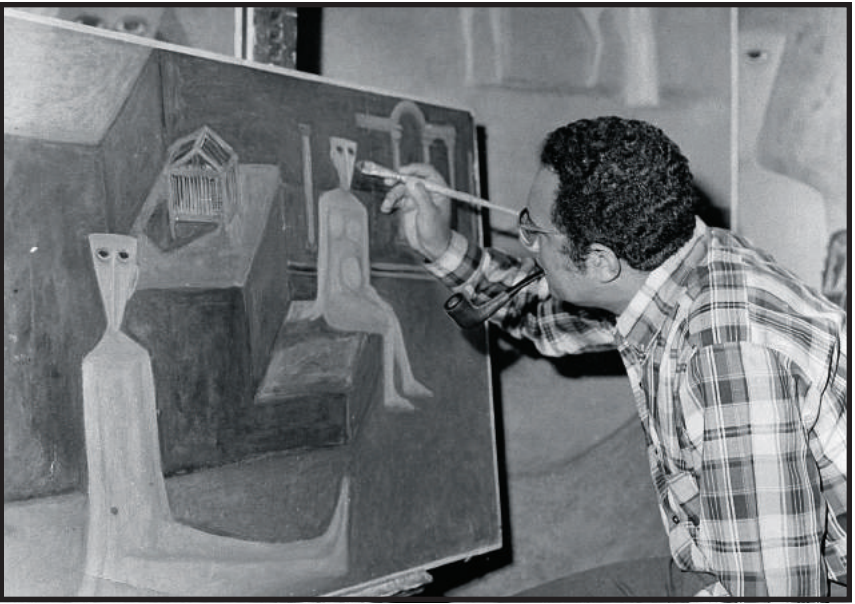
KAELAN WILSON-GOLDIE ON THE ART OF AHMED MORSI

Ahmed Morsi, *Seaside*, 1987, diptych, acrylic on canvas, overall 7' 8½" × 11' 9¾".



Left: Ahmed Morsi, *Lady in Black Gown*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 72 × 61¾".

Right: Ahmed Morsi painting *Red Cage*, 1968, in his Cairo studio, 1968. Photo: David Beshay.



ON A CRISP MORNING this past summer, before the streets had wilted under the humidity and grime, I picked my way through the strange corporate wilderness and crowds of office workers of midtown Manhattan to find the studio of Ahmed Morsi. An Egyptian painter of both rumor and renown, Morsi has lived in a modern townhouse on East Forty-Eighth Street since 1974. He is totally out of place yet firmly present in this most improbable of neighborhoods, making paintings that act as portals to other worlds, bringing multitudes back to these shores in the form of ghostly traces.

Morsi, who turns eighty-eight this month, has been an established, almost canonical figure in Egypt for decades. He is known for his poetry, his criticism, and his journalism, as well as for his painting. Historians consider him a core member of the so-called Alexandria School, the experimental novelist Edwar al-Kharrat's term for the multidisciplinary group of artists, writers, actors, and theater directors active in the fabled cosmopolitan milieu of Egypt's second-largest city in the 1940s. Critics regard him widely (if not universally) as the junior-most member of the Egyptian Surrealists. And yet he remains completely unknown in New York.

This is largely a matter of choice. Back in the '80s, Morsi had a single show in SoHo, at a gallery called Vorpall, but he found the local market so crudely speculative and wholly unedifying that he checked out of the New York art world altogether. He has never reconnected with it. At the same time, and despite the long distance, Morsi has been at the center of Egyptian cultural life continually since his twenties. His work was chosen for the opening exhibition of the Alexandria Museum of Fine Arts in 1954. He

took part in the first Alexandria Biennale in 1955. The original group of Egyptian Surrealists, known as Art and Liberty, had scattered by then, but Morsi was close to, and showed with, several members who remained in Egypt, including Hassan El-Telmissany and Fouad Kamel. His friendship and collaboration with Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar, one of the chief protagonists of the Contemporary Art Group (which either extended or betrayed the work of Art and Liberty, depending on whom you ask), was lifelong and legendary.

