

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

the body in art

In this section we explore the artistic potential of the human body and its physical properties, from the power of our hands to create and sculpt to the movement of our limbs in performance art. We also look at the social, political and symbolic aspects of the human form and its physicality, as expressed by artists in their quest to explain and understand what it means to be human.





Amado Alfadni.
Reimage Restore 3. 2021. Digital
art on paper. 50 x 70 cm

TRADING BODIES

In a world where history is still overwhelmingly written by the victors, Amado Alfadni lifted the lid on a very ignoble chapter in African history through *Alternative Museum of the Sudan*, his recent show at London's Sulger-Buel Gallery.

Words by James Parry

Among the many shameful episodes in human history, there are few more irremediably shocking than that of slavery. The trade in human beings as commodities was explored in sharp relief by Amado Alfadni in *Alternative Museum of the Sudan*, a creative and unusual exposition of a complex set of issues that covered not only the brutal and shockingly recent history of slavery in Africa but also how Black communities have internalised colonial propaganda and stereotypes.

Alfadni describes himself as a "Sudanese diaspora Cairene artist", born in the Egyptian capital in 1976 after his father had travelled there a quarter of a century earlier to study at Al Azhar University. He recalls how "the very smell of our house evoked Sudan" and how his childhood was a symbiosis of Sudanese memories, real and imagined, and the hurly-burly "cosmopolitan space" of downtown Cairo. Yet the apparent diversity to the city masked deeply entrenched cultural attitudes and inherent racism. Alfadni recalls the Egyptian school system as imbued with a negative image of Sudan

and the wider media as "having constructed the infamous image of the 'black' Arab. It is this clash between different constructions of Blackness that I have had to endure and worked to understand."

The result of several years' research, *Alternative Museum of the Sudan* explored a range of different but related themes, all connected by a sense of the artist working as a social archaeologist to excavate some of the more neglected – and troubling – chapters in the history of Egypt, Sudan and East Africa more widely. In his quest to unpack these stories and to "allow silenced history to speak", Alfadni turned to British and Egyptian archives in search of source material on the history of slavery between Egypt and Sudan during the nineteenth century. Young men were traded from Sudan to become enslaved soldiers, some of whom were 'gifted' by the Egyptian Khedive to Napoleon III and ended up fighting for France in Mexico in the 1860s. Others were forced to serve in colonial forces used to suppress local communities in other parts of Africa.

"The exhibition highlights the importance of reappropriating and



Amado Alfadni. Askari 4
Costumes. 2021



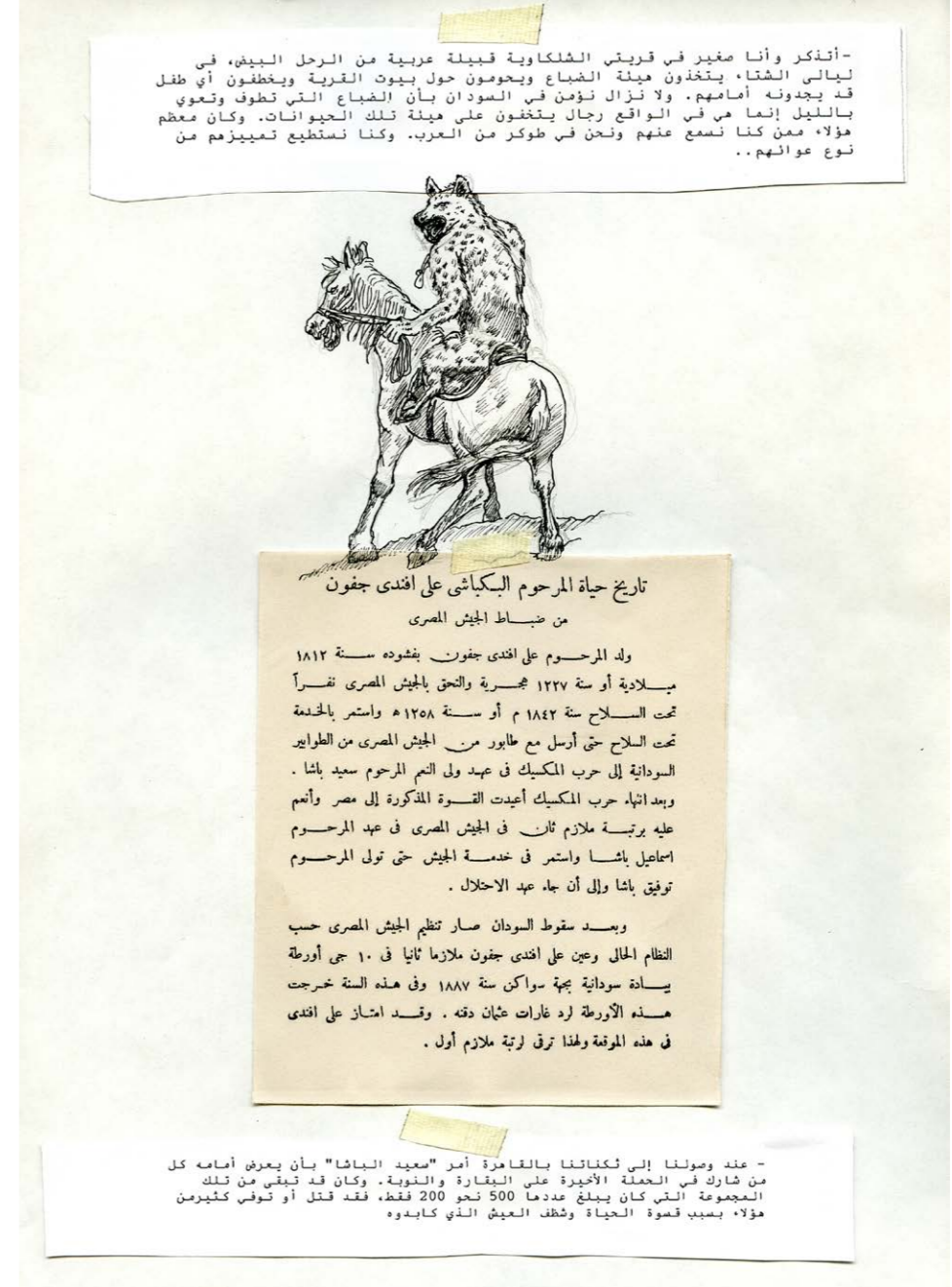
Amado Alfadni. *Ace of Spades - The Unlucky* No. 9387. 2017. Photo transfer monoprint. 30 x 42cm

