

diptyk



NFT, art's new gold rush

Dubai, city of endless possibilities



This year, I’m delighted to offer you a digital issue of DIPTYK. We can’t wait to share our original insights into Arab and African contemporary art with audiences in Dubai. From our vantage point in Morocco, where DIPTYK has been published since 2009, it is interesting to observe echoes from contemporary scenes and keep a close watch on what’s happening inside the studios of artists on the rise. You’ll be privy to work in progress by artists Dhewadi Hadjab and Massinissa Selmani, as well Maya-Inès Touam and Aïcha Snoussi. Morocco is central to the rediscovery of non-Western modern movements, and in this issue we revisit Casa-blanca School pioneer Mohamed Chabâa, through stunning images from a retrospective show devoted to his theory and multidisciplinary practice. We also serve up the Moroccan scene’s incredible vitality. Curatorial practice is nothing new to Morocco, but now independent young curators and cultural programmers are rethinking, reshaping and deconstructing, eager to re-enchant the codes of their profession and anchor them in reality, on the ground. Don’t think for a minute that the Maghreb and Africa are missing out on state-of-the-art practices. To prove our point, we’ve included a feature piece on the who and how of NFTs.

More than a revolution, the NFT market is already staking its claim as the world’s dominant new movement, in Africa as elsewhere. Since Christie’s first sale of a solely digital artwork — and the first cryptocurrency sale, for 60+ million dollars! — in March 2021, the virtual marketplace has skyrocketed, taking major artists and operators along for the ride. Bearing in mind that digital art—on the rise due to the pandemic and boosted by strong crypto-values—offers plenty of advantages: the perfect traceability of artworks, cutting out middlemen, better recognition for digital artists, diverse forms of transactions...For the followers of crypto-art, the party is just getting started! Here and now, in March 2022, DIPTYK joins a fine team of Moroccan galleries to take part in Art Dubai, where this year’s fair coincides with Expo2020, opened to the public in October 2021. Through this unprecedented programme, Dubai is sending very powerful messages to the world. It is the first World Expo to be held in this part of the world, the most fragile in geopolitical terms. Dubai has become the symbol of this new, essential crossroads and all of its complexity. Here in Dubai, the vibration of converging energies can spark progressive—and hopefully more peaceful—change, to restore and preserve our global equilibrium.

Morocco is central to the rediscovery of non-Western modern movements

[Contributors]

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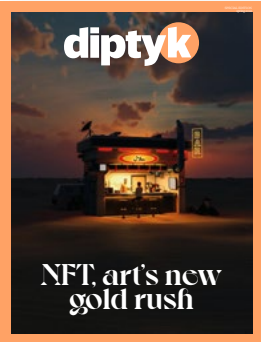
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#SPECIAL EDITION
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Muhcine Ennou, The
Bar, 2021. Courtesy of
the artist



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[Expo 2020 Dubai]

After a one-year delay, the World Expo has finally opened its doors. With a central theme of “Connecting Minds, Creating the Future”, Expo 2020 Dubai is on view until 31 March 2022. A guided tour of the Morocco Pavilion.

By Salima El Aissaoui

— A sustainable and realistic futurism

Approaching the site by car or by direct metro from downtown Dubai to the World Expo, visitors will see the name MOROCCO—in Arabic and in English—emblazoned across one of the Expo’s tallest structures. A hint of déjà vu will wash over those who know the hillside *ksour* perched high in the Atlas Mountains, in a crescendo of rammed-earth volumes. Combining this ancestral construction method with state-of-the-art architectural technique, Tarik Oualalou’s design responds to present-day sustainability needs. He offers the world an historic example of earthen architecture, exploring a material that is becoming increasingly relevant to future urbanism.

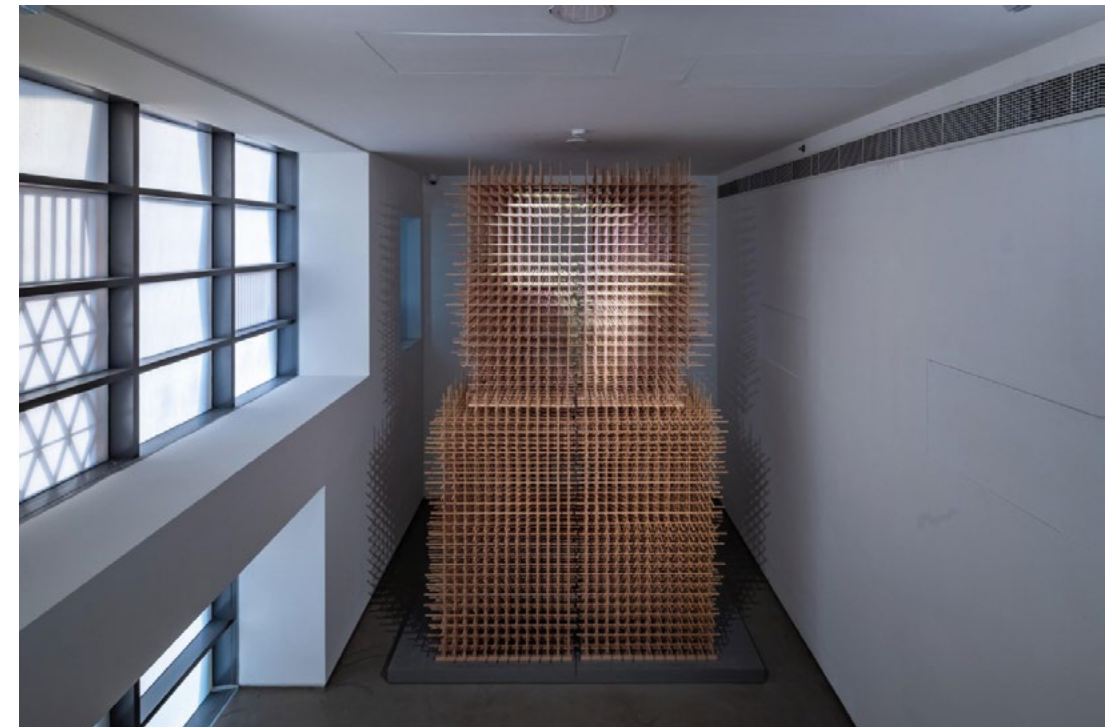


— Land of opportunities

A guided tour of the Morocco Pavilion begins on the seventh floor. Each room is dedicated to a different aspect of the country’s culture and development. Exhibition rooms feature interactive displays and/or immersive scenographies that allow visitors to have fun and enjoy beauty as they discover Morocco. The Pavilion’s permanent exhibition and a jam-packed programme present the nation as a land of opportunities, in terms of economic investment and technological innovation. The ongoing story of Morocco’s natural and cultural heritage is shared through a series of rooms, connected by a descending walkway that overlooks the riad-inspired central patio.



© Suneesh Sudhakaran/Expo 2020 Dubai



— Hassan Darsi reveals Africa

The fifth room is home to Hassan Darsi’s contemporary work *Reveal Africa*: a meticulous composition of wooden sticks. Using this scaffold-like medium, the artist imagines a representation of African geography as a metaphor for a continent under construction. Diffuse light passes through the work’s core, symbolising hope and the radiant future of a continent in the whirl of development. Visitors are then invited to use their cell phones to photograph the piece, and, as they do so, a map of Africa appears in their digital images. Darsi’s artistic proposition thus becomes participative, as the viewer’s intervention completes the expression, extending the work beyond its exhibition space.



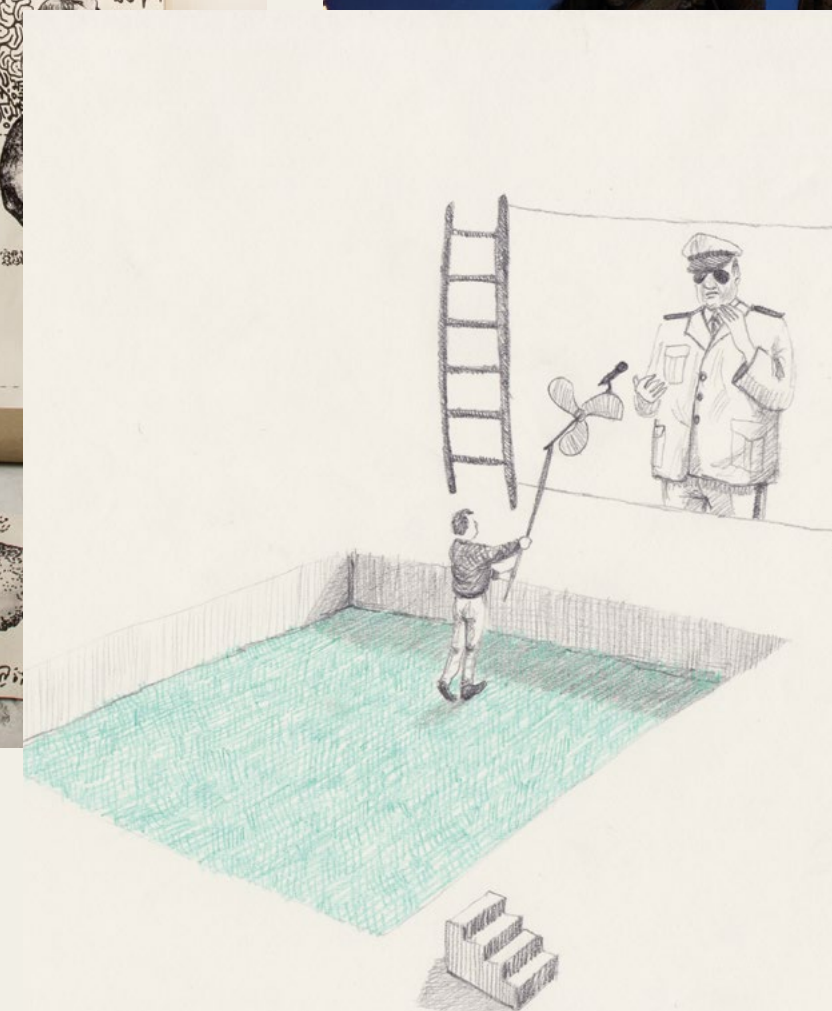
Morocco Pavilion@MoroccoExpo2020Dubai

— Modern art, a renewed heritage

The exhibition path of the Morocco Pavilion closes with a show organized by the National Foundation of Museums. The show’s chronological display describes the trajectory of visual arts in Morocco. Reinforcing the Morocco Pavilion’s central theme of “Shared Heritage”, a selection of artworks reveal how artistic modernity has sought inspiration in the multiple cultural references of Morocco. The recurrence of ornamentation in the work of Mohammed Ben Ali Rbati and Ahmed Louardighi for example, or the use of vernacular iconography for the avant-gardists of the Casablanca School. A second act devoted to contemporary art opened in January 2022, extending this reflection upon the transmission of Moroccan cultural heritage, this time in terms of current artistic creation.

[WORK IN PROGRESS]

Dhewadi Hadjab
Massinissa Selmani
Aïcha Snoussi
Maya-Inès Touam
Steph



Dhewadi Hadjab, *Posture du corps I*, 2019, oil on canvas, 135 x 190 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Dhewadi Hadjab When we fall

The young Algerian painter Dhewadi Hadjab is interested in body distortions. Staging an unsettling atmosphere, this Beaux-Arts of Paris student poses his subjects in strange postures of representation.

“What has art history overlooked?”, such is the question raised by Dhewadi Hadjab, a student of Beaux-Arts of Paris since 2019. After focusing on patterns of duality and shadow during his studies at the Beaux-Arts of Alger, he has turned his attention to bodily contortions. Well-acquainted with the world of contemporary choreography, he came upon the idea of staging moments of discomfort while observing the difficulties encountered by dancers. “We have shown little interest”, he comments, “in these moments when we fall down, hurting ourselves. When we make a movement that we should not have made.” This is far from the dancers of Degas, closer perhaps to the moments of tension that emanate from certain works by Francis Bacon, like the scream that literally innervates the canvases of his *Pope series*.

Before he begins to work on canvas, Dhewadi Hadjab goes through a series of deftly elaborate stagings. “I work from a photo-montage, seeking out models from the people I know. After the photo session, I use Photoshop to create a stage set for a place that doesn’t exist.” The resulting images are disturbing scenes where upholstery is slashed and interior spaces are strangely empty. Sometimes a window opens onto an eerie night-cape. Characters dive into a pool. But what truly fascinates the artist is “water, and its capacity for deformation”, not unlike the bodies in Dhewadi’s postures of crisis. Themes that the artist is continuing to explore during his Paris-based residency in collaboration with Rhizome, the newly-launched art space in Algiers.

Olivier Rachet



Dhewadi Hadjab, *Dream dancing II*, 2020, oil on canvas, 195 x 130cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In the good books of Massinissa Selmani

The Algerian artist flips through his research sketchbooks, filled during his lockdown days with poetry, illustrated with landscapes and enlivened with bits of watercolour. Pure gold.

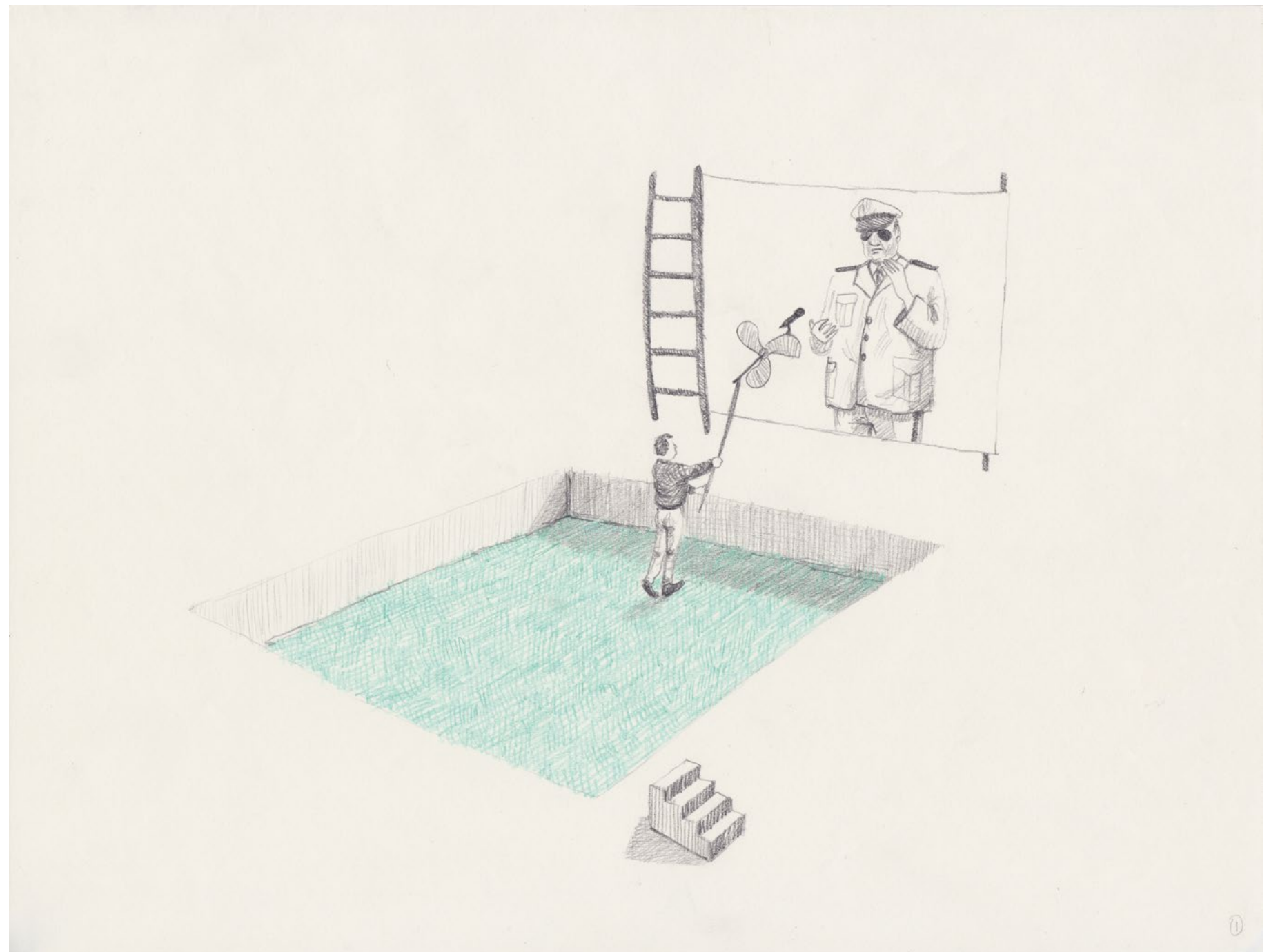
At first glance, the unprecedented period we have been living through did not have much impact on the strangely dream-like world of draughtsman Massinissa Selmani.

“*The advantage of drawing*”, he notes, “*is that little is required to practice.*” Once past the initial shock of the new, he continued his studio work and went on to give substance to these “*often futile situations*” that characterize his work. “*I really like the notion of failure*”, he confides, before adding that he has a predilection for “*impossible and absurd situations*”. Speaking of “*drawn forms*” to describe his work, he continues to “*give shape to the unfathomable*”, at the same time trying his hand at animation.

But reality, even in its absence, will eventually catch up with anyone who thinks he might escape it. Written texts make a brilliant first appearance on the pages of his research, and not merely through a predilection for wilfully ambiguous titles (one of his series bears the intriguing title *Do we need shadows to remember?*). He found company during lockdown in the poetry of Jean Sénac, the Algerian poet assassinated in 1973, to the point where he seems to immerse him in his own drawings. As if, when the world was stopped, only the tongue could still wag? Even more surprising is the sudden presence of watercolour, a technique he had not explored since his teen years, and which showed up quite by accident in his work. “*It’s as if, one morning, someone said get up and try watercolour!*”, he remembers with a smile. Timidly, tentatively, colour erupted into a world until then dominated by graphite.

Though his drawings usually feature the void of white space, landscapes made their well-received apparition at his most recent exhibition, “*Le calme de l’idée fixe*” (Calm Obsession) at CCC OD in Tours. Today, they slide without warning into his sketchbooks. Though he prefers the concept of “*spaces devoid of any human presence*”, the artist insists upon the graphic dimension of this research, or how to depict a space that holds few elements. If drawing is indeed “*an extension of thought*” and “*a mental construction*”, it must be said that in Massinissa Selmani’s own head, experiments are always underway. Will they ever lead him to delve into the world of painting?

Olivier Rachet



© Massinissa Selmani, *Prétextes*, 2019, animation loop, without sound. Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Anne-Sarah Bénichou and Selma Feriani Gallery.

[WORK IN PROGRESS]

Aïcha Snoussi, Undefined Scrolls, ink on wallpaper rolls. View of the exhibition “Gonorrhea” at Galerie La La Lande, Paris, 2019



In the retro-futurist world of Aïcha Snoussi

Winner of the 2020 SAM Prize awarded by the Palais de Tokyo to support non-Western artistic projects, this Tunisian artist is developing a retro-futurist narrative about the swamping of a mysterious civilization.