But even if his own work is rarely shown in New York, Morsi himself sees everything, and for more than forty years, until he stopped writing in 2012, he has contributed regular art criticism to Arabic papers such as *Al-Hayat* in Beirut, *Alam al-Fikr* in Kuwait, and *Akhbar al-Adab* in Cairo. He penned diaries and dispatches from New York for an audience operating in another language, grouching about nearly every edition of the Whitney Biennial, to cite just one example, for a readership no less interested for living elsewhere. Morsi also wrote four volumes of criticism on American poetry, including a study of African American poets from Langston Hughes to Amiri Baraka and Maya Angelou, which was published by Iraq's Ministry of Culture in 1975. (None of his criticism has been translated into English, and his newspaper work hasn't even been collected in Arabic.) Maybe New York doesn't know him. But he knows you. And that knowledge provides one of several necessary codes for interpreting his paintings, which are obsessive in their expressions of exile, anonymity, dislocation, and estrangement.

In the past few years, Morsi's work has been the subject of one retrospective after another, in Cairo and

across the Arab world. Salah M. Hassan, who teaches art history at Cornell and edits the African art journal *Nka*, co-organized last year's "Ahmed Morsi: A Dialogic Imagination," at the Sharjah Art Museum, which explored the relationship between Morsi's writing and painting and found his Surrealism to be the common denominator. In 2016, the Egyptian curator Ehab El-Laban assembled sixty-five years' worth of paintings and etchings for "Ahmed Morsi: A Pure Artist," at Cairo's state-run Ofok Gallery. Laban's show argued that the secret to Morsi's art was its hidden manifestation of a timeless Egyptian identity. (This is the kind of unabrasive nationalist language that has become fairly standard in Egypt for government-sponsored exhibitions.) And just a few months ago, the Gypsum Gallery in Cairo mounted "You Closed Your Eyes in Order to See the Unseen," an exhibition of Morsi's paintings, drawings, prints, photographs, poems, and artist's books from 1974 through 2012. The Gypsum show added considerably to the reading of his work by linking his imagery directly to Greek, Roman, and Egyptian myths, including the stories of Isis, Osiris, and Horus. As these exhibitions have increased in number, the audience for his work has been turning up more often at Morsi's door.

And so Morsi has joined the ranks of several quietly New York-based elder artists whose work is currently undergoing reappraisal. He is, like all of them, foreign-born, and that itself may be a part of the story. Museums, curators, and galleries are turning to artists who have been overlooked or underexposed, many of them women and/or artists of color, to redress and expand the canon. (At its best, this impulse arises from the need to reexamine the ways in which the



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stories of the experiences of modernism, abstraction, and Surrealism have been told, and to retell these stories more generously.) Unlike with Zarina, from India, or Carmen Herrera, from Cuba, the rediscovery of Morsi's work isn't happening here, in New York, or even in the United States. It is happening over there, in Egypt and in the Arab world. And not just anywhere in the Arab world, but in the Gulf States.

This is interesting for two reasons. First, the major collectors of Egyptian Surrealism are now institutions in Sharjah and Qatar, with a few private acquisitions scattered across Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. This means that the great champions of far-left-leaning artists such as Inji Efflatoun and Kamel El-Telmissany, for example, include some of the world's most conservative, least democratic regimes. (Egypt today, under Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, belongs in that category, too.) If the Egyptian Surrealists were really calling for total revolution and the destruction of the state, it seems highly ironic for their legacy to have fallen into such hands.

Second—not unrelated but perhaps more important—the political fallout from euphoric demonstrations, often descending into autocracy and civil war, has been so devastating in the Middle East over the past few years, and so wracked with additional anxieties in the age of Trump, that the whole experience of immigration and exile seems much harsher now than it was even for Morsi's generation in the '60s and '70s. Given the constancy of his work's themes, what kind of connections might be made, or usefully pursued, between Morsi and what feels at times like an entire generation of young artists, writers, and thinkers who have left Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut, and Istanbul to reconstitute themselves in cities like Berlin, Boston, and New York? If Morsi's work so brilliantly cuts across time and place, might it do something similar for generations displaced?

