

Inji Efflatoun: The Poetics of Justice

7 October 2026 – 14 February 2027

Ticketed

The Poetics of Justice marks the first significant UK exhibition of **Inji Efflatoun** (1924 - 1989 Cairo, Egypt), one of the most important Egyptian artists of the twentieth century. A feminist and political dissident, Efflatoun regarded art as a powerful tool for social engagement and political expression, and her activism and artistic practice were deeply entwined. The exhibition brings together key paintings including the acclaimed series made while she was imprisoned during the early 1960s, alongside works on paper and rare archival documents and photographs. Together they provide a fascinating insight into Efflatoun's life and career during a key period in Egypt's transition from British occupation to independence and post-independence.

Born into an affluent Cairo family in 1924, Efflatoun rejected the privileges of her upbringing and became deeply involved in politics from an early age. She was active in anti-colonial movements against Egypt's occupation by Britain, advocated passionately on behalf of the rights of Egyptian women (nationally and internationally) while a student, and increasingly campaigned for the rights of ordinary working people.

Efflatoun began painting early, and as a teenager was mentored by the revolutionary artist and filmmaker Kamel El-Telmissany. He was one of the founders of the radical left-wing Egyptian Surrealists movement, 'Art and Liberty' (Art et Liberté), which Efflatoun also joined. She was the youngest artist to take part in the group exhibition *Art & Liberty* held in Cairo in 1942, with her evocative painting *Young Girl and Monster* (1941). Efflatoun's works from this period are characterised by unworldly landscapes, dreamlike imagery, psychological intensity and rebellious energy. The exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery will include examples of these early works.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Efflatoun became a leading voice for progressive feminism in Egypt. She was one of the first women to study in the arts department of the University of Cairo, and in 1945 was among the founders of the 'Ligue des jeunes femmes des universités et des instituts' (League of young women in universities and institutes), which promoted left-wing, anti-colonialist politics and campaigned for gender equality. She increasingly integrated her social and political concerns into her artistic practice and her paintings from this time reflect a growing interest in the experiences of ordinary people, particularly 'fellaheen' (agrarian working class), factory workers and women, reflected in paintings such as *Motherhood* (c.1950s) and *Farm* (1953). She also revisited historical events under British colonial rule, as seen in her poignant ink and pencil drawings of the Denshawai Massacre of 1906.

In the mid-1950s, Efflatoun travelled to Upper Egypt, Nubia and the Southern Oases and continued to use her art to advocate political and social consciousness. The exhibition includes the paintings *Fisherman* (1957) and *Old Sailor* (1958), both highly expressive portrayals of labour and collective activity and examples of her commitment to representing social realities. A pivotal moment in this development came in 1956, when she met the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974). A member of the Mexican Communist Party, his compelling and powerful works reinforced Efflatoun's own interest in art as a form of social commentary.

In 1959, Efflatoun was incarcerated by President Nasser's regime for her political activism and remained imprisoned for more than four years. Despite severe restrictions, she continued to paint while in prison and the exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery features key paintings and drawings from this period including *Dreams of a Detainee* (1961) as well as a series of intimate black and white sketches. These emotionally charged, highly celebrated portraits of her fellow inmates further solidified her status as Egypt's first female artist-activist. As her time in prison progressed, Efflatoun moved away from portraiture and began to paint the external world glimpsed through her cell window, with trees, boats and landscapes becoming her primary focus.

After her release in 1963, Efflatoun's work increasingly focused on the fecundity of the natural world and rural communities. She continued to represent peoples and cultures largely absent from mainstream narratives, including agricultural labourers, fishermen and working women. Described as her 'white light period', these works are characterised by a bright, often luminous palette, depicting rural landscapes and agricultural work such as the gathering of the orange harvest in vivid, radiant colour.

Weaving together the artistic, personal and political, *Inji Efflatoun: The Poetics of Justice* traces the trajectory of Efflatoun's simultaneous development as an artist and political activist across five decades. Her powerful fusion of artistic experimentation, political protest and social campaigning position her as a major figure in global modernism and reflects the Gallery's ongoing commitment to showcasing art that engages with powerful cultural, social and political issues.

Inji Efflatoun: The Poetics of Justice is presented in partnership with the Sharjah Art Museum and Global Studies University, Sharjah, UAE.

Notes to Editors

- *Inji Efflatoun: The Poetics of Justice* runs 7 October 2026 – 14 February 2027.
- *Inji Efflatoun: The Poetics of Justice* is curated by Gilane Tawadros and Salah M. Hassan (Chancellor of Global Studies University and Dean of the Africa Institute, Sharjah, UAE).