With *UNDERWATER* تحت الماء, which will be the subject of a Palais de Tokyo exhibition in 2022, Aïcha Snoussi aims to scramble temporal points of reference. The visual artist morphs into an archaeologist, “resurfacing a future civilization that has sunk under the water”. Like her earlier works, all of which have included dystopia-tempered narratives, she now builds an inventory of objects found/collected in Benin, Tunis, or other marketplaces of the diaspora, which she then transforms and re-appropriates to create a sense of immersion in this lost civilization. According to the artist, it is a metaphor “for minority cultures erased by official histories”. In the manner of Joan Fontcuberta, the brilliant creator of imaginary beasts and herbariums, Snoussi uses fiction to question our representations and their share of mystification. While Fontcuberta joyfully twists the language of documentary photography, Aïcha Snoussi plays with codes of anthropology to flesh out a criticism of dominant views steeped in patriarchy. In *Undefined Scrolls*, she builds a narrative around these mysterious scrolls whose creation has been attributed by some archaeologists to a once-radical feminist society, or by others to a band of hysterical counterfeiters. Aïcha Snoussi is having a blast, hurling us without warning through the twists and turns of her retro-futurist world, creating her own codes that each evoke some form of invasion: by the organic, tentacular shapes within her works as well as the intrusion of conventional thinking that would marginalize anything strange or unfamiliar. So Snoussi digs up and breaks down the artifacts of fictional communities, exposing the mechanisms of domination. And those are real.

Emmanuelle Outtier

Cyborg archeology. Xeno exhibitions. Maison Bergamini. Brussels. 2019





Maya-Inès Touam Sitting down with Matisse

During her residency at the Fondation Blachère in Apt, photographer and visual artist Maya-Inès Touam revisits the works of Matisse and reinvigorates her own relaxed approach to photographic ready-mades.

“Not everybody can be Matisse!” laughs Maya-Inès Touam. Observing the Fauve painter’s brilliant “pure lines” inspired the photographer to reinterpret four paintings by the master. Among these is *Icarus* from the 1947 *Jazz* series, and *Still Life with Grenadines*, painted in Vence that same year. A meticulous process of (re)composition always takes place before the shoot: “First, I take stock of all the objects present in the painting, and then I set out to recreate the same composition.”

On the heels of her still-lives inspired by Flemish masters, the artist has taken up a new formal obligation. Her use of light is stronger for it. “Matisse’s light is frontal”, she explains, while her own use of light is “softer, more fleeting, like Vermeer”. Gone is the chiaroscuro of her earlier photo compositions, welcome to a laid-back diversion! Humour is never far away, glimpsed in the addition of kitsch-objects like plastic bouquets, alongside miscellaneous objects straight out of surrealistic free-association. “My work also has to do with the idea of a happening.”

While waiting to enter her post-production phase, the artist is curious about a flag seen in France during a *Black Lives Matter* protest. Made from fabric printed with patterns borrowed from Africa or overseas territories, this object might just inspire her next work of re-creation. Maya imagines a reinvention of the map of France, taking the shape of a patchwork assembled from various fabrics connected to colonial history. A patchwork *in progress*, where cultures will be woven together in a new way.

Olivier Rachet



© Maya-Inès Touam, 2020.

Us, video clip
directed and
choreographed
by Steph.



Steph

Virtuosity in a state of urgency

Us, a video by young choreographer Steph is a visual UFO where dancing bodies combine with a video-editing rhythm to form a single choreography. It is a poetic gem, heralding an emerging Moroccan scene that is reappropriating urban space with confidence.

Can the recording of a dance piece be itself a work of art? No doubt the young, Salé-based choreographer Mustapha Es-Sabbah, AKA Steph, has achieved this in his self-produced video work, Us. With the support of director Adil Nakach, this self-taught 27-year-old dishes up a choreography dripping with graphic power, driven by a video montage that underscores dancers’ movements to a soundtrack by Australian trip-hop band Ta-Ku. Shot on the rooftop of an abandoned building in downtown Casablanca, Us adopts the growing trend among a spontaneous generation of young Moroccan creators to re-appropriate their public space by inhabiting non-conventional urban settings. “One of the major challenges was to shoot this piece in a place that wasn’t authorized for that use, with scheduling constraints due to Covid-19 on top”, confides Steph. This process is reminiscent of the minimalist world of Ismael Zaidy, who photographs his entourage on the roof of his family home, with an acute sense of staged representation. Created within an uncomfortable, illicit space that tinges the work with virtuosity in a state of urgency, Us is certainly a dance performance, but it also an accomplished visual performance. Choreographer Steph chose to speak “of love, of jealousy, of self-acceptance and accepting others”. There is tension between the individual and the group: the oldest story in the world but here in Morocco it is an essential dimension. Dancers stare each other down, then come together. Though Steph may not be seeking out this Moroccan context—his motto: dance is a universal language—, there is a freedom of the body here that feels almost political, as body and gender become the last reaches of intimacy waiting to be unlocked. A gem.

Emmanuelle Outtier

Diptyk, le podcast deuxième saison.

Diptyk. le podcast est disponible sur **Apple Podcasts**, **Spotify** et partout où vous écoutez vos podcasts, avec la participation de **Maroc Telecom**, partenaire des arts et de la création.



Power 100 List: committed or omitted!

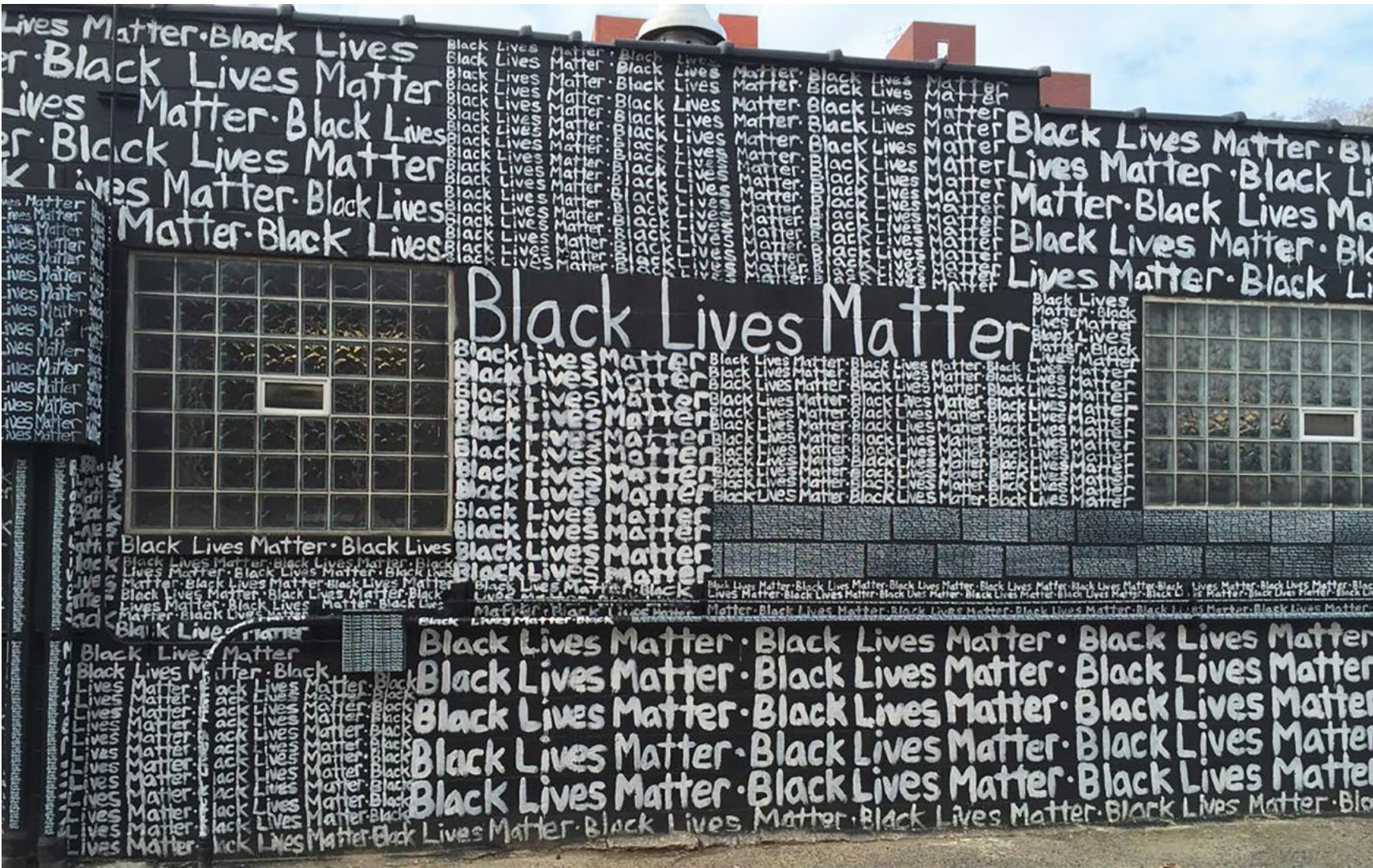
As a sign of the times, the Black Lives Matter and #Metoo movements dominated the 2020 vintage of the Power 100 List of the most influential art world personalities. Gallerist Nathalie Obadia had the idea to analyse the evolution of this art scene barometer by comparing the years 2010, 2015, and 2019. The results are in, and they show an increased prominence for activists and curators.

By Nathalie Obadia

[Listen to the podcast](#)



© Luc Castel. Courtesy of Galerie Nathalie Obadia Paris / Brussels



Wall mural in Detroit (Michigan). Photo © Ricardo Martinez

Activism and engagement: these are the two criteria that dominate the Power 100 List of the most influential personalities of the art world, generated for the past 20 years by British magazine *Art Review*. The jury consists of twenty or so voting individuals, including the journal's editors and a few anonymous power players. For some time the ranking has privileged criteria associated with Anglo-Saxon values, but in 2017 the editors of the *Art Review* announced an upheaval of their own benchmarks, putting forward criteria that one might define as those of multiple identities, in the wake of the influence of *gender studies*, postcolonial theories, and *subaltern studies*. These different currents have become very influential in the Anglo-

Saxon world, and more specifically in the USA, where many researchers from non-Western geographies have been invited to teach at universities and art schools. The 2020 rankings are the result. We are witnessing a decentralisation of the criteria produced by an Anglo-Saxon, capitalist and globalist world, shifting toward the perspective of other actors, often from formerly-colonised regions. For those who hail from the Western world, they are in various ways seen as defending the claims of multiple identities. Leading the way are two American movements, Black Lives Matter (1st) and #MeToo (4th). These movements have pushed the USA to the forefront of ranking values with, in addition to an ever-powerful art market, a US-driven orga-

nisation of the tools necessary to defend minority populations. Therein lies all the power and paradox of America, a country that leads other Western nations in this criteria-busting wave of energy.

A curated world

So, the 2020 Power 100 artists are all activists, or identified as such, and are thus associated with Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. They represent about one-quarter of the 100 ranking slots, including a wide majority of non-Westerners. Among the first is ruangrupa, an Indonesian artists' collective that captures 2nd place after being named the next director of Kassel's documenta, while American Arthur Jafa (6th) is heralded for "shaping the trajectory of Black art". As for Cecilia Vicuña (17th), Power 100 states that she tackles themes of climate change, exile and women's rights.

In 2010, artists represented barely 20% of the Power 100, though their level of influence was primarily in recognition of their art practice. Though the first among them, Ai Weiwei (13th in rank), was described at the time as an artist-activist, others (Bruce Nauman, Mike Kelley, Cindy Sherman, Gerhard Richter, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami) were recognized for nothing other than the recognition by an art world dominated by major Western museums, the market and its galleries (which score higher in the rankings than the artists themselves) and by the globalized circuit of mega-collectors between the US and Great Britain, leaving a bit of space to Italy, Greece, and France.

As for curators, this field remained a marginal sector in 2010's Power 100, where only the hyperactive Hans Ulrich Obrist and the directors of the Venice Biennial and Kassel's documenta. Since that time, a radical paradigm change has come over: being a curator now determines the presence of over 50%

of names on the list, figures that now include eight well-known intellectuals, such as Judith Butler, who appeared at #48 on the list for the first time when criteria shifted in 2017, returning again

We are witnessing a decentralisation of the criteria produced by an Anglo-Saxon, capitalist and globalist world, shifting toward the perspective of other actors, often from formerly-colonised regions.

in 2020 (10th) after her book *Gender Trouble* continued to have great success in the US since being published in 1990. Or Achille Mbembe, the Cameroonian postcolonial thinker and professor at prestigious US universities. Also appearing in 2019 is the pair of researchers Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr (6th), whose advocacy for the unconditional restitution of African cultural heritage held by former colonial powers moved them up to 3rd place in 2020.

It is logical then that collectors would not hold their same rank in 2020. To appear in the Power 100, a personal fortune and collection of famous artists' works known as "Wall Power" are no longer the defining criteria. Only collectors who are committed in their choices have made the grade, and building a museum designed by Frank Gehry can guarantee a spot only if it is associated with a commitment linked to cultural studies. Thus, François Pinault, Bernard Arnault and Eli Broad all disappeared between 2019 and 2020, as they are no longer considered to be committed

The galleries make a difference through their active and curated programmes. Hauser & Wirth's established policy is to always indicate the gender and origin of their artists upon announcement of representation. (Photo © Alex Delfanne)



collectors, which seems to be the case for Miuccia Prada, who still dropped down from 11th to 39th place in the space of a year.

Another—invisible—ranking

Clearly, in the 2020 Power 100, a different artworld no longer exists, or at best in a very marginal sense: the world associated with a globalized market and disconnected from sociopolitical issues. Gagosian, the world's leading gallery, occupies a mere 29th place, just before David Zwirner and Hauser & Wirth, while the latter two ranked in the top five in the 2019 list. Since 2000, exclusively Western galleries that once represented a full quarter of the list number only 15 in 2020. Under pressure to show their own sociopolitical colours, galleries have distinguished themselves by committed and curated programmes. A very strong strategy at Hauser & Wirth, a gallery that always specifies the gender and origin of artists upon announcement of their representation. It is of interest to note how art fairs such as Art Basel and Frieze, defending of the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art) for over a decade and representing all issues of power and influence of all stakeholders of the entire



In the 2010 list, artists like Cindy Sherman were associated with nothing other than the recognition by an art world dominated by major Western museums, the market, and globalized circuit of mega-collectors. (Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 2010-2012. © Sotheby's)

artworld, are no longer first in place in this situation. While they remain on the list at 79th and 90th place, associated with their new shareholders (American, though these top fairs were both born in Europe), the existing model needs rethinking.

Considering the 2020 rankings, it is truly a shame that artists seems to be recognized only by their activism, while the quality of their artistic practice has become secondary. How is it possible that one of greatest contemporary artists, an Afro-American painter like Mark Bradford, has never appeared in the rankings, and David Hammons was present for a long time before dropping off?

Have they fallen into oblivion due to suspicion of derogation through the production of works too easily assimilated by the market, by way of powerful galleries? How can it be that Gerhard Richter, who once again demonstrated his talent at the Met Breuer in spring 2020 and continues to exert influence in the world of painting and photography, has disappeared from the list?

Indeed, hidden within this 2020 Power 100 list lies another ranking, this one invisible, but clearly present and responding to other systems of recognition that might not be completely erroneous: that of great artists, still appreciated by market “taste makers” and influential Western institutions that offer them solo exhibitions. These shows continue to inspire future artists and researchers, not to mention visitors. It would be simplistic for themed shows and monographic exhibitions to be

Have Mark Bradford and David Hammons fallen into oblivion due to suspicion of derogation through the production of works too easily assimilated by the market, by way of powerful galleries?



American artist Arthur Jafa, ranked in 6th place, is “shaping the trajectory of Black art”, according to the 2020 edition of the Power 100 list. View of his works in the international exhibition “May You Live in Interesting Times” at the 58th Venice Biennial.

conceived solely in response to activism-charged criteria that systematically and politically abandon talented artists who may not be recognized as activists. If the centre—dominated by the United States and other Anglo-Saxon countries since the end of World War II—has leaned into exclusionary blindness, it would be just as radical and injurious to impose a concept that says art can only exist if it hinges upon the struggles of our societies.

The original version of this article was published in the online daily The Art Newspaper (French edition).

portfolio

Sara Imloul

The theatre of the unreal

By Olivier Rachet

Sara Imloul, *La chaise*, *Passages* series, 2015-2018, calotype with ink, pencil and collage, contact print on silver gelatin paper created by the artist, 13 x 18 cm.
© Sara Imloul, Courtesy Galerie127





[PORTFOLIO]

Sara Imloul, *La vague* (The Wave), *Passages* series, 2015-2018, calotype with ink, pencil and collage, contact print on silver gelatin paper created by the artist, 13 x 18cm.
© Sara Imloul, Courtesy Galerie127

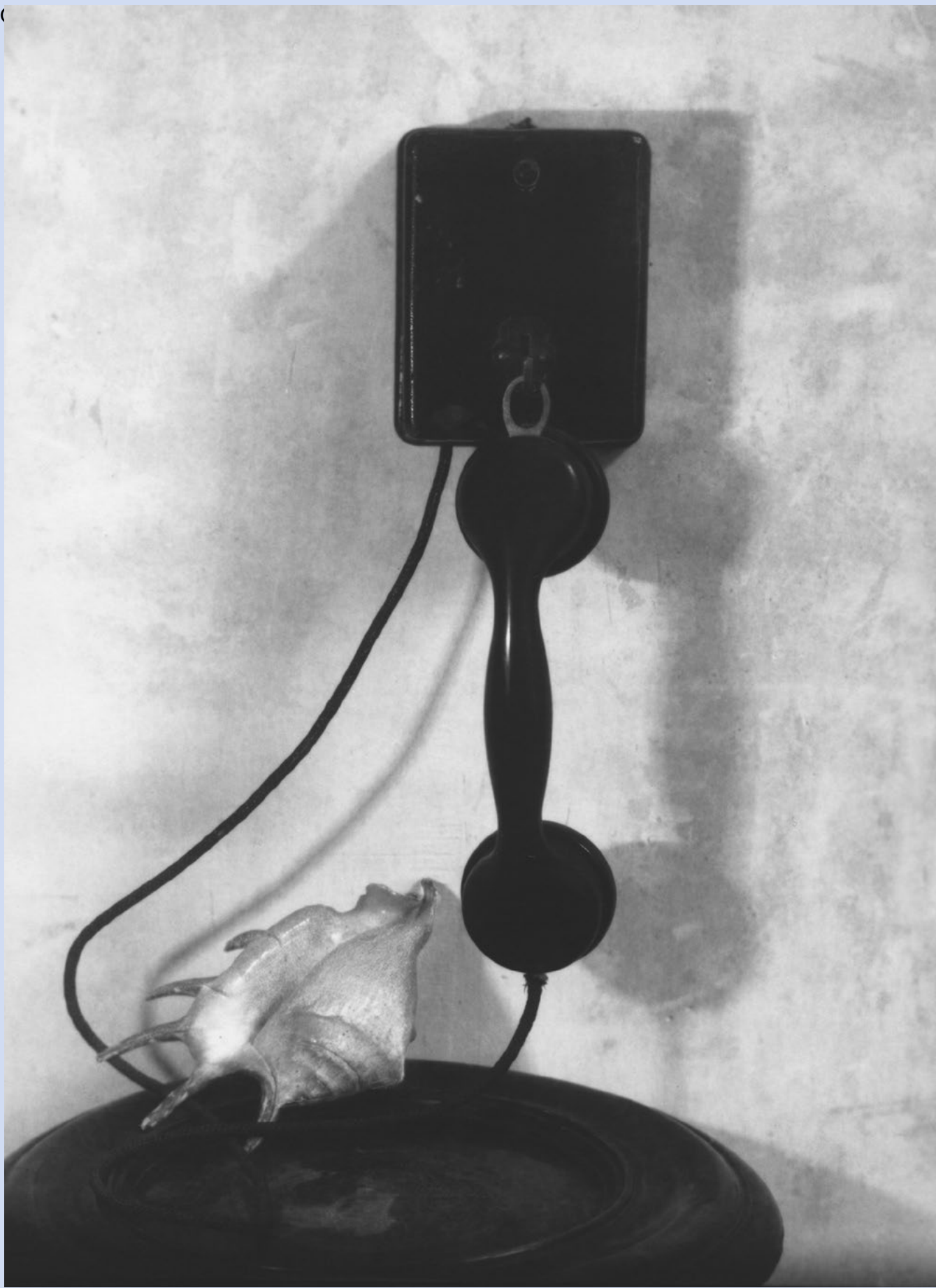


Sara Imloul, *Le nid* (The Nest), *Passages* series, 2015-2018, calotype with ink, pencil and collage, contact print on silver gelatin paper created by the artist, 13 x 18cm.
© Sara Imloul, Courtesy Galerie127