THE MAJOR ELEMENTS of Morsi's paintings have changed little in the past half-century. He has con-



tinually refined and recycled a distinctive vocabulary of signs, including a horse, a bull, fish, birds, clocks, a cello, a flute, a dressmaker's mannequin, the New York and New Jersey transit systems, men with blue skin, women with their heads lopped off at the brow line, androgynous figures with double profiles unified by a single eye socket, dramatic scars dividing bodies and pyramids, the shallow and indeterminate spaces of moodily monochromatic backgrounds, and a shoreline that is almost certainly that of the port city of Alexandria, painted over and over, like Calvino's Venice, showing the beach at night, moonlit and dreamlike. Many of these elements are standbys of Surrealism—think Max Ernst or Man Ray—but in this case they are even stranger for extending so far into the twenty-first century. Morsi is an accomplished poet. He wrote his first *diwan*, or “collection,” at the age of nineteen. A comprehensive anthology of his poetry, published in Arabic in 2012, runs to more than a thousand pages. Perhaps for that reason, his paintings seem like texts to be deciphered, like sequences of symbols open to very literary—and often literal—acts of interpretation. When elements that have obviously been drawn from the streets of New York (such as manhole covers or roadwork signage) suddenly appear on those strangely crepuscular shores of Alexandria, Morsi's paintings speak clearly to the experience of constantly holding the memory of one city in mind while managing the everyday details of life in another.

While the essential visual language remains consistent, Morsi's paintings change dramatically over the years, as he shifts among various approaches to line and texture. His paintings from the '50s, such as *Fallah*, 1954, bear a strong resemblance to the outlined figures and folkloric subjects of the Syrian painter Louay Kayali, who belongs to roughly the same generation. Kayali specialized in depictions of the poor and suffering that were both over-the-top sorrowful and timelessly heroic. Morsi, in addition to emulating his dramatic outlines, appears to have tried out Kayali's emotional temperament for a time.

In several of Morsi's works from the '60s, such as a still life from 1965 and an untitled portrait of a nude woman beside a pair of fishermen from 1968, the brushwork is smudgy and the lines are blurred, provisional. In the '70s, Morsi, who was classically trained by the Italian painter Silvio Becchi, shifted from using mostly oils to solely acrylics. This allowed him to work faster and on larger canvases. By the end of the decade, he had learned how to make woodcuts and lithographs at the Art Students League of New York, which fortified his line and at the same time let his figures float in what has become his characteristically strange and ethereal treatment of compositional space.

Opposite page, top left: View of “Ahmed Morsi: A Pure Artist,” 2016, Ofok Gallery, Cairo. From left: *Seaside*, 1987; *Waiting for the Trains*, 1987.

Opposite page, top right: View of “Ahmed Morsi: A Dialogical Imagination,” 2017, Sharjah Art Museum. From left: *Adam & Eve (2)*, 1994; *Green Horse II*, 2000.

Opposite page, bottom: Ahmed Morsi, *Summer by the Seaside*, 1985–88, acrylic on canvas, 68 7/8 × 61”.

Right: Ahmed Morsi, *Still Life*, 1965, oil on canvas, 39 3/4 × 33 1/2”.

Below: Ahmed Morsi, *Untitled*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 39 3/4 × 49 1/4”.





Left: Ahmed Morsi, *Black Bird II*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 59 x 78 1/2".

Right: Ahmed Morsi, *The Subway Station III*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 54 1/2 x 74".