rewriting some of the forgotten and erased accounts of history,” explained curator Najlaa El-Ageli, “in particular, that of the slavery endured by the Sudanese people. [The artist’s] intensive research into some of the written and photographic archives of the enslaved soldiers ... is re-choreographed to give dignity to those men who essentially died as martyrs for their country.” Alfadni’s creative virtuosity brings these individuals to the foreground through the digital remastering in colour of original black-and-white archival images. Standouts in the exhibition included works from *The Askari Project* and *Ace of Spades*, focused on enslaved Sudanese soldiers (or *askaris*) serving in colonial armies outside their country of origin.

These dynamic interpretations were dramatically supported by a

series of mannequins dressed in funky colonial-style military outfits, designed by Alfadni and inspired by the uniforms of colonial troops such as the British King’s African Rifles, German Schutztruppe and Anglo-Egyptian Army. The artist created his own textile designs based on the patterned fabrics that originated from the Dutch East Indies and which spread across Africa and have been adapted in myriad local variations. Alfadni’s highly political interpretations include the juxtaposition of potent historical imagery ranging from the British East Africa Company, King Farouk and the KKK to Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, serving to emphasise the global web of complicity in the enslavement and subjugation of peoples.

One of the most poignant and original presentations in



Amado Alfadni. *Black Ivory sketch 1*. 2016. Mixed media on paper edit. All images courtesy of the artist and Sulger-Buel Gallery

Alfadni’s museum was *Black Ivory*, a group of sketches and audio installation inspired by the real-life story of Ali Al-Jifoon Effendi, a Sudanese soldier. Interviewed in an English magazine in 1902, he recounted how he was kidnapped as a child and forced to serve in three colonial armies. Alfadni was moved to create an oral history version of the soldier’s account of his life, spoken in Shilluk, the man’s native tongue. It contains harrowing details of abduction and maltreatment, and also includes references to therianthropy – the assuming by humans of animal form – which Alfadni remembers his mother talking about. “We could smell them grilling meat on the fire,” recounts the soldier’s ‘voice’. “It might have been the meat of the gazelles they hunted or the meat of one of us. When it came time to sleep they untied us. I could hear their laughter and singing, as I was trying to sleep. I would close my eyes and stifle my cries so I wouldn’t see them turn into hyenas.”

The response to the exhibition was so positive that its run was extended by an extra three months, explained gallery owner Christian Sulger-Buel. “We had a diverse spectrum of visitors and a curious audience, coming from as far away as the USA and Africa and including many academics interested in the topic of enforced

slavery. Alfadni’s bright colours, his poetics and aesthetics are an immediately attractive and gentle way of exploring a very difficult and traumatic subject. His artworks offer a new dimension and safe space in which to reflect upon the past.”

Alfadni’s artistic interventions are all the more potent because of his own family’s history as slave traders, which continued until his maternal grandfather “decided to leave the family slavery business and settle down on our island next to the River Nile.” Whether by way of atonement or simple historical analysis, he offers an authentic and personal narrative that attempts to unpick the complexities surrounding slavery, Sudanese identity and colonial history. One exhibition visitor, a school teacher from Kenya, was particularly touched by the Askari installation and audio recording. “It is wonderful to see an artist confront his background and context by using problematic historical episodes and successfully empowering the forgotten voice of history,” she offered. An undeniably powerful show, simultaneously disarming and revealing in its honesty, *Alternative Museum of the Sudan* was presented in a highly engaging format that nodded towards how images of identity can be reformed from new perspectives. ■