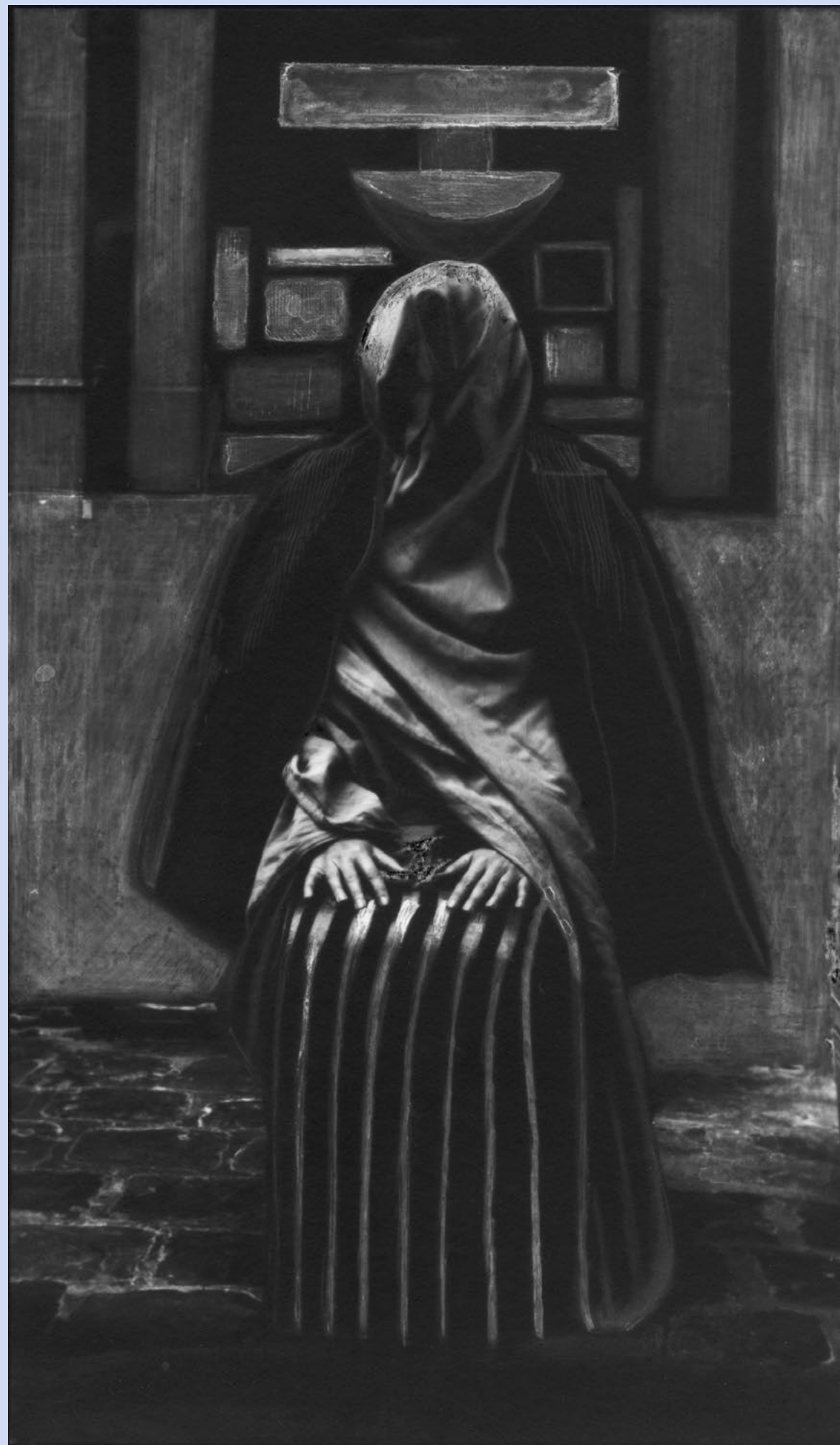
Sara Imloul, *L'autel (The Altar)*, *Passages* series, 2015-2018, calotype with ink, pencil and collage, contact print on silver gelatin paper created by the artist, 13 x 18cm.
© Sara Imloul, Courtesy Galerie127



Sara Imloul, *Les racines (Roots)*, *Passages* series, 2015-2018, calotype with ink, pencil and collage, contact print on silver gelatin paper created by the artist, 13 x 18cm.
© Sara Imloul, Courtesy Galerie127



Sara Imloul, *Le cordon (The Cord)*, *Passages* series, 2015-2018, calotype with ink pencil and collage, contact print on silver gelatin paper created by the artist, 13 x 18cm.
© Sara Imloul, Courtesy Galerie127



Sara Imloul, *La femme (The Woman)*, *Passages* series, 2015-2018, calotype with ink pencil and collage, contact print on silver gelatin paper created by the artist, 13 x 18cm.
© Sara Imloul, Courtesy Galerie127

“It was about making a sort of symbolic inventory of what I wanted to leave behind as traces of myself in the photo.”

Well-versed in calotype, the young photographer creates strange and unexpected worlds, in the pure tradition of Dada and Surrealism. A visual experience somewhere between theatre and drawing.

At the source of Sara Imloul’s work is a child’s dream: one in which she recreates the magic of theatrical plays that have fascinated her since she herself was a child. *“Taking photographs is my way of inventing a little play, of capturing it then documenting it.”* When she discovered the technique of calotype while a student at the Toulouse School of Photography (ETPA), la technique du calotype, something clicked. Invented in the 19th century, this photographic process consists of producing a paper negative through photosensitisation in a large-scale box. Calotype requires long exposure times, giving Sara Imloul the time to create her own intimate sketches, shadow theatre in which accessories, costumes, and dramatic lighting set the scene. Like a painter in her studio, she considers her art in terms of scenography: *“Everything must be in place and well-structured before the shoot. There is no room in my work for instant photography.”* Such is the case for her series Passages, de l’Ombre aux Images (Passages, from Shadow to Images, Prix Levallois 2019), made in reaction to the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015. On this intimate stage, where the strangest objects comingle with children’s toys and scattered elements, photography renews the still life genre by trying to exorcise fears that belong to the artists herself.

“It was about making a sort of symbolic inventory of what I wanted to leave behind as traces of myself in the photo.”

Cloistered for months in her apartment-studio, she created her most introspective work yet, which echoes her earlier series Das Schloss (The Castle), created behind the closed doors of a family home in Lorraine.

“It’s as if I were held captive by my own fear”, she offers in description of the muted violence that occasionally inhabit her works, like in the image La jambe de bois (Wooden Leg), in which the lower limb of a man who had the misfortune to step on a landmine leans against three books representing—for her—the three monotheistic religions: *“these foundations of mankind that may one day bring it down”*.

Writing with light

In addition to the symbolic or metaphoric use of objects that recalls the aestheticism of Dadaists and Surrealists to whom she welcomes comparison, there is a constant plasticity. Negatives are reworked by hand “like drawings”, imparting a bit of *“rough and velvet”* underscored by a black and white that can feel like an etching. The very essence of her art is there: writing with light. *“I’m all about chemistry, optics, paper and matter”*, at the very point of origin of photography.

“Taking photographs is my way of inventing a little play, of capturing it then documenting it.”

After showing her work created in tandem with Nicolas Lefebvre in Marrakech, and later at the 1-54 Art Fair in Paris (“À quatre mains”, Galerie 127), Sara Imloul has completed her lockdown period series, Chez moi (At Home), created entirely within her Parisian apartment/studio, which she will soon be leaving. As a worthy successor to her Dadaist predecessors, she now uses collage to integrate her photographs with images of the alligators, gazelles, or pelicans that have restaked their claim over the city and, in her imagination, her apartment. Animals she refers tenderly to as “my innocents”, victims of a world that is ever more guilty of separating us from beauty and life. The violence of reality is never far off, photography can only transcend it.

Collectives, weapons of mass collaboration

Emerging from the immobility of lockdowns are a handful of artists' collectives, driven by the urgency to reinvent themselves. Is this mere opportunity, good timing, glaring need or a formidable tool of empowerment? What do these collectives from the Moroccan and regional scenes have to say?

By Houda Outarahout

Previous page: © Houssam Eddine Gorfti. Courtesy Noorseen Collective

Top right: © Imane Djamil. Courtesy KOZ Collective

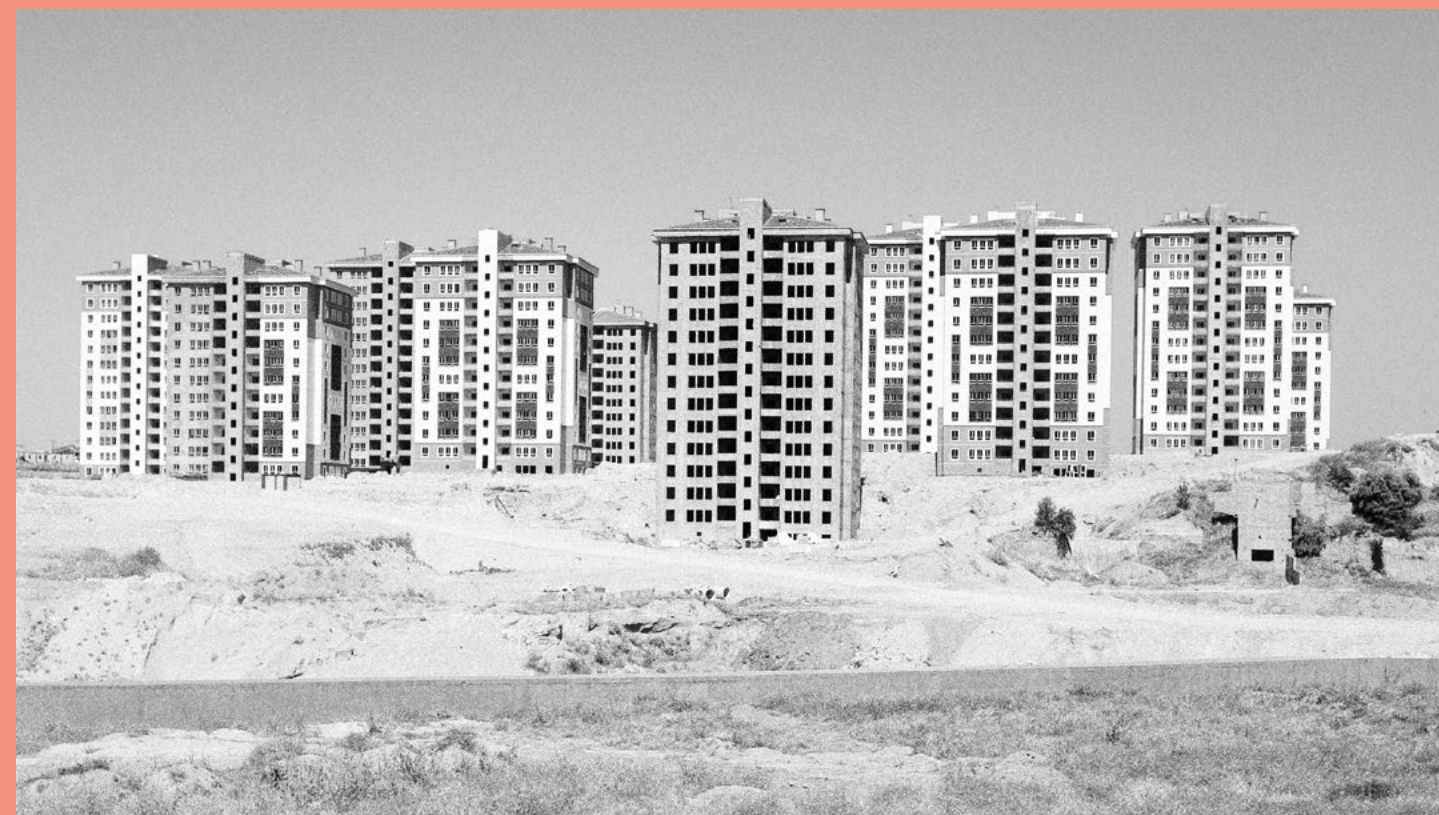
Below: © M'Hammed Kilito. Courtesy KOZ Collective

Spring 2020. While Morocco was held in amber, immobilized, a soft breeze awakened an artistic scene eager to reinvent itself. Almost simultaneously, three collectives were born: KOZ, Noorseen, and Interval, collectives composed of photographers, artists, and creatives in a country that has held onto this tradition. A remarkable hatching that has not gone unnoticed. But why return to this form of collaboration that some discreet predecessors—such as Collectif 212 or Everyday Casablanca—had brought to life only to fall soundlessly into oblivion? Though the scope of their activity remains to be refined, the creation of these collectives seems to respond to a sense of urgency, according to Amina Debbiche, co-founder of Interval. She describes a near-irrepressible will to “retake control of our regional narrative, to have a presence, tell a story, and be more inclusive”. For these founding “art enthusiasts” (as they describe themselves), this initiative imposes an imperative: “stop being followers” to join the ranks of key players. In this way, Interval—created in 2020—explores its ambition “to expand access to art and culture, to generate debate around the vector of art, to create bridges and dialogue between local and international artists and to advance innovative models with powerful social impact”, explains Hamza Slaoui. He cites the example of their first digital exhibition, “IM(PULSION)”, which brought together no less than 21 artists from the Moroccan art scene. If there is a real need for this type of ecosystem, it is also the result of a skilful blend of happenstance and encounters, singularity of context and the determination to transcend practice.

A remedy for solitude

“This has been a long time coming”, notes M'hammed Kilito, founding member of KOZ. The path was lined with plenty of obstacles to overcome, from simple yet insidious demotivation to the unnecessarily harmful effects of ego struggles. “Meeting Seif [Kousmate, co-founder of KOZ, Ed.] was definitive, it made me believe in this new collective project, explains Kilito. The rest [reaching out to fellow co-founders Yasmine Hatimi and Imane Djamil], was obvious.” The lockdown period acted as a catalyst. Time

“Without a shred of ego, we are taking advantage of this chance to evolve together, based on the idea that one person’s work can only improve the work of another.” Yasmine Hatimi



and mental focus boosted the process, says Seif Kousmate: “good people at the right time, with the right mindset”. A fundamental axiom for these photographers who advocate the need for local collaboration.

The term “collective” evokes sharing, singularity of vision, even a “move toward professionalization outside of institutional circuits”, adds self-taught artist Imane Djamil. The collective creates the opportunity to “use an alternative system to obtain the codes of this profession” that are waiting to be written.

The synergy that characterises their exchanges seems also to benefit individual progress. “Without a shred of ego, we are taking advantage of this chance to evolve together, based on the idea that one person’s work can only improve the work of another”, points out photographer Yasmine Hatimi. As for Seif Kousmate, he hopes to break free from the “egocentricity” of the artistic practice. “I’m tired of defending my photography”, declares Kousmate, who has established his practice at the intersection of social and cultural documentary. It is high time to “advocate for an intention, a vision, a region and a continent”.

This organization, understood and lived by each of its members as a “family, a refuge” in which good will and trust reign supreme, has also proved to be a remedy for the photographer’s condition of solitude. As Kilito suggests, “open and well-informed minds” as well as “people who speak the same language” are few and far between.

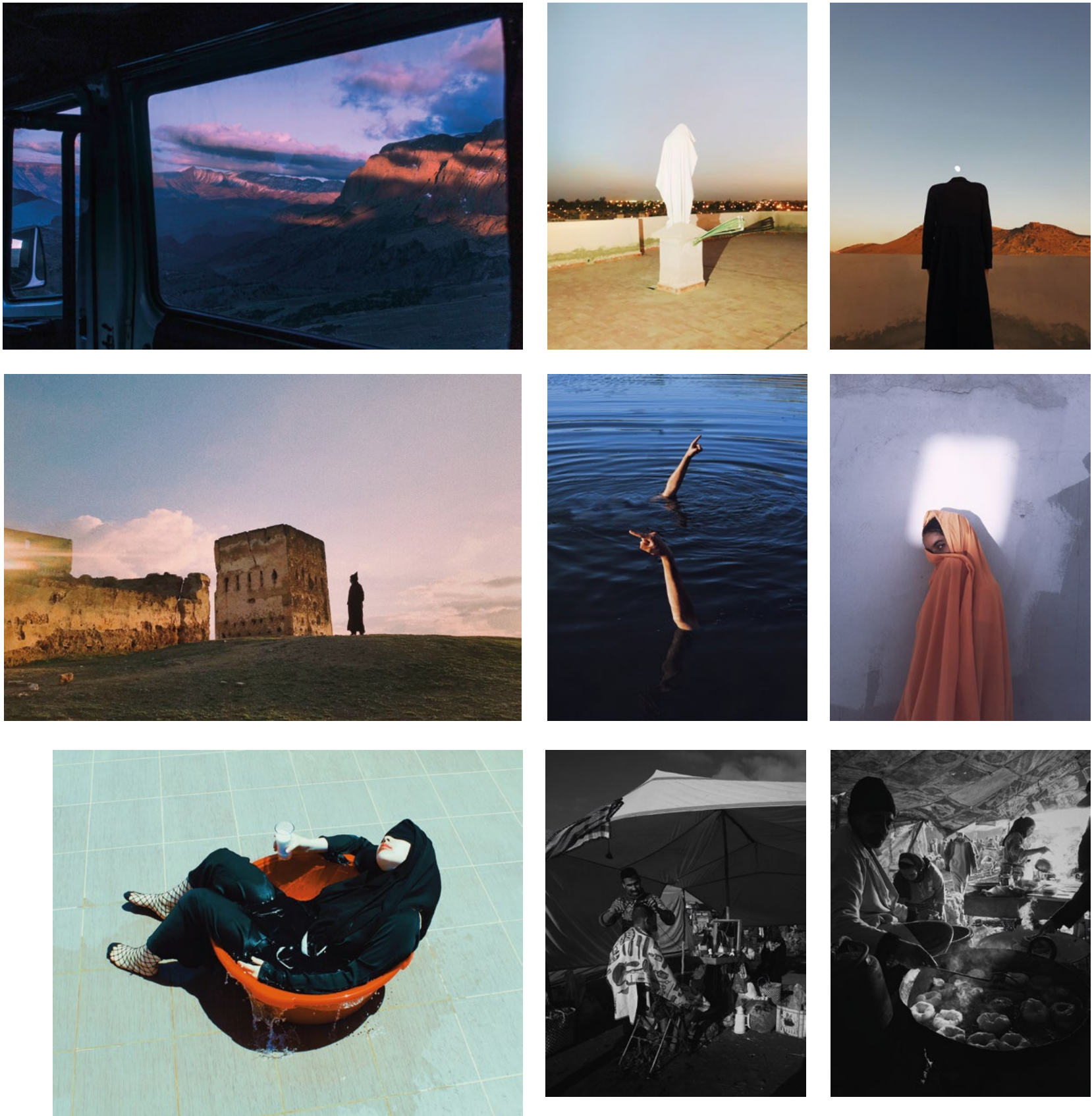
Creating an ecosystem

The spirit of breaking through isolation—exacerbated by lockdowns—also animates young photographers like Amine Houari (66kchifa), Marouane Beslam, Yassine Sellame, Jalal Bouhsain and Fatima-Zohra Serri to turn toward the collective. Fourteen millennials who grew up with the Internet and its avalanche of images, bone-weary of the endless stream of stereotypical snapshots of Morocco. Together they

formed Noorseen. For this young generation, collectives paradoxically offer a path out of anonymity. Like the somewhat older generation at KOZ, they extol the virtues of complementarity, knowledge-sharing, and a structure that provides greater visibility within an art scene that seems unwilling or unable to stimulate them or meet their expectations. Time to bring down elitist interpersonal negotiations to build a group identity? This is what these collectives revendicate, to “distinguish ourselves from the amateurism of Instagram”, in the words of Amine Houari. Together they hope to achieve recognition and rise to the level of “not Moroccan or African photographers, just good photographers” in the most noble sense of the term, concludes Kilito, from KOZ. Shattering borders and breaking free of existing strangleholds seems more than ever to be a team effort, and an initiative that has arisen from the margins of society.