Press Contacts

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Listing Information

Inji Efflatoun: The Poetics of Justice

7 October 2026 – 14 February 2027

Galleries 4 & 5

Ticketed

Visitor Information

General Gallery admission: Free

Ticketed shows: £16.50 (Standard ticket) / £9.50 (Concessions)

Opening times: Tuesday – Sunday, 11am – 6pm; Thursdays, 11am – 9pm

Whitechapel Gallery, 77 – 82 Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX

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About Inji Efflatoun

Born in Cairo in 1924, Inji Efflatoun was educated at the Collège du Sacré-Cœur before joining the Lycée Français where she developed an interest in literature and political history. She was one of the first women to attend the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University and from 1940, she studied under the painter and filmmaker Kamel El-Telmissany. El-Telmissany introduced Efflatoun to the surrealist group Art and Liberty founded in 1938 by writer Georges Henein.

Efflatoun was an engaged feminist and political activist as well as an artist. In 1942, she joined the Egyptian Communist organisation Iskra (al-sharara) and in 1945 she was one of the founding members of the 'Ligue des jeunes femmes des universités et des

instituts' (League of Young Women in Universities and Institutes). She published several political pamphlets including *80 Million Women With Us* (1948) and *We Egyptian Women* (1949). After she met intellectual and feminist Saiza Nabarawi in 1950, Efflatoun joined the Youth Committee of the Egyptian Feminist Union. In 1951, she participated with Nabarawi and other female activists in the organisation of the Women's Committee for Popular Resistance. In March 1959, Efflatoun was arrested and jailed together with twenty-five female political activists. She was released in July 1963 after organising the first women prisoners' strike. In 1985, she was appointed Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Ministry of Culture. She continued painting until her death in 1989.

Efflatoun had her first solo exhibition at the A.D.A.M. Gallery in Cairo (1952), and she participated in various biennials including the São Paulo Biennial (1953), the Alexandria Biennial (1961 and 1965) and the Venice Biennale (1968). She had additional solo presentations in Rome, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Prague, Kuwait and India. Recent selected group exhibitions include *Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrica*, Barbican, London (2026); *Surrealism Beyond Borders*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2021-22); *When Art Becomes Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists (1938-1965)*, Palace of Arts, Cairo (2017); *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2016); *Focus: Works from Mathaf Collection*, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha (2015–2016); and *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World*, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC (1994). Efflatoun's work is included in the collections of the Amir Taz Palace, Cairo; Museum of Egyptian Modern Art, Cairo; Museum of Modern Art, Alexandria; Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; The Dubai Collection, Dubai; Barjeel Foundation, Sharjah; The Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation, Beirut; Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman; Moscow's State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow; and private collections around the world.

About Whitechapel Gallery

2026 marks Whitechapel Gallery's 125th Anniversary, providing a unique opportunity to celebrate the Gallery's groundbreaking history and set a bold agenda for the future.

Founded in 1901 with the aim to bring 'the finest art of the world to the people of East London' the Gallery has been responsible for bringing some of the most radical, innovative and influential artists of our times to its East End home. From the outset it pushed the boundaries of what a locally embedded cultural institution could do: giving voice and platform to local, national and international artists at all stages of their careers; presenting diverse practices, forms and ideas; exemplifying sector-leading learning and community outreach programmes; and being at the forefront of the global cultural scene.

From ground-breaking solo shows from artists as diverse as **Barbara Hepworth (1954), Jackson Pollock (1958), Helio Oiticica (1969), Gilbert & George (1971), Eva Hesse (1979), Frida Kahlo (1982), Sonia Boyce DBE RA (1988), Sophie Calle (2010), Zarina Bhimji (2012), Emily Jacir (2015), William Kentridge (2016), Theaster Gates (2021), Nicole Eisenman (2023), Zineb Sedira (2024), Gavin Jantjes (2024), Peter Kennard (2024), Lygia Clark (2024), Sonia Boyce (2024), Donald Rodney (2025), Hamad Butt (2025), Joy Gregory (2025) and Veronica Ryan (2026)** to thought-provoking group and thematic exhibitions that reflect key artistic and cultural concerns, the Gallery's focus on bringing artists, ideas, and audiences together remains as important today as it did over a century ago, and has helped to cement the East End as one of the world's most exciting and diverse cultural quarters.

The programme for our anniversary year continues to give space to a range of perspectives from the local to the global, with priority given to those systemically under-represented, especially women-identifying artists and artists of colour. Our mission is to ensure that Whitechapel Gallery continues to claim a distinctive and radical position in the wider social and cultural landscape, building on its pioneering history while translating and animating it for our time.

Inji Efflatoun: The Poetics of Justice has been generously supported by:

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