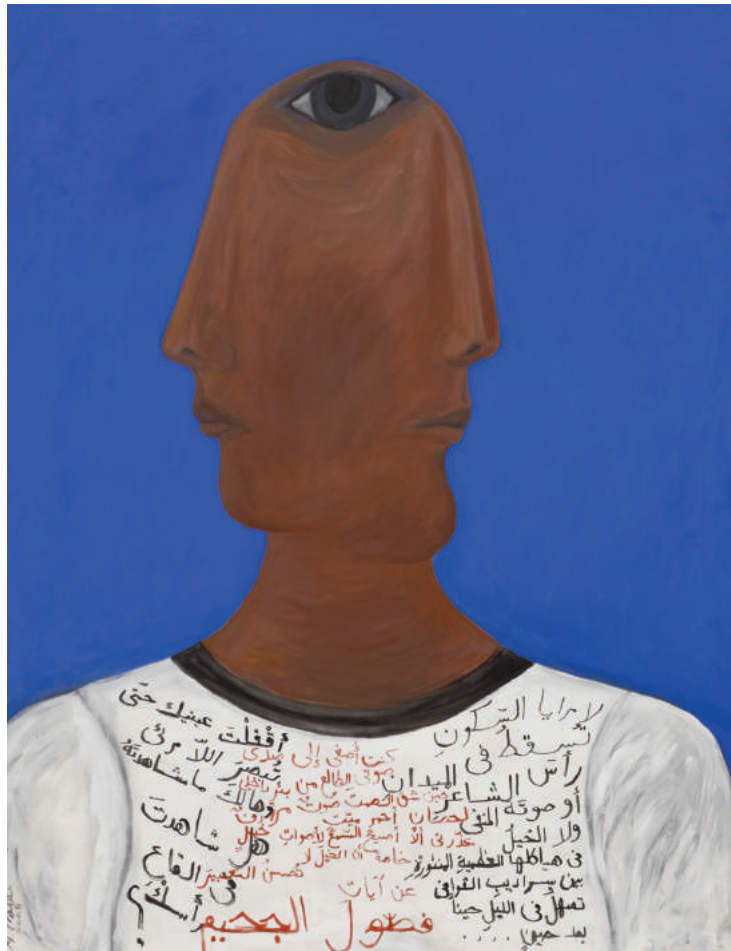
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Morsi rarely paints shadows, but when they do appear, they look more like pools of radiation than indications of a light source. His brushwork is the same for figures and grounds, and seems everywhere, ever so slightly, to swirl. In *Waiting for the Trains*, a diptych from 1987, an old-school locomotive comes charging through the sea, with storm clouds overhead and a yellow glow emanating from within. But it is completely unclear where the six waiting figures on the beach are standing. Their feet rest on unsteady whirls of purple and orange. They appear in total profile, looking left or right, as if they could only slide like paper dolls along to the shore but could never turn and face the oncoming train, or us.

The depths of Morsi's paintings are shallow and compressed but also endless, in limbo, vulnerable to the sudden irruption of objects and things that seemingly do not belong. Fire hydrants rise from his beaches. Horses descend onto subway platforms. Faces split and shift out of alignment. Eyes double. Figures appear like phantoms wandering in and out of a transitory realm, like characters in a Philip Pullman novel who are fiercely attached to the experience of childhood, which, in that very moment, is also slipping like sand through their fingers. In *Green Fish*, 1985, for example, a couple as iconic as Adam and Eve cast lunar shadows along a flat white coastline. She looks at him with some skepticism while he looks at us searchingly, clutching an enormous green fish. In *Lady in Black Gown*, 2008, a figure in a Victorian dress, dramatic at the chest, fills three-quarters of the canvas and stares at us sternly

while resting an elbow on the back of a stylized bench. The vertical band that forms the top of the bench simultaneously reads as a landscape or horizon line. The ambiguous purple shape in the top right could be a building or a mountain or a shadow. The anachronistic volumes of the dark dress almost overtake the composition. In *The Black Fish*, 1984, a woman strides out of the ocean in a billowing white skirt, holding a fish in one hand, with a horse grazing in the surf over her right shoulder. Wisps of fiery red paint electrify her skin. She appears to be standing on some kind of tarmac. And, as space dilates and flattens, it is bizarre to imagine the place or the height from which we are seeing her. In an untitled portrait from 2008, a hand reaches up from inside a woman's skull to clasp another hand descending down from outside of the frame. She appears against a blank void.

Morsi is often clearly playing with the history of European portraiture, and with Piero della Francesca's diptych of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino in particular; hence his predilection for vaguely regal faces seen in profile against vacuum landscapes and monochromatic skies. The woman in blue posed in full side profile for *Bust*, 2008, appears timelessly aristocratic—except for the dramatic scars segmenting her face and neck. (Aleya Hamza at Gypsum Gallery reads this painting as a reference to Cleopatra.) The Janus-faced figure in *Poetry*, also 2008, captures in one canvas the idea of a couple facing off across a drawing room. This character is a recurring figure in Morsi's painting, and seems an apt allusion to his exile, his dislocation, his bifurcated existence.



Ahmed Morsi, *Poetry*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 78 1/2 x 61".