While collectives continue to be fragile by definition, potential victims to the diversity, hence divergence, of the people and practices that compose them, they are also heralded as those who speak truth to power. Each of them is committed to the mission of “contributing to the development of an ecosystem of photography, to educate and raise awareness, to demystify and democratize access to culture” through mentoring, webinars, workshops and studio projects, while developing collective artists’ projects in new, experimental spaces. Responding only—for the time being—to their own rules, if these federating collectives manage to resist the sirens’ call of conformity, they just might reshuffle the cards to deal a more promising cultural scene.

*From top to bottom and left to right:
© Mehdi Aït El Mallali; © Ali El Madani;
© Ismail Zaidy; © Amine Houari; © Anass Ouaziz; © Ismail Zaidy; © Fatimazohra Serri;
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All photos: Courtesy Noorseen Collective,
except for Ali El Madani (KOZ Collective)*





© Marouane Beslem. Courtesy Noorseen Collective



© Yassine Sellame. Courtesy Noorseen Collective

Thameur Mejri, painting with his fists

Violence is always under control in the graphic world of Thameur Mejri. An encounter with this rising Tunisian artist and research-professor at the Beaux-Arts in Tunis, who paints like a boxer: blow for blow.

By Olivier Rachet

Portraits: Courtesy Galerie Selma Feriani.

Top: Untitled (good god), 2018, acrylic, charcoal and pastels on canvas, 200 cm x 180 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Though he is a peace-loving family man and a respected professor at the Institut Supérieur des Beaux-Arts de Tunis, it doesn't mean he's completely settled down. Thameur Mejri now lives in Nabeul, but when he speaks of his younger years, he frequently mentions his struggles with a difficult father and a very conservative society: "I put up with a lot of things and now I'm responding to that. My studio allows me to do that". He needs little encouragement to compare his work space (a studio next to his house, within earshot of his laughing daughter) to a real boxing ring. As an admirer of Francis Bacon and a reader of Michel Foucault, Thameur Mejri considers painting to be a counterattack against all forms of oppression, which he describes as much more of a means to domesticate the body than to stifle freedom of expression. In his paintings, we see the same sort of rage that oriented the Abstract Expressionists.

Organising chaos

"First, I let myself be guided by accident, then I try to control composition", the artist remarks. "I always try to build out from the initial chaos, to bring order to this mess." Patches of colours, drippings, a few streaks here and there: the expression of anger is immediate. It's about "breaking, desecrating the white anxiety of the canvas"; after which the painter proceeds to "obliterate, erase, deconstruct, and destroy." But he does not follow the sirens' call of abstraction, as tempting as it might be, because figuration is essential to him. But he does not follow the sirens' call of abstraction, as tempting as it might be, because figuration is essential to him. The body, sketched in large lines, is omnipresent, and a concern for incarnation runs deep in him. "I think of painting above all else as a personal experience", he adds in afterthought, underscoring the fact that he is mostly interested in showing "that which lies within each of us". A visceral style of painting that finds reality by x-raying his subjects. "The body is central to my creative process", he confirms as he indicates the nearly disembodied figures that inhabit his canvases. These universal figures allow him to draw attention to political oppression as experienced by the body: an intentional form of painting that could illustrate the Foucault's thoughts on biopower, a theory he is keen to mention.

Though he has tried his hand at oil painting, he prefers acrylic for its quick drying time. He finds it more appropriate to his graphic world, allowing him to express "this sense of urgency and immediacy" that characterizes his work. Not to mention that the medium makes it possible to continue the composition using pastel or charcoal, to tame the initial impression of chaos, as in the drawings featured in his recent exhibition, "Walking Targets" at Selma Feriani Gallery. The act of drawing, "in its radicality and literality", has also helped him to "become liberated from colour" to refocus his attention to his plastic vocabulary.

The subversion of pictographs

As a great admirer of the Surrealist school, in particular Magritte for his sense of the independence between works and their titles and de Chirico for the importance he lends to the metaphysical dimension of object, Thameur Mejri attributes particular importance to the symbolic function



*The walking target, 2020, acrylic, charcoal, and pastels on canvas, 180cm x 140cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Selma Feriani Gallery*



Deactivate, 2020, acrylic, charcoal, and pastels on canvas, 180 cm x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Selma Feriani Gallery



In the middle of the monster, 2020, acrylic, charcoal, and pastels on canvas, 180 cm x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Selma Feriani Gallery

of the objects and titles of his works: “I believe that the title is integral to the work itself, it is not a commentary on the work”. He reminds us, as he quotes Spinoza, that “we inevitably project our unconscious mind on the objects that surround us”. But the rarefied objects that haunt his canvases—helicopter, knife, football, gas can, dove, or television—are more similar to pictographs that the artist superimposes and subverts, toying with them in a rage that continues unabated. An example is the canvas dedicated to the prophet Abraham, *Untitled (Let the symptoms increase)*, in which a road sign featuring a sheep stands out against a knife wielded by a skeletal figure. A roundabout way to turn away from the sacred aspect of this ritual, pushing forward the image of sacrificial violence. Indeed, he can’t seem to find words harsh enough to evoke the imperative of virility and domination that run like a thread through family education and social domestication in

the land of Islam. Each of his paintings is constructed like a situation destined to destabilise the viewer, and we must admit that this pictorial system is operating at full capacity! As for the figure of Abraham, Thameur Mejri underscores that it is emblematic of the “father-son relationship that well illustrates society’s power dynamic.” In the same vein, the pictographs represent “the authority and the law that are always there to crush us as individuals”.

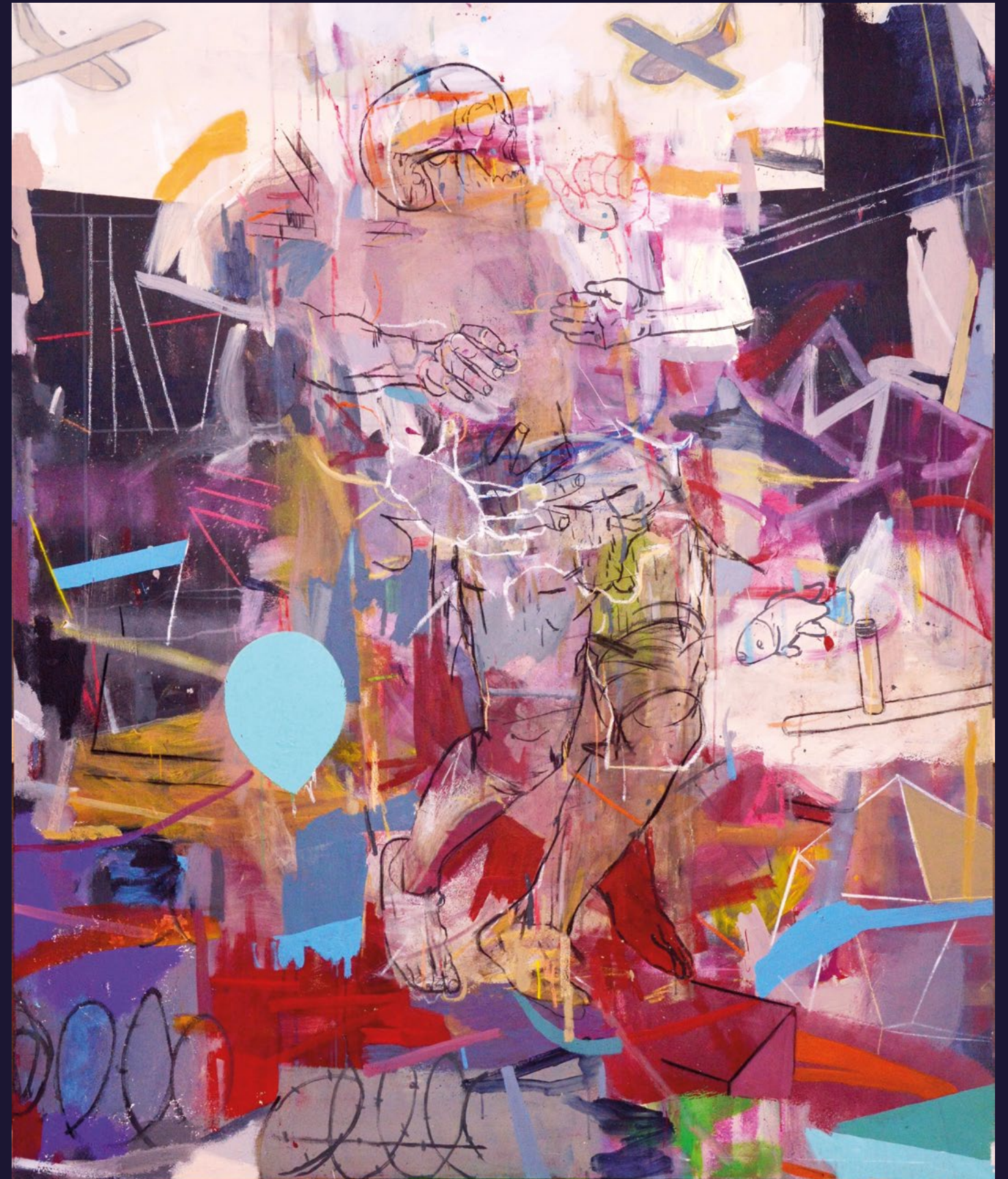
Violence of colour

After a solo exhibition at the Selma Feriani Gallery in Tunis, where he tried his hand at wall frescoes, the Tunisian artist is preparing to show his work in New York, then next March at Station B7L9 of the Kamel Lazaar Foundation (Tunis), and in early 2022 at Musée d’Art Contemporain de Lyon. The latter two solo shows—curated by art historian Matthieu Lelièvre—will be an opportunity to take a closer look at this artist’s graphic universe, grounded in the key concept of implosion. Like the paintings that veer into staggeringly brilliant tones of blue that are equally reminiscent of the sky and the sea. Water, this Tunisian artist is quick to recall, has become more symbolic of death than of purification.

Violence by colour. “Colour is not colouring”, insists Thameur Mejri. It must have a meaning, a symbolic connotation. For me, colour is the soundtrack of a scene in a film”. In effect, a form of painting that enflames the senses and shakes up the mind.

For Thameur Mejri, each painting represents a situation that is destined to destabilise the viewer.

Untitled (aircraft), 2018, acrylic, charcoal, and pastel on canvas, 180 cm x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Selma Feriani Gallery



Inside the contemporary art factory

If curatorial practice is nothing new to Morocco, it is more than ever being reconsidered, rethought, reshaped and deconstructed by a young scene of independent curators and cultural programmers, eager to re-enchant the codes of their profession and anchor it in reality, on the ground.

By Houda Outarahout

View of the "Facets of Tangier" exhibition at Mahal Art Space, Tangier, February 2021
© Mohamed Amine Touh - TSlack Company

“ The history of art is predatory, hierarchical, selective and no one can escape it”, declares Abdelkader Damani. It is under this cover of fatalism that the director of Frac Centre-Val de Loire (France), and curator of the Biennale de Rabat exhibition “A Moment Before the World”, is calling for “an end to curating”. And to participate “not in the factory of imagination, but in the factory of reality”, even more so in our societies of virtual causes and digital avatars, and to impel “two worlds to collide for each to flourish”. A political and complex dialectic to which the young generation of Moroccan curators and cultural programmers are particularly sensitive.

In the absence of self-definition, they follow diverse paths—some are self-taught or artists in their own right, others are disillusioned academics—to question their practices at the dawn of a new professional era, steeped in paradox. How to tell the story of Morocco’s contemporary art scene in what Bouchra Salih, founder of État d’urgence d’instantanés poétiques (EUIP-State of Emergency for Poetic Moments) refers to as “the absence of an adapted linguistic background”? How to exist in a microcosm that leaves little room for independents, a microcosm that continues to live under what Laila Hida, the founder of 18 Derb El Ferrane (Marrakech) considers a “hegemonic and grandiose vision” of culture? How to facilitate and democratize access to contemporary art, often found to be exclusionary, elitist, even snobbish by most people who are “reluctant to enter the space of a White Cube”, in the words of Tangier-based Nouha Ben Yebdri? How to be a curator in this era of emancipation, of raising awareness and levels of individuality? How to reintroduce a sense of reality into artistic practice?

Don’t fight it, fix it

For Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa, there is no room for doubt: “rethinking the tools of the trade”—the trade of curating in Morocco—becomes an imperative, “in a practical, real-world way”! This imperative comes as the fruit of multiple years of experience as head of programming at Rabat’s MMVI museum as well as an independent curator. “I still find that when I’m speaking with an INBA (National Institute of the Fine Arts, editor’s note) graduate, and I share a series of references, texts or theories with them, not only do they not understand me, but they are completely lost!”, she laments. Though her background is academic, this young woman came to the conclusion that the practice of a “classic” form of curating, like the kind seen at Western biennials, is a dead end. And for good reason! Aside from the iconic heritage of the 1960s and 70s and the intellectual/cultural effervescence of the Casablanca School, the majority of these young curators and cultural programmers find that our local approach is still struggling in the aftermath of Western practice. “We exist only in the view from the North” and “with a vocabulary that has been imposed upon us”, declares Bouchra Salih. Words echoed by Laila Hida, who adds: “We’re stuck in a curating and art vision that remains un-decolonised!” This seriously-considered observation is irrefutable. And yet, such a disillusionment may spawn new possibilities, and new conquests. Abdelkader Damani refers to a “revolt of reparations and rather than combat”, led by emotional response, and in which “the curator must imperatively bring both the artist and the public into reality”. In Tangier, young Hicham Bouzid advocates for a curatorial approach that “makes sense (to me) for disengaging from an institutional framework”. In fact, the co-founder of the Think Tanger platform cannot imagine this practice outside of targeted social, civic, and political engagement. “Art for the sake of politics!” He fiercely tosses out this maxim, which not only describes his approach but is conditions it. His marching orders are collaboration, exchange, and transdisciplinarity! No man is, effectively, an island, and this young generation seems to have, more than ever, absorbed

Curatorial approaches in Morocco are still struggling to escape the wake of Western practices.



Nouha Ben Yebdri is a curator, cultural coordinator and independent researcher in Tangier. In parallel, she directs the Mahal Association, dedicated to the promotion of contemporary art practices in Tangier. The organization’s most representative projects are the Mahal Art Space, which launched in November 2016, and Pédagogies Invisibles (Prélude) project, in 2019. Since October 2020, Nouha Ben Yebdri is also consultant to the Rotterdam-based (A)WAKE organization and a member of the curatorial collective Madrassa.



All photos: Mahal Art Space, Tangier. © Mohamed Amine Touh - TSlack Company



© Baptiste DVA

Hicham Bouzid is a curator, co-founder and artistic director of Think Tanger. Through this platform, he also oversees the development of the recently-launched “Print Club Tanger”, infusing the art of screenprinting with new energy. In September 2020, he inaugurated Makan, a review that focuses on urbanism, architecture and art in Tangier and elsewhere. Hicham Bouzid is also co-curator of the “Zone Franche” (Free Zone) held in the spring at the Institut des Cultures d’Islam (ICI), in Paris.

and integrated this vision of the world. Certainly, if most curators and cultural operators are striving to discard backward-thinking curation that is ill-adapted to local reality, all of them recognize the importance of creating connections between disciplines, weaving connections, fostering organic and direct relationships with artists in their space, their reality, and the projects they support. This is how to move away from the manufacturing of art from the outside in, and to reconnect with local context and public. Also in Tangier is Nouha Ben Yebdri, founder of the young Mahal Art Space, who underscores “the curator-artist relationship has not always been one of collaboration” in a full sense, but rather to the contrary, it has often been tainted with an inadequate “hierarchical and dominating relationship”, often out of balance. If the very nature of curating is “to take care of the work and of the artist”, she believes that it is high time to restore this concept to the heart of the ecosystem. Idem for Bouchra Salih, for whom “everything must come from the artist”. For over 20 years, this self-taught and independent cultural operator, who developed her own practice through artists’ workshops in Tahanaout and Marrakech, explores the essential issues of public space and the public itself. It is necessary to “create opportunities for exchange with researchers – anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, etc. – whose areas of research deal with cultural things”, resumes Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa. To underscore how vital it is “to work the curatorial practice for social, direct, and concrete applications and to update this notion of inclusion that existed in the 1960s. It is important to establish the artist and for the artistic space – like Mouhcine Rahaoui and his work on Jerada –, a point of departure and a pretext to invite the public’s presence and arouse their interest. What we need most at this point are links and connecting paths.

Democratising and facilitating access to art is part of the DNA of this young generation of curators

Screenprinted posters by Anuar Khalifi, Yto Barrada, Khadija El Abyad, and Laila Hida (from left to right and top to bottom), printed and distributed by the Tanger Print Club.



SPECIAL EDITION SPRING 2022



Founded by Laila Hida, Le 18 occupies a riad in the old medina of Marrakech.



© laila wa hicham

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Laila Hida is an artist and curator. In 2013, she founded Le 18 in Marrakech, a meeting, research and creation space that aims to support artist and disseminate their projects. Recently, she co-curated the Dabaphoto 6 project, “Je frotte mon langage contre l’autre” (I rub my language against another) with Jeanne Mercier, and curated the “About Us” exhibition at Dar Bellarj (Marrakech). She is a graduate of the Visas pour la création program of the Institut Français, and fulfilled an artistic residency at the Villa Arson. She is also an invited participant to the Dakar Biennale in 2022.



This is the only way to bring the practice alive!”, she proclaims in a heartfelt plea. The need has been established. How to respond, as we move forward, is not a matter of “exploring new paths of research, by bringing something simple and popular”, suggests Laila Hida. There is no absolute winning formula, but multiple expressions of experiences and individualities. For Tangier-native Hicham Bouzid, artistic projects germinate in the course of multiple discussions, imagined collectively within urban research laboratories: “The public is implicated from the point of genesis of the project.” Naturally, this is how he resists this “elitist brand image” of contemporary art, and participates, as he likes to emphasise, in a “socio-emotional” shift. The proximity and regional presence are also primordial factors, in Tangier and everywhere. “No copy-pasting, no importing ideas or foreign-based concepts”, declares Bouchra Salih, who “writes projects based on local issues, in sync with the Moroccan context”, and invites artists to imagine works in the context of the Jardin d’Essais Botaniques (Botanical Gardens) of Rabat. She thus integrates her practice into an ultra-proximity, responding in a certain manner to a transcendent objective. Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa also seeks “these micro-utopias, with the inclination to understand and create them”. As she examines these questions related to territories, the young curator strives to “invoke a practice that is truly localised and contextualised, emanating from an actual experience or space, without borrowing methodologies or postures from what we call international art”. Idem for Nouha Ben Yebdri, who chose a name for her art space that is emblematic of this very notion of proximity (Mahal literally translates as “location”, or “home” in one of its variations).

She has been working since 2019 on “Pédagogies invisibles” (Invisible Pedagogies), a programme for research and artistic mediation where researchers, artists, students, mediators, cultural operators and the public at large are invited to think together about how to give value to forms of creation and develop alternative pedagogical avenues.

Sketching out the elements vital to the democratisation of, and access to art. For the young generation of curators, this particular concern is nestled in the DNA of their practice. Well-aware of the avant-gardist paths walked by her elders on the Post-Independence scene, Bouchra Salih explains that the only way she is able, today, to occupy the public space is “because of others who did it before”. Nevertheless, she “questions this heritage”, and hopes more than ever to “see people move around: to see them move from the outside [reference to the Gardens, editor’s note] to the inside”, to find their way in this universe of contemporary art that struggles to expand its audience. In Marrakech, Laila Hida, whose creative platform is located in the heart of the old medina, is also continually working to “make the space accessible”, in other words, visible. This process plays out through workshops organised in collaboration with the Dar Bellarj cultural foundation, where participants become viewers of whatever is on display Le 18. In these art spaces, to democratise is also to popularize, using accessible codes to present concepts, as Nouha Ben Yebdri suggests.

Blow up the codes

As a theoretician, Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa hopes to see the use of “a sort of art observatory” in order to rethink questions of “interdisciplinarity, alterity, marginality” in a “forensic” approach (screening and treatment, editor’s note). It is also essential to consider “new economic models that are collaborative and participative”, adds Hicham Bouzid, in order to repair the connection that has been distorted by an excessively rigid and ossified institutional framework that ignores the radical desire for change among young curators, programmers, and artists. A reconciliation, then, a curation in the most literal sense of the word. This growing scene is juggling practical and complex considerations, such as the financing of projects, as most funds are provided by foreign sources in the absence of local recognition and support. It is also grappling with the need to drive, provide support, and to seize the power of change that is animating the Moroccan as well as international art scenes. “Think global, act local!”, concludes Nouha Ben Yebdri. Young artists’ references are constantly evolving in sync with multiple influences and a saturation of images and productions. At this point, it has become impossible to exist within the confines of a classical context without sacrificing the transdisciplinarity, awareness, individuality, and freedom that these young curators and artists are demanding. Accelerated by social networks, the generational divide could not be more pronounced. Codes are being shattered. The potential for creativity and the desire for discovery – of self and of others – is expressed with greater resonance than ever. For Abdelkader Damani, it is time to invoke some new mantras: curating is over, time to make room for “artisans of reality whose primary medium would be the artist’s imagination”. Together, they must strive to “create what is real and remember more fully”.

it has become impossible to exist within the confines of a classical context at a time when young artists’ references are constantly evolving in sync with multiple influences and a saturation of images and productions

— Find the interview with Abdelkader Damani on Diptyk the podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts.



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© Carlos Perez Marin

Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa is a curator and independent researcher. She is particularly interested in contemporary artistic practices that tend to reorganise relationships between the rural and urban worlds, between high and popular culture, between fine and applied arts. She recently curated “Mohammed Chabâa: Visual Consciousness” at the Cultural Foundation of Abu Dhabi. She is also part of the research programme about the School of Casablanca, initiated by ThinkArt, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Sharjah Art Foundation, and Goethe-Institut Marokko.



© Ines Bouallou

Bouchra Salih defines herself as a cultural activist. She is an independent cultural operator, curator, and clothing designer, and in 2018 she founded “État d’urgence d’instant poétiques” (Emergency of Poetic Instants - EUIP), an in situ contemporary art manifestation organised every year in the Botanical Gardens of Rabat. She is preparing the next edition of EUIP to be held in November, and is working on a project to group all previous editions.

Homegrown theory How Mohamed Chabâa codified the Casablanca School





View of the retrospective exhibition “Mohamed Chabâa: Visual consciousness” at the Cultural Foundation of Abu Dhabi



Mohamed Chabâa, *Sans titre*, 1977, acrylique sur toile, 75 x 95 cm. Succession Mohamed Chabâa

Mohamed Chabâa, *Untitled*, 1973, acrylic on wood panel, 100 x 100 cm
The estate of Mohamed Chabâa



Mohamed Chabâa, *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 150 cm
The estate of Mohamed Chabâa



The Cultural Foundation of Abu Dhabi welcomes a vast retrospective devoted to one of the pioneers of Moroccan contemporary art, Mohamed Chabâa. It is the first time that an exhibition organized outside of Morocco pays tribute to the great yet often overlooked member of the Casablanca Group.

By Houda Outarahout

“Without Mohamed Chabâa, the Moroccan artistic revolution would never have happened!” proclaims his daughter, Nadia Chabâa. And to drive her point home, she adds: “Melehi was not only convinced of this, he even put it in writing. One had to be well-prepared to be able to develop critical thought and lay out all the reflection that led to this revolution, was undeniably well-prepared.” This artist, who was the linchpin figure of the Casablanca School, passed in 2013, and now he is finally the subject of a retrospective exhibition outside of Morocco. A major first that comes over twenty years after his exhibition at the Mohammed V National Theatre in Rabat. The Cultural Foundation of Abu Dhabi’s exhibition “Mohamed Chabâa: Visual consciousness” presents Chabâa the painter, but also the muralist, the graphic designer, the interior designer, as well as the educator. The exhibition explores the eclectic range of his works through his quest for gesture, his positions in terms of collective action, and his research in support of integrated arts. A veritable curatorial and scenographic feat that unfolds in an unprecedented tripartite arrangement, the exhibition is represented by curator Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa – with the mandate and support of the Zamân Books and Curating platform –, Nadia Chabâa as the artist’s estate, and Reem Fadda, director of the Cultural Foundation.



Mohamed Chabâa, Untitled, 1963, acrylic on board, 49 x 70 cm. Pauline de Mazières collection

One of the principal challenges was to operate “in an exploration of Chabâa’s work by attempting to understand the major developments of his pictorial adventure, of his engagement and the networks of sociability that he either initiated or consolidated, in Morocco and elsewhere”, summarises Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa. But it was also an essential task to pay tribute to “the third

Mohamed Chabâa always put all phases of his work on paper, through his writing and manifestos

member of the Casablanca Group [Belkahia, Chabâa, Melehi, editor’s note], the great forgotten one of this trio” and yet a leading figure in the artistic movements of the post-Independence era, she adds. To address this, she chose to enter his work through his prolific written texts. Indeed, “Mohamed Chabâa always put all phases of his work on paper, through his writing and manifestos“, remembers Nadia Chabâa. Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa echoes this observation: “He is the only member of the Groupe de Casa to play the role of an artist-theoretician, in view of his declarations and his critical activism” on the subject of colonial subjectivity. The curator immersed herself in the artist’s archives, “hand in hand with Nadia”, who holds a “very curated view of her father’s work” and who took on a guiding role to navigate “this extraordinary body of foundational texts, historiographic research and documentaries”. Like his countless position statements and texts, Chabâa’s work demonstrates a richness that is equal to its complexity. The challenge posed for this exhibition is then to “distil a clear narrative” despite the tangled multiplicity of references, nuances, and inquiries in his work. The scenography is thus laid out in four major chapters, each articulated around “the two major axes of the evolution of Mohamed Chabâa’s artistic career: the first is his special relationship to architecture and space in general. Out of all artists active at that time, including the Casablanca Group, Chabâa explored and revendedicated the spatial dimension in his own work to the greatest extent, describes Nadia Chabâa.



Mohamed Chabâa, Untitled, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 106.5 x 127 cm. The estate of Mohamed Chabâa



Chabâa in front of his wall mural for the pavilion of the National Irrigation Office, Casablanca International Fair, 1964. The estate of Mohammed Chabâa



Mohamed Chabâa, Untitled, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 144 x 94 cm. Private collection



Mohamed Chabâa, *Sans titre*, 1959, huile sur papier, 50 x 67 cm. Succession Mohamed Chabâa

The second axis concerns the artist’s commitment to social responsibility and his advocacy to implicate the arts in the population’s daily life, as well as the establishment of the “return to our roots” as the foundation of our artistic modernity, and this via the rehabilitation of artisans and of traditional arts to elaborate a contemporary Moroccan visual vocabulary”.

Unrecognised aspects

Thus, works that “reclaim the universe of the traditional and rural arts” with an emphasis on “the motif of the cyclopean eye, the symbol of renewed perception” in the 1960s, as well as the emblematic works of the geometric period in the 1970s, inform “Chabâa’s predilection for open structures, oblique lines and volatile form, in connection with the mathematical rigour of certain patterns”. Works from 1980s mark a postmodern turning point, “affirming a critical and creative vitality” that finds source in “craft, and its personal visual vocabulary”. As for the eclectic range of works from the 1990s and 2000s, “they seem to revisit themes from the preceding decades”. A return to gestural painting is a confirmation of confirms of this artist’s sense of visual freedom. The retrospective exhibition also presents dioramas of creations produced in his design and interior design workshop, Studio 400, founded in 1968. A less well-known aspect of the artist’s body of work, brought to life through models and never-before-seen archives. With influences ranging from Moroccan crafts, the Bauhaus movement, post-war abstraction and the Avant-garde, Chabâa was in the thick of all artistic battles. He managed to define his own language; the influence of which remains irrefutable to this day.

— Mohamed Chabâa: Visual Consciousness”, Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation, Abu Dhabi, close of exhibition on September 20th, 2021.



Mohamed Chabâa, *Sans titre*, 1965, acrylique sur toile, 150 x 120 cm. Succession Mohamed Chabâa

[SERIES]

How the Arab World Invented its own Modernity in the Maghreb

An overview of what was happening in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Three countries that lived under the colonial yoke at the same time, amid the struggles for independence, followed by the emergence of an artistic modernity that would reappropriate its own cultural identity.

By Brahim Alaoui, art historian and curator

Rafik El Kamel, Untitled, 1980, oil paint on canvas, 111,5 x 86 cm
Courtesy of the Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation





Chaïbia Tallal, *Les Tisseuses de Chtouka* (The Weavers of Chtouka), 1987, oil on canvas, 130 x 195 cm. © CMOOA



Abderrazak Sahli, *Graffiti*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 120,5 x 91,5 cm. Courtesy of the Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation

To speak of the Maghreb is to underscore the evidence of a rich and diverse cultural affiliation, elaborated by different populations over the course of a long, secular history. As for the historic trajectories of the 20th century in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, they are relatively similar, as all three countries experienced European colonial conquest and, in parallel, led their individual struggles of independence. This forged a sense of “common destiny”. Their modern art histories had evolved, in part, due to the fact that colonial powers installed conditions propitious to the emergence of a practice of easel painting from the onset of the last century. Systems had been put in place for artists’ residencies and exhibition spaces, art schools were created, offering education opportunities for local artists. These efforts were met with the development of a type of painting known as “the colonial school”, dominated by an academic and orientalist approach that flourished among travelling European artists as well as those who had chosen to live in the Maghreb.

In the first half of the 20th century, Algerian artist Mohammed Racim (1896-1975) established himself as a forerunner of a modern aesthetic that reconciled, in a very original way, the oriental art of the miniature with codes of Western painting. His singular approach earned him artistic recognition in France, and in 1930 he was nominated as a professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Algiers. This is how he paved the way for an identity pictorial approach that echoed among local artists, as well as certain Tunisian artists such as Ali Ben Salem (1910-2001) and Jellal Ben Abdallah (1921-2017). At that same time, many self-taught painters began to emerge across the Maghreb, often encouraged by Westerners to pursue their vocations. Such was the case for Mohammed Ben Ali Rbati (1861-1939) in Morocco and the Algerian artist Baya (1931-1998), discovered during a 1943 visit to Algiers by the legendary gallerist Aimé Maeght, who was impressed by her gouache paintings and invited her to show them at his gallery in Paris in 1947. During this exhibition, these works by Baya—who was only 16 at the time—thrilled André Breton, who consecrated her work with a generous review in *Derrière le miroir*.¹ It is not surprising that this father of surrealism, who denounced dominant

André Breton, who denounced dominant rationalist arrogance, saw in the work of the young Algerian painter Baya an exploration of the “inner voice” that was dear to him



Abdallah Benanteur, *Les Errantes* (The Wanderers), 1972-1974, oil on canvas, 194,5 x 193,5 cm. Paris, Musée de l’Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA), © ADAGP/Philippe Maillard



Mohammed Khadda, *Les Remparts de Koufa*, 1989, oil on canvas, 97 x 129,5 cm. Courtesy of Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation



Mohamed Chabâa, *Composition*, 1967. Société Générale collection, Morocco.



Néjib Belkhodja, *Perspectives*, 1992, oil on canvas, 92 x 65 cm. Courtesy of Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation

rationalist arrogance, became interested in Baya’s work and saw an exploration of the “inner voice” that was so dear to him. Other self-taught artists indulged in a spontaneous form of painting, like the Moroccan painter Ahmed Yacoubi, whose work attracted the eye of American writer Paul Bowles in Fez, in 1947. Bowles invited the young Yacoubi to move to Tangier, where he became immersed in the milieu of artists and major authors of the Beat Generation who spent time with Paul Bowles in the 1950s. Among these was the painter and writer Brion Gysin, who came to know the young Mohamed Hamri, encouraging him to teach himself how to paint, and introducing him into his cosmopolitan circle of acquaintances. Thus, the presence of members of the Beat Generation in Tangier would reveal the talents of a singular group of Moroccan artists, all demonstrating a combination of false naivety and prolific imagination, even more so as their visual language was free of any academic convention or imitation.

Between identity and spontaneity

Nevertheless, Moroccan intellectuals in the post-Independence period were critical of Paul Bowles and his accomplices, whom they accused of racism and orientalism. As for the Moroccan modern artists, they ostracised the self-taught painters, relegating their productions to the category of “naïve art”, a tendency that—in their eyes—served the colonialist vision, much to the detriment of a deliberate and reflective art practice. This contextual position would not last long, and eventually these art world originals were recognised in their country, and their work grew to be widely admired. In the post-war years, many young artists from the Maghreb chose to study in Paris. Some of them, attracted by the non-figurative painting that dominated the new School of Paris movement, would attempt to add their own individual contribution. Among them were Abdallah Benanteur, Ahmed Cherkaoui, Jilali Gharbaoui, Abdelkader Guermaz, and Mohammed Khadda. Their work caught the attention of art critic Pierre Gaudibert, who organised the collective exhibition, “Peintres du Maghreb”, at the Galerie Le Gouvernail in Paris in 1963. This group show generated real visibility for their non-figurative approach, and unveiled the essential foundations of Maghrebian pictorial issues as they were evolving at the time. The domination of lyric and gestural abstraction is evident, as is the exploration of the memory of signs of origin. In this way, Ahmed Cherkaoui (1934-1967), proud of the heritage of his millenary culture of signs, began to elaborate a personal style that consisted of bringing symbols from his own childhood to the surface of the canvas,

The presence of members of the Beat Generation in Tangier would reveal the talents of a singular group of Moroccan artists who demonstrated false naivety along with prolific imagination

giving shape to these echoes of memory. He would relentlessly pursue his visual constructions until his premature death in 1967. He has come to be considered the precursor of the Maghreb’s school of signs, and his approach continued to evolve in other forms during the second half of the 20th century. Beginning in the 1950s, an air of independence was blowing across the Maghreb, heralding waves of national emancipation and liberation. Many artists, after completing their studies in various European capitals and learning the theories and techniques of artistic avant-gardists, returned to their native countries. They contributed to the cultural development of their respective countries and conducted artistic experimentation through which they would reappropriate their own artistic heritages to reinvent them, in order to elaborate their own modern art forms. The majority of these artists produced non-figurative work at the onset of the 1960s, to break with the “colonial school” in a symbolic gesture of liberation and modernity. Others however, advocated for the adoption of social realism for ideological reasons, with the aim of making their art accessible to all. This was also the case for certain Algerian and Tunisian painters. In this way, an underlying duality between figuration and abstraction would accompany the advent of artistic modernity in the Maghreb.

The School of Tunis was created in 1948 by several Tunisian and French painters, led by Yahia Turki (1901-1969). The majority of these artists practiced a figurative form of painting that illustrated scenes of local daily life in a neo-orientalist style. Hatim Elmekki (1918-2003) was the exception at the heart of the School of Tunis. Though he opted for figurative representation in the same vein of this movement, he distanced himself from local tropism. Figuration allowed him to express his national commitment, as he painted the “Tunisian reality” that had been, in his opinion, hidden away under the years of the protectorate.

In the 1960s, a young generation of artists rebelled against the School of Tunis. They took on visual creation with a greater sense of inspirational freedom and modes of expression; without disavowing their artistic heritage, they advocated for a local modern art form. The painter Néjib Belkhodja (1933-2007) became known for a radical abstraction that combined the form and rhythm of Kufic calligraphy and local architecture. He created a style that the writer Ali Louati referred “urban constructivism”, anchored both in his enthusiasm for cultural context and his understanding of European geometric abstraction. In a clear break with academic conventions, a modern artistic practice was adopted and amplified by those young artists who returned from their studies in Paris to Tunis in the 1970s; artists such as Abderrazak Sahli, Gouider Triki, and Rafik El-Kamel. These individuals shared an interest in the search for a new, free and personal practice. Together, they showed their work at the Galerie Irtissam (1976-1983), founded by the artist Mahmoud Séhéli (1931-2015), who offered them the perfect space to pursue their artistic experiments and to exchange ideas.