Several of the artist's paintings from the '60s—such as *Untitled*, 1960—show Morsi experimenting with color and cubism, fracturing the body of a woman into rainbow shards. His portraits from the '50s—including *Portrait of an Alexandrian Lady*, 1953, *Untitled*, 1954, and the fulsome *Seated Nude*, 1959—owe an obvious debt, in their attention to the powerful sexuality of the painted female body, to Mahmoud Saïd, an artist who specialized in painting highly seductive women and was one of Alexandria's great modernist pioneers, adopted as a father figure by the Surrealists for his freedom in exploring dreams and subconscious desires.

In that sense, Morsi appears to proffer Surrealism—with its endlessly adaptable and perpetually useful language—as a bridge between the modern and the contemporary. After all, tunneling into the unconscious has proved especially appealing in places where political conditions are so often irrational and absurd. Consider a lineage connecting Saïd to Morsi to the artist Maha Maamoun, for example. Maamoun's most recent film, *Dear Animal*, 2016, splices together two texts: the real notes of a woman named Azza Shaaban, who left Egypt after the revolution of 2011 to find herself in India, and a short story by the exceptionally talented novelist Haytham El-Wardany. Wardany's tale tells of a drug dealer named Walid Taha who, when he is unable to cough up the money



Above, left: Ahmed Morsi, *Bust*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 90 1/2 x 61".

Above: Ahmed Morsi, *Black Fish*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 59 1/2 x 52".



Above: Ahmed Morsi, *The Family*, 1968, oil on canvas, 78 ¾ × 78 ¾".



Right: Ahmed Morsi, *Waiting for Godot*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 60 ¾ × 44 ¾".

he owes his boss, turns himself into “a zebroid goat” (or a goat with a zebra’s stripes).

With much humor and an eye as attuned as Morsi’s to weirdness, Maamoun’s film seems to ask, after all that’s happened in the past seven years—revolution, counterrevolution, coup, countercoup, popular protest, massive repression—could things go any worse, get even weirder? That sentiment echoes in works by other artists in the region, already torn in a million different directions even if they haven’t left, and among those who have fled. It echoes in the fabulist elements of Ahmad Ghossein’s videos, in Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s abiding interest in lying, and in the stories of Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme’s *And Yet My Mask Is Powerful* (2017) about young Palestinians hacking 3-D copies of Neolithic artifacts for disguise and ambiguous adventure in the occupied West Bank. Morsi’s own Surrealist language is also useful if you want to claim, as he does, to be apolitical. It passes the censor, so to speak, while remaining open to interpretations, including those that would read his work as directly political and subversive.

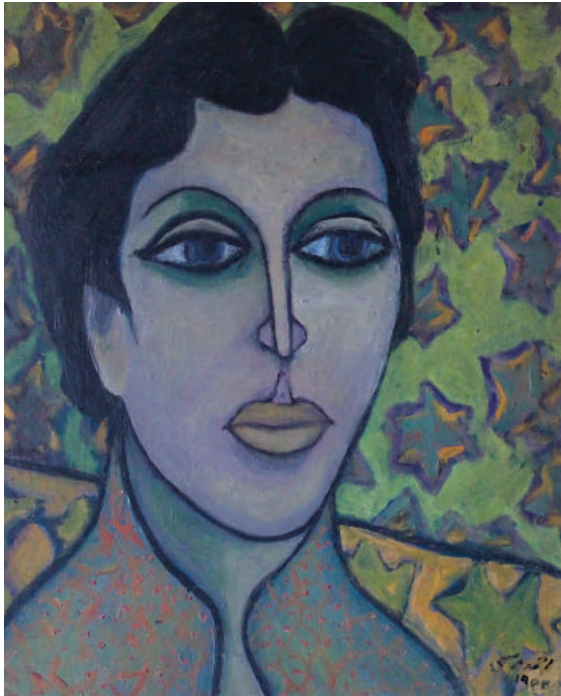
MORSI WAS BORN AND RAISED in Alexandria, and the city pervades his painterly imagination—in colors,

forms, and the steady invocation of an off-kilter paradise, a place eerily dislodged from linear time. In an introduction to Morsi’s work that ran last year in the bilingual journal *Alif*, the literary scholar Hala Halim, an expert on the Alexandria School who teaches comparative literature at New York University, makes an important distinction about the Alexandria to which Morsi belonged. His was decidedly not the Alexandria of Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet* (1957–60), the glamorously disheveled playground of Italians and Greeks, Armenians and Levantines, Christians and Jews, who were most often wealthy and lovelorn, and mostly expelled from the country in the ’50s. Rather, Morsi’s Alexandria consisted of “the older, less privileged and largely non-Europeanized areas to the West and the South of town.”