In Algeria, the debate was raging

The debate between the defenders of figuration and of abstraction would violently explode on the Algerian artistic scene in the wake of Independence in 1962, as each movement claimed to be the exclusive representatives of an authentic national art. Upon returning to his homeland, artist M’hamed Issiakhem (1928-1985) co-founded the Union Nationale des Arts Plastiques (UNAP) to promote a socially-committed art practice that would be “accessible to the people”. Issiakhem’s work was figurative, and he painted with thick bursts of impasto paint, intended to communicate his own revolt and the turmoil in his soul. The representation of women, as a metaphor for heroic and emancipatory resistance, prevails in his works. He actively advocated in favour of a figurative style of painting that would be “accessible to the many and not just a minority of intellectuals”. Another great figure of Algerian modern art is Mohammed Khadda (1930-1991, who returned to his country after a decade in Paris, where he frequented the artists of the new School of Paris in the company of his friend Abdallah Benanteur (1931-2017), who chose to continue his artistic career in France. Khadda carried out his pictorial research while at the same time turning to writing, entering a reflection upon the elaboration of an endogenous artistic modernity. He championed the need to undergo a process of cultural decolonisation so that Algerian painting could acquire “its own personality”, and thus be able to contribute to “universal contemporary art”. He tried to anchor his non-figurative painting in his local cultural environment by reappropriating signs and symbols taken from ancestral writings (Arab and Amazigh). This influence extended to Aouchem (Tatoo), a group founded in 1967 by a dozen artists, painters and poets in opposition to an official art form dominated by socialist realism, which they considered demagogic, demanding instead “a return to the source and the richness of popular art”. Among the first signatories of the group’s manifesto were Choukri Mesli and Denis Martinez, who perpetuated the group’s activity and pursued an exploration of the signs of the vernacular arts that “managed

The exhibition “Painters of the Maghreb” in Paris in 1963 revealed the issues raised at that time of Maghrebian pictorial issues; lyric abstraction gestural abstraction is evident, as is the exploration of the memory of signs of origin

to maintain the gestures that model and paint clay, weave wool, decorate walls, carve wood or engrave metal”. The Aouchem group, which lasted only six years from 1967 to 1972, was challenged by the official artists affiliated with the sole state party, the FLN, which pushed for socialist realism. Artist and writer Ali Silem witnessed the brutality of these men during an exhibition by Aouchem artists: “The UNAP hall where the Algiers exhibition was on display was brutally invaded, during the opening event, by Union painters and other individuals, some armed with sticks. They evacuated the room manu militari (there were foreign diplomats present). Posters were torn down, works carelessly stripped from the walls. The painters M’hamed Issiakhem (1928-1985), Mohamed Temmam (1915-1988), Farès Boukhatem (1941), and Ismaïl Samsom (1934-1988) were the most vehement instigators of this heavy-handed raid.”² Khadda, who also stood up to the defenders of figuration, which he denounced as “opportunistic realism”, remained nevertheless critical of the limits of such a reappropriation, writing: “There is a need for a return to the source of our values, not to stay within those confines, but rather to operate a critical inventory in order to eliminate elements that have become invalid or inhibitory, or abhorrent and alienating foreign elements introduced under colonialism, and to retain for the purpose of this inventory the elements that still hold value, to update them by adding all of the scientific, technical and social gains, and to channel them to what is modern and universal”.³

The Casablanca School, incubator of modernity

In independent Morocco, the elaboration of artistic modernity crystallised around the School of Fine Arts in Casablanca. Artist Farid Belkahia (1934-2014), upon his return from Europe where he studied art first in Paris, then in Prague, took over the direction of this school in 1962. At that moment, he began to lead a fundamental artistic experimentation, studying the new paths of access to modernity. Surrounding himself with a team that shared his own vision, including Mohamed Melehi and Mohamed Chabâa in 1964, as well as the Italian art historian Toni Maraini, and Dutch anthropologist Bert Flint. Together, they would initiate an innovative pedagogy to the Beaux-Arts de Casablanca, based upon the reappropriation and regeneration of the traditional arts to bring about a modern artistic creation anchored in local culture, emancipated from academic artistic practice, and open to the world. It was this same process that Farid Belkahia applied to his own work as well as the work of his students. He revisited Moroccan heritage memory and its artisanal traditions, exploring the creative potentialities of these skills, thus suggesting a release from any dominant model of modernity. As for Mohamed Melehi (1936-2020), he understood how to build a prolific body of work that revealed his rigorous research into modern forms of representation, and to spread a transversal aesthetic specific to the articulation between figuration and abstraction, and between local and global. Other artists would join the Beaux-Arts’ collective of professors, including Mohamed Ataallah, Mohamed Hamidi, and Mustapha Hafid. This group, known as the Casablanca School, advocated in favour of an expansion of the artistic field in service to modern culture in Morocco. They approached creation in relationship to architecture, extolled the integration of art in the public space, and initiated—with their colleagues at the Beaux-Arts de Casablanca— extra-muros artistic manifestations, including the historic exhibition “Présence plastique” (Plastic presence), which took place on the legendary Jamaâ El Fna Square in Marrakech in 1969. Eminently present in national societal and political debate, this group felt the need to expand their geographical footprint across the Maghreb by participating in the first pan-African cultural festival in the Algiers in 1969. They later took part in the Maghreb Exposition organised by UNAP, also in Algiers, in 1974. This event was the opportunity to announce a Maghreb union of visual artists, regardless of their individual diversity, who would present themselves as a group of regional representation at the first Arab Biennial to be held in Baghdad in 1974. Participating in this event was a significant Moroccan delegation, eager to encounter artists from the Mashriq and affirm their

Maghreb artists, regardless of their individual diversity, presented themselves as a group of regional representation at the first Arab Biennial, held in Baghdad in 1974



Farid Belkahia, Hommage à Gaston Bachelard, 1984, natural dye on animal skin mounted on wood panel, 320 x 296 cm. Centre Pompidou, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris. © ADAGP, Paris 2021. Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Philippe Migeat/Dist. RMN-GP



Gouider Triki, Untitled, 2011-2012, gouache on paper, 40 x 59 cm. Courtesy of the Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation



Hatem El Mekki, Homme couché, 1953, gouache on paper, 49,5 x 65 cm. Courtesy of the Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation



Ahmed Cherkaoui, Talisman n°3, 1966, oil on canvas, 101 x 134 cm. Paris, Musée de Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA). © Musée de l’IMA/Nabil Boutros

individual identities at the heart of a vast cultural zone that was opening up to them. Morocco would host the second Arab Biennial in Rabat in 1976, at the initiative of the Association Marocaine des Arts Plastiques (Moroccan Association of Visual Arts, AMAP), thus reinforcing exchanges with artists from the Arab world, exchanges that were supported by private galleries such as L’Atelier in Rabat and Nadar in Casablanca, which would show work by Iraqi, Egyptian, Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian and Maghrebian artists. In this way, over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, Maghrebian modern artists became animated by a creative synergy that stemmed from a desire to emancipate themselves from the colonial model, to resist identity isolationism and political subordination, and, finally, in solidarity with the third world in terms of research and into the ways and means that would lead to cultural renewal and economic and cultural development.*

1. André Breton, « Baya », *Derrière le miroir*, Éditions Adrien Maeght, Paris, 1947.
2. Ali Silem, « Le groupe Aouchem », texte (1/2) publié en 2015 dans *Le Lien*, numéro 66.
3. Mohamed Khadda, *Éléments pour un art nouveau*, Éditions Barzakh, Alger, 2015.

Art Market

NFTs, art's new gold rush

More than a revolution, the NFT market is already staking its claim as the world's dominant new movement, in Africa as elsewhere. Since Christie's first sale of a solely digital artwork — and the first sale payable in cryptocurrency, for 60+ million dollars — in March 2021, the virtual marketplace has skyrocketed, taking major artists and operators along for the ride.

Bearing in mind that digital art, on the rise due to the pandemic and boosted by the strength of cryptocurrency values, offers plenty of advantages: the perfect traceability of artworks, cutting out middlemen, better recognition for digital artists, diverse forms of transactions...For the followers of crypto-art, the party is just getting started!



◆ Sold \$478,800

Robert Alice x Alethea AI, To the Young Artists of Cyberspace, 2021, intelligent non-fungible token (iNFT). © Sotheby's

Outbidding the auction houses

In 2021, NFTs burst onto the scene and into the catalogues of the major auction houses, adding more speed to the digitalization of the art market, which had begun to take off in the early days of the pandemic. From here on in, it's up for grabs, and the more techno-savvy, the better.

Céline Moine, Artmarket.com

Everything has moved quite fast since the first digital artwork was sold by Christie's in March 2021. Beeple (alias Mike Winkelmann), little-known outside the realm of digital art, found himself propelled to third place on the podium of the world's most valuable living artists in terms of auction sales, just behind Jeff Koons and David Hockney. An admirable achievement based on a single transaction, the sale of his digital collage *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, purchased for the exorbitant price of USD 69.3 million. An earthquake generated by a few pixels. According to Christie's, 22 million individuals, most of whom are under 40, were online for the sale of *The First 5000 Days*. An incredible frenzy, driven primarily by new bidders who are well-skilled in the handling of cryptocurrencies.

The race toward Innovation

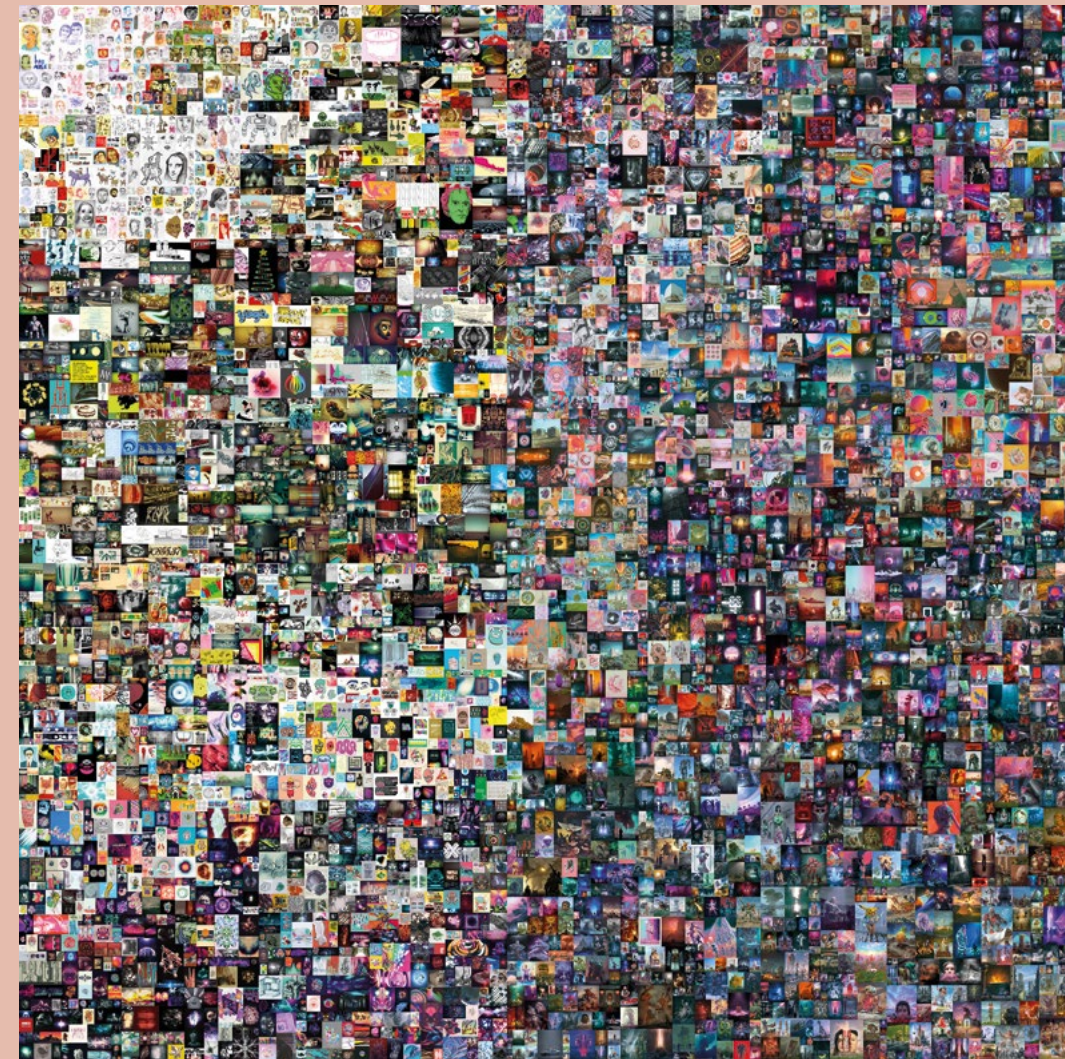
Shored up by the strong liquidity of the cryptographic space, NFTs soon became the new market target for the major auction houses. These institutions have made every effort in extremis to integrate NFT artworks into their prestige springtime auctions. Their haste has proven to be lucrative, as this new movement went on to break new records in the weeks and months that followed.

In their pursuit of innovation, these auction houses have tried everything to deliver the most technophile profile possible. One month after the \$69.3 million

sale of Beeple's jpeg, Phillips brought in \$4.1 million for the first multi-generational NFT capable of automatically generating new works (*Replicator* by Mad Dog Jones). Christie's went even further in May, with the sale of the first tokenised works by the pope of Pop art, Andy Warhol. In June, Sotheby's presented the first intelligent NFT capable of interacting with its owner thanks to artificial intelligence (*To the Young Artists of Cyberspace, 2021*, by Robert Alice, \$478,800) and yet another digital holy grail: the first NFT artwork ever created, *Quantum (2014)*, by Kevin McCoy. The sales price for *Quantum* leaped to about one and a half million dollars on June 10th, the equivalent of ten times more than the auction's preceding lots. The successes scored by Christie's, Phillips, and Sotheby's have clearly inspired other auction houses across the world, including Duran in Spain, Millon in Belgium, SBI in Japan, Basezero in Italy, and Artmark in Rumania.

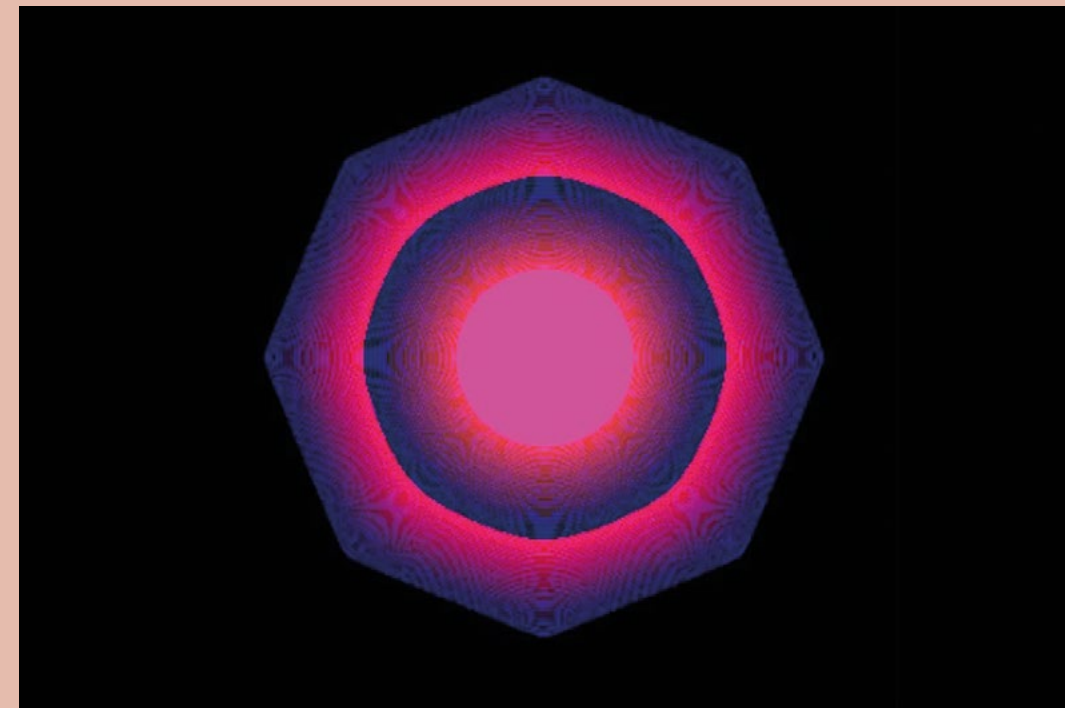
The new stars

In the space of a few months, the NFT market has already found its star performers. Beeple in first place, followed by Yuga Labs, Larva Labs, Pak, and Mad Dog Jones, whose best NFT auction results posted between 4 and 24.4 million dollars from April to September. On May 11th, 2021, for the opening of its prestige contemporary art sale in New York, Christie's set a high estimate for a lot of nine *CryptoPunks*,



◆ Sold \$69,346,250
Beeple, *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, non-fungible token (NFT), 21,069 x 21,069 pixels.

NFTs that reach the highest results are those that use technology in service to the artwork, not in service to the artist

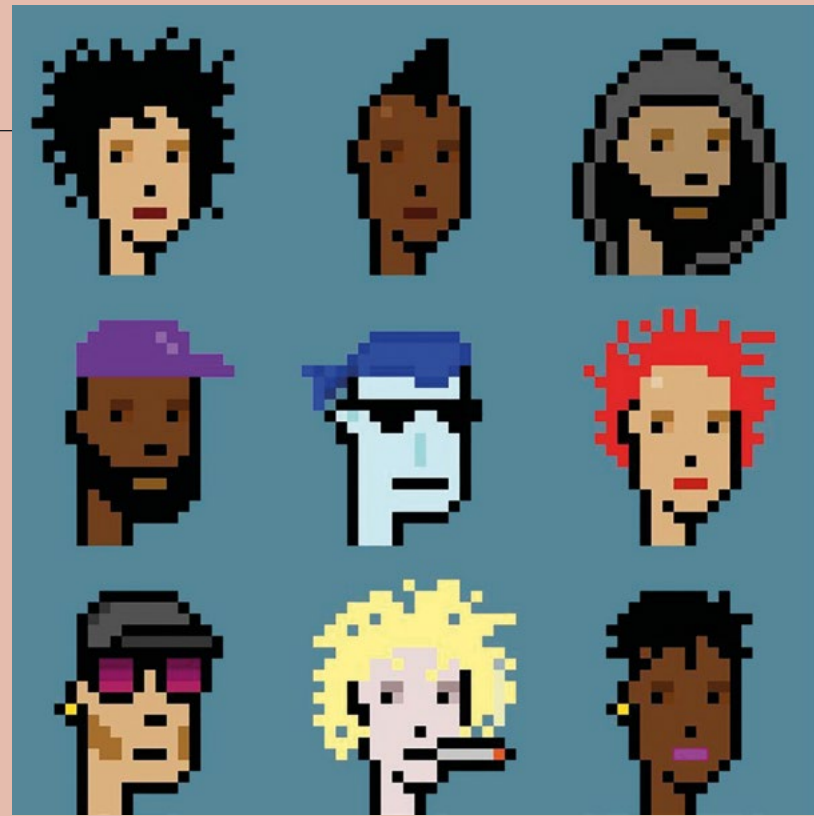


◆ Sold \$1,472,000
Kevin McCoy, *Quantum, 2014-2021*, non-fungible token (NFT).
© Sotheby's



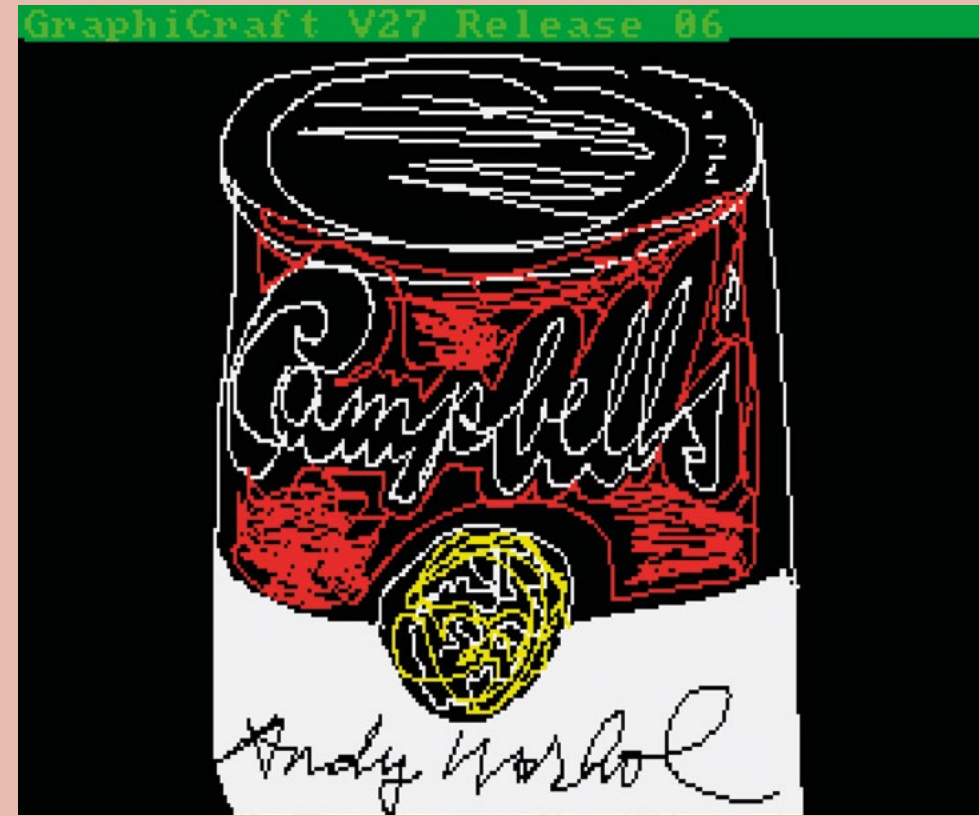
◆ Sold \$4,144,000

Mad Dog Jones, *Replicator*, 2021, non-fungible token (NFT), 4800 x 6000 pixels. © Phillips



◆ Sold \$16,962,500

Larva Labs, lot of 9 CryptoPunks (2, 532, 58, 30, 635, 602, 768, 603, and 757), 2017, non-fungible tokens (NFT), 24 x 24 pixels each. © Christie's



◆ Sold \$1,170,000

Andy Warhol, *Untitled (Campbell's Soup Can)*, 2021, non-fungible token (NFT), 4500 x 6000 pixels. © Christie's

these unique 24 x 24 pixel characters generated by an algorithm. Between 7 and 9 million dollars were announced for these NFTs, part of a 10,000 CryptoPunk collection of characters tokenised on the Ethereum blockchain. The lot reached the height of bidding at \$16.9 million, representing a spike surge of nearly \$10 million over its low estimate for these cult images, considered to be the first collectible unique tokens. Indeed, the CryptoPunks have spearheaded the digital collection market. Since their creation in 2017, they have generated around 1.5 billion dollars' worth of transactions. The 10-million-dollar level was passed once again in June, this time not for nine CryptoPunks but for a single unit, considered to be "extremely rare". The sale took place at Sotheby's, featuring CryptoPunk 7523. Part of a series of nine extra-terrestrial Punks, but the only one wearing a mask (a 2017 creation that seemed to predict the future pandemic), its price sailed upwards to 11.7 million dollars!

Sotheby's has shown no intention of slowing down. At the beginning of September 2021, the company brought to auction a group of 101 distinct digital avatars from the very popular NFT collection

Bored Ape Yacht Club (BAYC), developed by Yuga Labs. These "bored apes" scored second place in the auction record rankings for NFTs (after Beeple), raking in 24.4 million dollars. These BAYC NFTs are sought after not only for their scarcity (they number 10,000): their "owners" become part of an exclusive members-only club that offers multiple advantages. They are, one might say, connected by a sort of digital brotherhood.

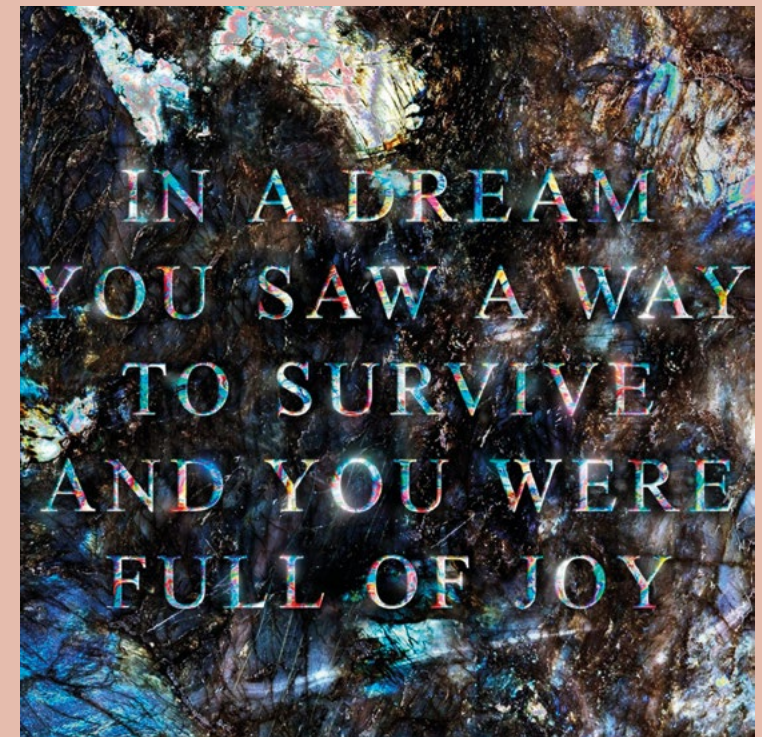
Uneven results

While prices have exploded for NFTs that are recognized and sought-after by crypto fans, auction results have been uneven for others, even for the most famous artists in the visual arts history of the 20th century. Indeed, in early June of 2021, hammer prices for two pioneers of multimedia art—Jenny Holzer and Nam June Paik—were a disappointment. Christie's was surely hoping to surf the new wave of sales prices, but bidding peaked at a mere \$37,500 for Jenny Holzer's first NFT, and \$56 000 for a work by Nam June Paik, though hammer expectations were for double those amounts. Christie's went on to try another tactic,

adding NFTs by the young Nigerian crypto-artist Osinachi (see p. 104) to their catalogue. The sale took place during the 9th edition of the 1-54 Art Fair in London, at the very moment when demand for artists of African origin was reaching its peak. Osinachi's five NFTs went for \$35,000 to \$70 000 each. Even if, by indication of their high estimates, Christie's had expected more, these sales are nonetheless successful, proving that perspectives are beginning to open up for a new crop of NFT artist-warriors.

As a general rule, crypto purchasers' preferences lean toward digital objects that are in osmosis with contemporary aesthetics and challenges. The most desirable NFTs are those that use technology in service to the artwork rather than in service to the artist. This explains why the CryptoPunks are worth \$16.9 million while an NFT of Andy's Campbell's Soup Can topped out at \$1.17 million: Warhol takes us back to the past century, whereas Larva Labs represents new forms of exchange and new collection modes in the 2.0 era.

The CryptoPunks, who spearheaded the digital collection market, have generated around 1.5 billion dollars' worth of transactions since their creation in 2017



◆ Sold \$37,500

Jenny Holzer, *Present*, 2021, vidéo digitale avec jetons non fungibles (NFT), 1 min 12 (2 160 x 2 160 pixels). © Christie's

African NFTs make a breakthrough at Christie's

In October 2021, Nigeria-based Osinachi (born 1991) became the first African NFT-artist to be featured in a Christie's sale. Over the past few years, he has refined his visual expression on a little-used tool among digital artists: Microsoft Word. In this interview, he tells us about his shift to NFTs and reflects on the future of crypto-art in Africa.

Interview by Reda Zaireg



Osinachi's work was displayed during the ninth edition of the 1-54 London art fair, held from October 14 to 17, 2021. On October 19, the five pieces of his series *Different Shades of Water* were auctioned in a Christie's online sale and fetched \$214,000. Inspired by David Hockney's swimming pools, the 29-year-old Nigerian artist tackled the theme by bringing in his own insights and ideas. In *Different Shades of Water*, he explores how the body placement and how daylight can alter the perception of water. Although water and light are the driving forces of this series, the human element, a key ingredient in the artist's universe, is not ignored: the body remains central, and questions are raised about its place in a given environment.

How did you gravitate towards using Microsoft Word, which is best known as a text editor?

I didn't choose Microsoft Word. I would rather say that Microsoft Word chose me. I was first introduced to computers by my father when I was about fifteen or sixteen years old, in an Internet café because computers were expensive at the time. Microsoft Word was the software that caught my attention the most. At first, I used it to type short stories and poems. I also occasionally played



“NFTs, thanks to smart contracts on blockchain, allow artists to obtain a percentage on secondary sales, usually at 10%”

around with the Word drawing tools, and that's how I started creating visual works. It was the only software I had at hand to do what I needed to do. I hadn't heard of Photoshop, and to this day I still don't know how to use it. Word is the go-to place for me to play with shapes and colors. And yes, it freezes and crashes on me sometimes, but I still go right back to it, push it to the very edge, and push myself to get better at what I do.

At what point did you step into NFTs? Was there a particular catalyst?

It was in 2017 that I discovered art on the blockchain. I was working as a librarian at the university and was looking to show my work beyond Instagram. I kept two Google alerts set up for the keywords «digital art» and «visual art». One day, I received an alert: a platform called R.A.R.E Art Labs [a marketplace dedicated to NFT and digital art] was enabling the creation of art using the blockchain. I reached out to the guys at R.A.R.E, and they walked me through the process. Then I discovered other platforms afterwards. I guess you could say that it was the need to get my work validated that first led me to NFTs. Before the NFT, galleries were not interested in my art.

What do NFTs offer that traditional mediums do not?

For digital artists, NFTs are an indisputable way to ascribe value to a work. The dilemma that the traditional art space has never really managed to solve is the value of digital creation. NFTs also allow artists to bypass middlemen and gatekeepers in order to be in direct contact with collectors. This is an extremely important feature, considering that the world is becoming more and more decentralized. Finally, NFTs, thanks to smart contracts, allow artists to obtain a percentage of their secondary sales [i.e. the resale of a work by its holder]. These are usually royalties reaching 10%. Artists don't need to be after anyone to get their money, it's built into the smart contract.

In a way, you are paving the way for many emerging African crypto-artists. How do you see the future of NFTs in Africa?

NFTs can empower and enable African artists, and they are becoming more and more involved in this world. Many digital artists on the continent work for companies and barely make a living. With NFTs, they are able to put their skills to good use. It's no longer about commissions, but about being the primary beneficiary of their work. Of course, there is the issue of gas fees in the Ethereum blockchain [i.e., the fees users pay to validate transactions or establish contracts] which can be a barrier to entry, but there are other blockchains besides the Ethereum blockchain. In the Tezos blockchain for instance, gas fees are insignificant.

Overall, there is less exposure for African NFT artists, given that the NFT space has been dominated by Western artists until now. What do you think could be done to ensure that this changes?

Everyone must play their part. For African artists to exist in the NFT space, collectors from the continent must show support and interest. African collectors are the best qualified to appreciate and endorse these new forms of art: not only do they share similar aesthetic values with the artists, but they are also the ones who can fairly price their work and empathize with their experience. So, I believe that the African tech sector really needs to get into the blockchain and be part of what's going on. At some point, why not create an Africa-focused NFT marketplace, in order to ensure that the continent's artists get the attention they deserve. But the most important thing is that artists should stay true to their art. When you remain true to your art, even non-African collectors appreciate what you're creating, and they are more willing to collect your art, because it comes from your heart. It comes from a place that is not affected by a desperate desire to make money.

◆ Sold for \$68 800

Osinachi, Man in a Pool III, 2021, © Christie's

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[Témoignage]
Toni Maraini raconte
les années italiennes
de Melehi
~



Who are the Moroccan crypto-artists?

Moroccan crypto-artists may be few and far between, but they are convinced of one truth: NFTs are the future of artistic creation. An exchange with Muhcine Ennou, Nabil Abdellaoui, and Mehdi Ayache.

By Reda Zaireg

“NFTs can liberate artists, provided they know how to use them wisely”. Amsterdam-based creator and artistic director Muhcine Ennou is one of those caught up in the wave, with high hopes for NFTs. “I dove into this environment pretty early on. At the beginning, I watched and tried to understand”, he explains. After a period of evaluation, “I decided to take off on my own adventure”. As a specialist in imaging, photography, and special effects, Muhcine Ennou has shown his work in the past at the Nederlands Fotomuseum, the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, and Melkweg in Amsterdam. He has recently decided to focus his work around NFTs. His artworks, presented on the Foundation platform, are available for purchase at prices varying from 0,30 ETH (\$1370 as per November 2, 2021 market value) to 50 ETH (\$228,360). They speak of the desert, “a place that can hold distinct functionality for those who are familiar with it”, muses Muhcine Ennou, who asks himself: “What would it look like to have a coffee in the desert?” In his opinion, NFTs are only “the first opus of a technological revolution”. They stimulate new forms of creation and bring fresh oxygen to marginalized artistic sectors (digital art, generative art, etc.), but more importantly, they make it possible for “artists and collectors to negotiate in direct distribution, granting creators better control over the rights to their works”

(smart contract transactions, royalties, etc.). Difficult, nevertheless, to avoid saturating the market with creations that don’t necessarily stand out in terms of quality. In the same vein, price distortion for some NFTs is pushing critics to be cautious about this space, seeing it as a bubble that will inevitably burst. For Muhcine Ennou, there are places in the market “open to the public at large, where everyone can do anything and can easily figure out what exists there. But there are also platforms that offer carefully selected collections with a real curatorial effort behind them”.

100 Pieces of Shit

“Because it’s a new concept that is promising, and in many ways still undefined, this is way there is uncertainty. And it’s exactly this uncertainty that generates various kinds of fraud and scams”, suggests Nabil Abdellaoui. This data scientist at Gauntlet reveals a more critical view of the NFT market, which attracted his attention through his professional activity. “I work with a company that operates on the blockchain. I had heard about NFTs and they sparked my curiosity,” he explains. “At this point, 99% of NFTs are probably not much to speak of, combined with a lot of hype and money laundering schemes. But things become more interesting when we try to hunt down the valid 1%,” wagers Nabil Abdellaoui. After publishing off few NFTS



Muhcine Ennou, The Bar, 2021. Courtesy of the artist

Hassan Hajjaj will soon launch his own NFTs and MACAAL plans to enter a partnership with a French platform to convert physical works of art into NFTs



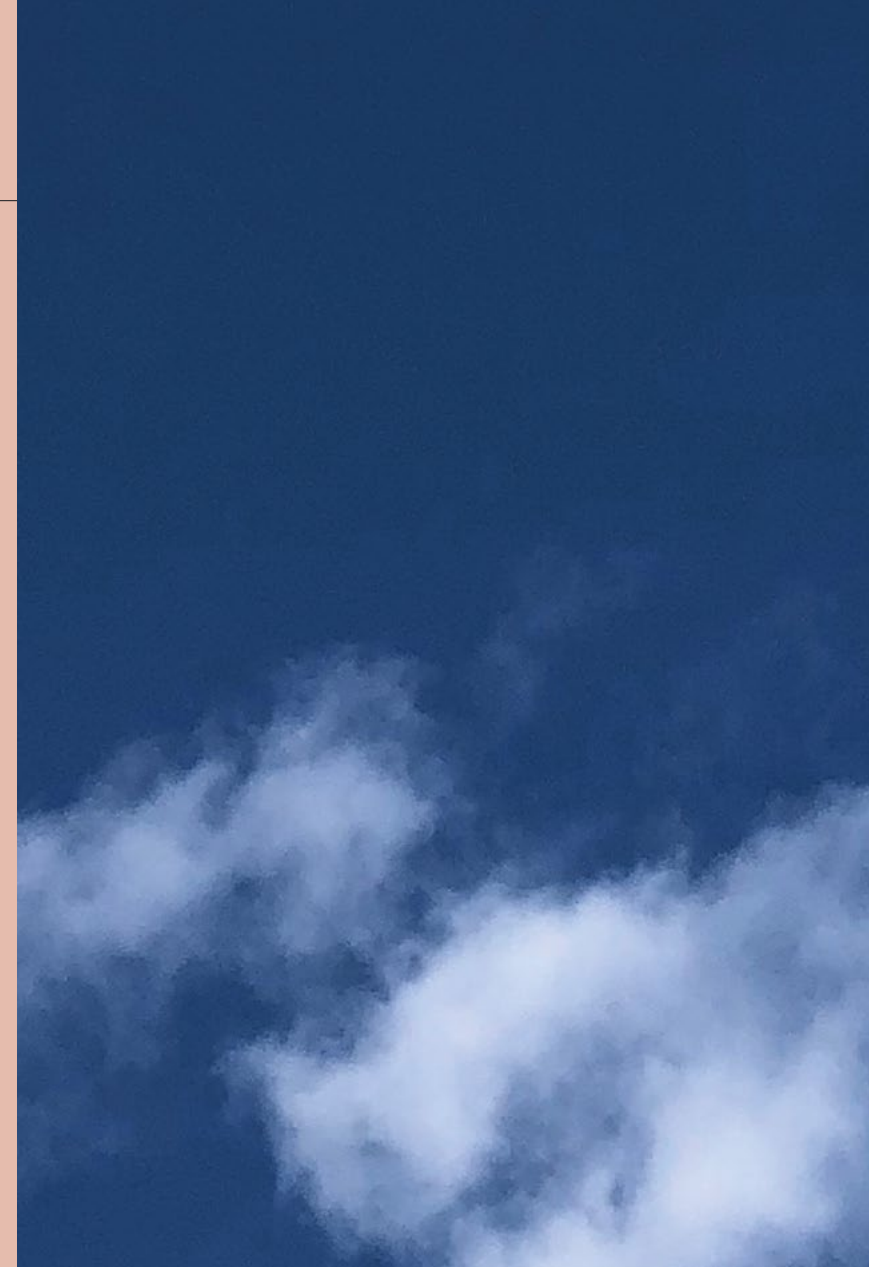
Mehdi Ayache, Berberos Kingdom Skulls #002, 2021. Courtesy of the artist

ex-gratia, “just to see how it works”, he decided to launch the23.wtf, a series of 100 Pieces of Shit that are caricatures of the boom as well as the speculation around non-fungible tokens. “There’s source code and there’s shit. And we compile the first into the latter!” is posted on their project site, which allows users to personalise the works: there is a choice of colour palettes – in Basquiat, Dali, or other artists’ styles – and of artificial intelligence because “For any good bullshit project, the buzzwords Artificial Intelligence, Deep Learning and Inception Generative Neural Networks must be leveraged,” suggests the website.

“The concept of NFTs is cool,” says Nabil Abdellaoui, taking the edge off any guilt. “I think that it could go down in art history. For creators, it’s really a new way of publishing and monetising their work.”

“Adapting to a foregone conclusion”

“For the moment, I’m observing and analysing. I’m not following an aggressive commercial approach, and I’m not in any hurry to sell,” explains Mehdi Ayache, an artistic director based in Casablanca. “The NFT economy is still at its origins, and evolving so fast that it is difficult to anticipate shifts and trends,” he weighs. After four months in the sector, he considers it “a golden opportunity, as a creator of brands, products, and art”. In addition to his conversion of some early works into NFTs, he has invested in several projects. The first is Berberos Kingdom, a digital experience that pays tribute to the Amazigh culture and civilisation. But he devotes most of his time to his series Empire from the Sun, a mixed-media production using stencil and paint. “NFTs are technology in service to art, in the end,” concludes Mehdi Ayache. “I don’t see them as a phenomenon, but rather a natural evolution, even



Othmane Bengelbara, Untitled 001 - Natural blockchain, n°1/365. Collection of unique blocks of sky everyday. Courtesy of the artist

In this NFT series, Othmane Bengelbara presents cut-outs of the sky. One per day, 365 days a year. It is also, according to the artist, “a deconstruction of NFTs: the sky is non-fungible, unique, and non-reproducible as a function of its instantaneousness. Today’s sky will not resemble the sky of tomorrow”.

a foregone conclusion that requires adaptation as soon as possible. It is the future of creation. As in the case of decentralised finance, no individual or organism can control the art economy, only users and the community can do that.”

The growing recognition for NFTs is making them increasingly popular. The expanding field of networks for creators and buyers who are swept up in the potential of blockchain and hold high expectations for growth – even if only for return on investment – has attracted even the most well-established artists. Hassan Hajjaj will soon launch his own NFTs. As for museums, MACAAL plans to enter a partnership with the French digitalisation platform LaCollection.io (see p. 112) to convert physical works of art into NFTs. This start-up

platform has already marketed at auction several stamps by Hokusai on behalf of the British Museum. “We’re working on a selection of artworks to be transformed into NFTs,” confirms Othman Lazraq, president of MACAAL. “I personally believe in the future of NFTs. It’s only a question of time.”

Legitimisation by museums

If museal institutions are getting into NFTs, this time they're not making acquisitions, they're making a sale! Digital copies of the most legendary masterpieces provide a new revenue source, unprecedented and most welcome during these times of crisis.

Céline Moine, Artmarket.com



◆ Sold 45 000 \$

In parallel to the “Hokusai: The Great Picture of Everything” exhibition, the British Museum announced a sale of 200 NFTs based upon the works of Hokusai, including his most celebrated work, The Great Wave off Kanagawa.