Although the neighborhood he grew up in was diverse—demarcated by a mosque, a church, a synagogue, and a Baha’i temple—the more central, postcard-worthy sites of Alexandria, including Durrell’s Cecil Hotel, its surrounding cafés, and the

foreign cultural centers, were “seldom frequented by young Egyptian writers and artists, and class barriers too were not half as porous as they may seem in nostalgic accounts.” That said, Halim writes, Morsi and his cohort were “Arabophone with access to European languages, middle- to lower-class—benefiting from both solid academic training and an eclectic formation.” Their Alexandria may have been more authentic (whatever that means), but it was still the same escape valve for goods and people fleeing the devastation of Europe during World War II; still the same city where galleries showed Modigliani, collectors in their salons hung Picassos alongside da Vincis, and where theaters, in their stage design, evinced the strong influence of Degas.

Morsi wrote his first poems, as a teenager, in French. They were published in a Communist newspaper in Greek. The Jewish owner of a European bookstore allowed him to buy titles by Paul Éluard and Paul Valéry on installment and treated Morsi like a son. He discovered the Greek-Alexandrian poet C. P. Cavafy



Ahmed Morsi, *Portrait of an Alexandrian Lady*, 1954, oil on wood, 24 ¾ × 20 ¾".

He was so attached to Alexandria that it had become embarrassing to him. His love for the city was unbearable.

through the writings of E. M. Forster. He was more familiar with the work of Picasso than he was with that of any other painter. (Allusions to Picasso remain incredibly prevalent in Morsi’s paintings.) He studied English literature, ditched his Italian mentor, and became one of the first Egyptian artists to keep a studio in the legendary Alexandria Atelier (where Edwar al-Kharat wrote *Hitan Aliya* [High Walls, 1959], his first short-story collection). For a young Egyptian of modest means, Alexandria may not have been the same material paradise it was for the city’s foreigners, but for Morsi it was definitely an intellectual heaven.

When I met him last summer, Morsi told me that at a certain point he was so attached to Alexandria that it had become embarrassing to him. His love for the city was unbearable. He couldn’t even travel to Cairo for the night without yearning to return home, and then doing so. So when a friend moved to Iraq, he decided to cut ties and follow. He took a job as a schoolteacher in Baghdad in 1955, arriving just as the city was entering a flourishing cultural era. He translated Éluard and the Surrealist poetry of Louis Aragon. He wrote the first major Arabic-language monograph about Picasso. He began working as an art critic for newspapers, chronicling, among other historical phenomena, the emergence of the Baghdad Modern Art Group, founded by the artists Jawad Selim and Shakir Hassan al-Said.

Two years later, he returned to Egypt and settled in Cairo. He designed stage sets for the Cairo Opera

House and worked a day job for the Middle East News Agency, a wire service initially set up as a joint stock company but later nationalized. In 1967 when Israel defeated the armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in the Six-Day War, a crushing and pivotal event for the Arab world, Morsi stopped writing poetry, a consequence of near-total spiritual depletion. (He didn’t return to it until 2001. Despite his standing, almost none of his poetry has been translated into English.) A year later, he and Kharat and several others started an avant-garde magazine called *Galerie 68*. It quickly became a literary and artistic lightning rod. Every time a new issue was published, Morsi, who was the editor in chief, was called in to the Ministry of Culture to defend its work.

By the time Egypt fought another war with Israel, in 1973, Morsi was married with two young children. When his wife, Amani Fahmy, was offered a job running the Arabic translation desk at the United Nations in New York, they decide to depart Egypt for good. Morsi told me that in every single painting he has done since leaving Alexandria for Baghdad—and he has been painting prolifically for sixty years now—he has been trying to find his way back to the Alexandria he left behind, depicting the city not how it ever was in reality but how he saw it, how he imagined it, how he wished it to be and perhaps willed it into being, then as now. □

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Ahmed Morsi’s covers for *Galerie 68*, 1968–69.