In spring 2020, the Uffizi Gallery in Florence was the first museal institution to enter the world of NFTs. With the assistance of Cinello, an Italian company that offers digital copies of masterpieces (respecting their original dimensions), the renowned museum put up for sale the first encrypted and certified digital copy of the Doni Tondo, a sublime

composition from the early 15th century, created by Michelangelo himself. Purchased by a Rumanian collector, the NFT brought in the equivalent of \$160,000. A fair price for the single and unique existing copy in digital version. For Eike Schmidt, director of the Uffizi, “NFT sales will, over the medium term, be able to satisfy some the museum’s financial obligations. This

◆ Sold 160 000 \$

First museum to offer for sale an encrypted digital copy of a masterpiece, the Uffizi Gallery of Florence has put up for sale a certified authentic NFT of the Doni Tondo by Michelangelo.

does not represent a change of course in terms of revenue, but rather a supplementary revenue source”. A useful revenue stream, considering that the Uffizi’s income had dropped by one-quarter from 2019 to 2020. This Florentine kick-off has spurred other major museums into action. The Hermitage, in particular, was the second institution to dive into the waters of technology with five ancient and modern masterworks: Leonardo da Vinci’s Madonna Litta, a Judith by Giorgione, Lilac Bush by Vincent Van Gogh, Claude Monet’s Corner of the Garden at Montgeron, and Composition VI by Wassily Kandinsky. For each work, two NFTs have been produced, one of which is retained by the Hermitage Museum as companion to the original artwork. On September 7th, 2021, the images were sold for a total of \$440,000 on the Binance NFT platform, accompanied by the encrypted signature of the museum’s director, Mikhail Piotovsky. In addition to the rare token, it is indeed the status of the Hermitage that is up for sale with each NFT, as it was for the Uffizi’s Doni Tondo. Three weeks later, it was the turn of the British Museum – one of the ten most-visited museums in the world – to announce the sale of 200 NFTs based upon the works of Hokusai, in parallel to the exhibition “Hokusai: The Great Picture of Everything”. These works were produced and classified in different categories according to criteria of rarity, meaning the number of NFTs created per image, with the participation of the French start-up LaCollection.io. The most famous of these images – in this case The Great Wave off Kanagawa – reached a sales price of \$45,000 (10.6 ETH) for its n° 1/10 edition (“super rare” category). Undeniably, the production of NFTs by the British Museum, the Hermitage, and



the Uffizi bring a real legitimacy to the NFT market, while promising welcome revenue to compensate for economic losses brought on by long closures during the pandemic. These first museum NFTs could become a veritable windfall in function of their value curves, as the contracts provide for commissions in the case of resale on a secondary market. For the British Museum, for example, the resale of a Hokusai NFT would generate 10% for the museum and 3% for LaCollection.io. Only the future will tell how high the values of these digitalised heritage works might climb. Those sold in 2021 by three of most distinguished museums in the world are already demonstrating advantages in terms of future appreciation values. In addition to the avant-gardist status, (they are the first museum NFTs, after all), they benefit from the aura of prestige around major artists and powerful institutional brands). Furthermore, they have no physical competition, in the sense that only the digital version has the potential to circulate by passing “from one hand to another”, to borrow a phrase from art dealers from the “former” world.

Art Dubai
Madinat Jumeirah Conference and Events Centre
11 - 13 March 2022

Art Dubai from modern to crypto

Aiming to become a major regional hub for modern and contemporary art, the Dubai-based fair has organised a fifteenth edition that is proving to be exceptional. The big surprise of the year? An entire section devoted to NFTs and digital artworks.

Par Yasmina El Gueddari

On February 22nd, the emirate of Dubai inaugurated its Museum of the Future. The façade of this marvel of architecture and innovation is adorned with a quote from Dubai's ruler: «The future belongs to those who can imagine it, design it and execute it. The future does not wait. The future can be designed and built today.» In this regard, Dubai's future in the international art market seems to grow stronger every year. Art Dubai returns to the Madinat Jumeirah Conference and Events Centre, March 11-13, 2022 to consolidate its foothold.

The COVID-19 pandemic plunged the Gulf region into severe recession in 2020. Iranian collector Mohammed Afkhami remarks that the 2021 edition of Art Dubai was for «a good sign for Dubai as well as a positive omen for some of the world's biggest fairs». The Templon and Perrotin galleries sold well (pieces by Ivàn Navarro sold for \$28,000-\$100,000 at Templon, and Perrotin sold two works by JR for \$65,000).

Art Dubai has skilfully added valuable also managed to surround itself well through judicious partnerships with renowned auction houses: Christie's and Bonhams. During the 2019 edition, Christie's 2019 edition sales were a great success, tallying over \$20 million.

2022 will be Dubai's year.

Determined to be one of the hubs of the art world, and strengthened by the success of the 2020 edition, Art Dubai is back for a 15th edition that promises to be

exceptional. It marks the appearance of a new category of exhibiting galleries: «Art Dubai digital», including 17 galleries presenting NFT digital art projects, some of whom are pioneers since the 1980s. Also present, e-commerce platforms transforming physical artworks into NFTs.

Underscoring the crypto-art dialogue is the most anticipated new beat of 2022. Among them, «Cyber Baat», an exhibition by Senegalese artist Linda Douina, who exhibits works by Afro-descendant artists.

In addition to the galleries, a number of conferences will take place during «Art Dubai Talks», focusing on the most influential modern artists in the MENA region. The «Building Important Art Collections in the Arab World» conference is particularly topical, as it explores the transformation of artistic production, demand, and the role of art collections in the Arab world. Rendezvous March 11th, 3-4:30 pm.

The fair also features the 9th edition of Campus Art Dubai, which, in this year of digital art, focuses on blockchain. Designed for digital-savvy artists, Campus opened its 8-week session in January. Every year, the fair moves closer to the forefront tech innovation in the art market.

To top it off are workshops for young people, 5-17, in close collaboration with UAE-based schools. Highlighting the art of African recycling, these immersive workshops are led by the Kenyan futurist-artist, Cyrus Kabiru. With more than 100 exhibitors from 44 countries (including more than 30 new exhibi-



Courtesy of Art Dubai



Mohamed Arejda, Zarbia, 2019, tapis traditionnel. Courtesy : Comptoir des Mines Galerie



Mohamed Lekleti, *Entre deux infinis tu nous tiens suspendus*, 2022, Mixed media on paper, 152 x 250 cm. Courtesy of Loft Art Gallery

tors), the 2022 edition is the largest edition so far and marks the return of Iranian art galleries (five this year, including one in the NFT category), and the absence of Israeli galleries, which ultimately reflects the political situation that binds the Emirate of Dubai to these two states.

As for Morocco, three contemporary art galleries will be present during this exceptional fifteenth edition: Loft Art Gallery (Casablanca), Comptoir des Mines (Marrakech) and dar d’art gallery (Tangier).

Hicham Daoudi, founder of Comptoir des Mines, explains the artistic approach of his gallery: «We will offer a modern and contemporary selection. For contemporary, we present our own artists: Hassan Bourkia, Mohamed Arejda, Fatiha Zemmouri, and Khadija Jay. The theme is *Le Pain Nu* by Mohamed Choukri. A book that raises interesting and very current questions: the individual destiny of the artist and the difficulties they may encounter in the context of Moroccan society, how they face resistance with resilience. And then, we must not forget that *Le Pain Nu* has changed Moroccan literature, and its raw and

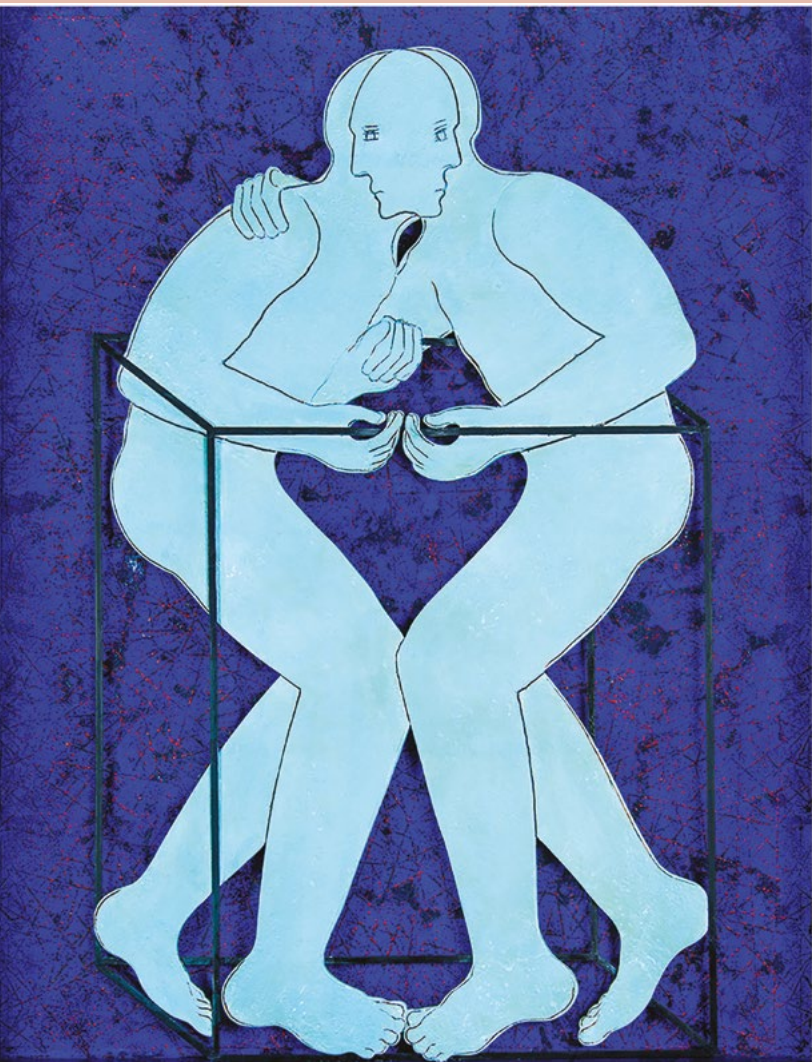
beautiful writing has had great impact in the Arab world. For the modern section, we focus on Kacimi and his work on the question of human dignity.»

Loft Art Gallery presents an exhibition bringing together 5 different perspectives on the theme «Transmission is Love». The artists presented (Mohamed Melehi, Malika Agueznay, Mohamed Lekleti, Mous Lamrabet and Marion Boehm) each use their own

The individual destiny of the artist and the difficulties they may encounter ... how they face resistance with resilience.

artistic process to demonstrate their love for their heritage and values. For Loft Art Gallery, «art is the transmission of their feelings, and for these five

With over 100 exhibitors - including 30 new galleries - from 44 countries, 2022 is the largest edition to date.



Mahi Binebine, mixed media on wood. Courtesy : Galerie Dar D’Art



Mustapha Akrim/Mohamed Choukri, 2022, calligraphy on metal. Courtesy : Comptoir des Mines Galerie



Malika Agueznay, 2021, oil on canvas. Courtesy artist and Loft Art Gallery

artists, transmission is an act of love”. Finally, dar d’art gallery and its «Dialogue» exhibition reunite two important figures of the Moroccan contemporary scene: Mohammed Melehi and Mahi Binebine. «The exhibition was to take place in 2020, when Mohamed Melehi was still alive,» explains Chokri Bentaoult, but after postponement of the 2020 and 2021 editions, Melehi’s touch will nevertheless be present, as «the selection of works and the scenography were decided three years ago. The presentation is large format: four pieces by Binebine, three by Melehi. The works have been sleeping in a warehouse for a long time; only two works of Mahi Binebine have been changed,» says Chokri Bentaoult. Though the duo’s popularity will surely attract visitors, this exhibition is also a beautiful tribute to the friendship and complicity that bound two significant figures who have played a major role in opening Moroccan art to the world.

Thanks to Art Dubai, the Emirate of Dubai remains, once again, one of the major players in the international art market, covering the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (MENASA) region with the presence of galleries from India, Pakistan, Korea and Turkey. This year, the fair takes place at the same time as World Expo 2020, and will highlight the Sharjah Biennial, postponed until later in 2022 or 2023.

Art Dubai reinforces the Emirate’s position as a commercial crossroads, an inheritance that dates back to the late 19th century and the links forged between the great Iranian merchants of the East and the British Empire of the West.



Khadija Jayi, Les restes de la terre, acrylic on canvas, mixed media (burned photo paper), 190 x 140 cm. Courtesy of Comptoir des Mines Galerie



Mohamed Kacimi. Courtesy of Comptoir des Mines Galerie

1-54 Art Fair

A conversation with Touria El Glaoui

This year, the 1-54 Art Fair in London is not only anticipating in an in-person edition, it is scaling up. Director and founder, Touria El Glaoui, looks back on nine years' worth of editions for this fair that has contributed to the emergence of African contemporary art.

In conversation with Meryem Sebti

1-54 London has reached its 9th edition, which is to say that the fair has earned a fixed spot on the calendar. Has the health crisis changed the dynamic of art fairs?

Last year brought up a lot of challenges for everyone, and in response, we were obliged to adapt to make sure the fairs would continue. Though many fairs were cancelled all around the world, we were able to adapt sufficiently well enough for ours to carry on in one way or another, on a reduced scale or in another space, like at Christie's or online. Nevertheless, for the next London edition, we are not only back to our normal size, we've organised a larger edition with 48 galleries spread across three wings of Somerset House.

Will the partnership with Christie's continue as well?

Our partnership with Christie's is a collaboration born from the pandemic and the need to adapt. We were able to hold superb in-person events during the past year, such as our special edition in Paris,

and we also created an online platform to accompany each edition of the fair throughout last year. These projects made the fair more accessible in the restrictive context of the pandemic, all the while presenting the fair, its galleries, and its artists to a new audience of collectors from around the globe. **Galerie 38 is offering a solo show of the Moroccan painter Mohamed Hamidi. In past years, we witnessed the great success of exhibitions of artists like Ibrahim El Salahi or Ernest Mancoba... What is the role of artists from African modernist movements at 1-54?**

To have a solo exhibition of Mohamed Hamidi at the fair is a real honour, given his stature as an artist, and we are delighted to share his work with our visitors. Presenting the work of a master has always been special for us, because we often present at the same time work by artists who have been inspired or even taught by that master. This offers visitors the opportunity to bear witness to a meaningful history.

[Listen to the podcast](#)



Touria El Glaoui in front of Somerset House, home to the 1-54 Art Fair in London. © Victoria Birkinshaw

“More and more novice collectors, in particular from Africa and its diaspora, are getting involved in the art market”

In nine years of existence, it is clear that 1-54 champions African artists, who then go on to join powerful galleries and broad spectrum major art fairs. Is 1-54 a discovery fair, or can it meet the challenge of accompanying well-established artists?

Since our first fair in 2013, it is important for us to present artists at any phase of their careers, without any particular distinction between “emerging” or “established”, and to feature a fair share of each. The different scenes on the continent have developed at very different rhythms; some have markets, financial support, and/or well-established institutional support and schools. This places artists in various positions in terms of access to opportunity and the ability to participate in the fair. We try to ensure that there are the fewest possible obstacles to participation. As a fair, we also want to ensure that there are multiple pricing levels, so that collectors with smaller budgets can enter the market.

Has the panorama of collectors changed over

the past nine years?

Collectors' profiles are changing. We observe more and more novice collectors, in particular from Africa and its diaspora, are getting involved in the art market. We are also seeing more established collectors from the continent, who tend to concentrate on modern artists, collecting contemporary African artists.

This is very promising, as it gives a positive vision of the potential of different art markets on the continent for the decade to come.



View of the 2019 edition of the 1-54 Art Fair in London. © Rocion Chacon

“The art world is obsessed with the notion of trends”

London, Paris, New York, Marrakech: do the different 1-54 fairs have specificity or do they attract a globalised elite that moves around the planet following the contemporary art agenda?

Each fair depends upon the environment in which it takes place, transforming each time in function of the city's needs. By implication, each is unique. We have an international group of dedicated collectors who try to visit all the editions, but most often our audience is more local.

Those who have followed 1-54 since the beginning have seen new visual trends emerge, the most recent being realistic portrait paintings. Do you have an idea what drives these trends?
The art world is obsessed with the notion of trends.

However, trends aren't very useful when talking about art, in particular if looking at art produced in a very large geographic area. No doubt that connections are forged between artists through shared realities they choose to address, whether it is about the use of certain materials, socio-economic events, histories, or choices of style. But viewing and discussing an artist's work through the filter of a trend can often minimise, or even ignore, the nuance in their work.



Trend

To be young, gifted and black

Despite the ravages of the health crisis, paintings by the rising stars of the Afro-American scene are flying out of auction houses. Time to wade into the fray? A look back over the young career of Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe.

Céline Moine, Artmarket.com

The recipe for success is just a few short lines, but impact makes all the difference: a thirty-something African artist, with a real talent for portraiture, influenced by the godfathers of contemporary Black painting like Kerry James Marshall and Kehinde Wiley, takes off with a strong show in London or the US...and market values soar. In the weeks or months that follow, early bird buyers ring up Phillips, Bonhams, Christie's or Sotheby's to play one off the other, because today's recipe is getting as hot as contemporary Chinese artists were in the first years of the new century.

Such is the climb for Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, whose destiny is linked with Roberts Projects, the Los Angeles gallery known for pioneering the new superstars of African painting. The gallery was the first to show Amoako Boafo, whose meteoric rise landed him on the front page when his 2019 painting fetched a whopping \$881,500 at auction. The sale was a dry run for Quaicoe, so Phillips fixed estimates between \$40,000 and \$65,000. The history is revealing: art dealer and collector Stefan Simchowitz had acquired the work, The Lemon Bathing Suit,

for a little under \$25,000 the previous summer from Jeffrey Deitch, who had the piece on consignment from Roberts Projects. This appreciation value of \$680,000 in less than a year, for a work from 2019, baffled many, despite Boafo's roster of powerful backers. Among his supporters is mega-talent Kehinde Wiley, fresh off the success of his official portrait of Barack Obama (2018), who has become a major proponent and unifier of the art world since opening his extravagant Black Rock artists' residency in Dakar.

A crisis-resistant market

At the time Boafo was breaking auction records, Roberts Projects opened the first solo show by Quaicoe ("Black Like Me") in America. In his Artforum review, Terence Trouillot described the show as "an ensemble of paintings that, although clearly indebted to the colourful, virtuosic work of Barkley L. Hendricks and Kerry James Marshall, present an idiosyncratic perspective on African culture through the celebrated form of black portraiture" (February 12, 2020).

The Ghanaian artist's familiar and direct style hit a vein, and his work was scooped up by significant private collections. A few months later, on July 2nd, the British company Phillips introduced the young artist to auction with the painting *Shade of Black* (2018). Estimated at \$20,000, the work reached over 10 times that, selling at \$250,000 despite a health crisis that many believed would have a calming effect on the market for young artists. Six more paintings went on to exceed their high estimates at other auctions the same year, including an important contemporary art sale at Sotheby's Hong Kong.

Amoako Boafo and Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe are not alone. These two men in their thirties represent

the new guard of this current trend (admittedly speculative), in the wake of many artists whose prices have climbed with a sense of urgency after they signed with powerful international galleries: David Zwirner for Kerry James Marshall (since 2013), Njideka Akunyili Crosby (2018), and Noah Davis (2020); Hauser & Wirth for Amy Sutherland, Lorna Simpson, Mark Bradford, Henry Taylor, and Simone Leigh; and finally, Gagosian for Nathaniel Mary Quinn (2019).



◆ Sold 881 500 \$

Amoako Boafo, *The Lemon Bathing Suit*, 2019, oil on unstretched canvas, 205.7 x 193 cm.
© Phillips

◆ Sold 130 000 \$

Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, *Black Stripes on White*, 2019, oil on canvas, 122 x 91.5 cm.
© Phillips

◆ Sold 4 265 000 \$

Amy Sutherland, *The Bathers*, 2015, oil on canvas, 183.2 x 170.2 cm.
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