

# NEW WAVES:

MOHAMED MELEHI  
AND THE CASABLANCA  
ART SCHOOL ARCHIVES



# INTRODUCTION

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Mohamed Melehi (b. 1936, Asilah, Morocco) is regarded as a major figure for postcolonial Moroccan art and within the history of transnational modernism.

This retrospective exhibition brings a pioneering artist's multi-faceted career to life, giving UAE audiences a unique insight into a practice that feels critical and relevant for contemporary concerns in this region. It also tells the story of the Casablanca Art School during its most radical period, when Melehi taught there between 1964-1969.

In Melehi's art, we sense the spirit of aesthetic revolution and the exhilaration of post-Independence Morocco. His creative energy and visual innovation are palpable in this unique selection of key works, dating from the 1950s to the 1980s. We trace Melehi's artistic developments in the 1960s, from experiments with abstraction in Rome and New York, to the fullest expression of the wave, his emblematic motif, in the 1970s. We also recognise his importance in the history of transnational art; Melehi's work resists the East/West divide that developed during the Cold War period. His wavy Third World frescoes take us on a cosmopolitan journey, drawing together the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.

Melehi has played an influential role in the development of local art pedagogy and experimental practices in Morocco. During the 1960s, alongside Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chabâa, Toni Maraini, and Bert Flint, he participated in a turning point in art education, at Casablanca's Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Archives from the school, shown in this exhibition, convey a spirit of collective knowledge through interdisciplinary displays and site-specific works. The school combined different studios for painting, sculpture, decoration, graphic design, and typography/calligraphy, encouraging students to look beyond Western art history, and develop deeper interest in local artistic production and craftsmanship instead.

Between 1985-1992, he took up on a new position at the Ministry of Culture, contributing to the development of art spaces and cultural institutions in Morocco, and leading major restoration projects including the Tinmel mosque in the High Atlas. Between 1999-2002, he worked as a cultural consultant to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As a graphic designer and photographer, Melehi helped shape the visual culture of political causes throughout the Maghreb and within pan-Arab artistic networks. His graphic design and editorial work for the Casablanca group and for avant-garde journals such as *Souffles* (1966-1969) and *Integral* (1971-1978) provide the best examples. A painter, photographer, muralist, graphic and urban designer, art teacher, and cultural activist, Melehi challenged convention and freed painting from the gallery and studio, breaking down hierarchies and reclaiming public space for the visual arts.

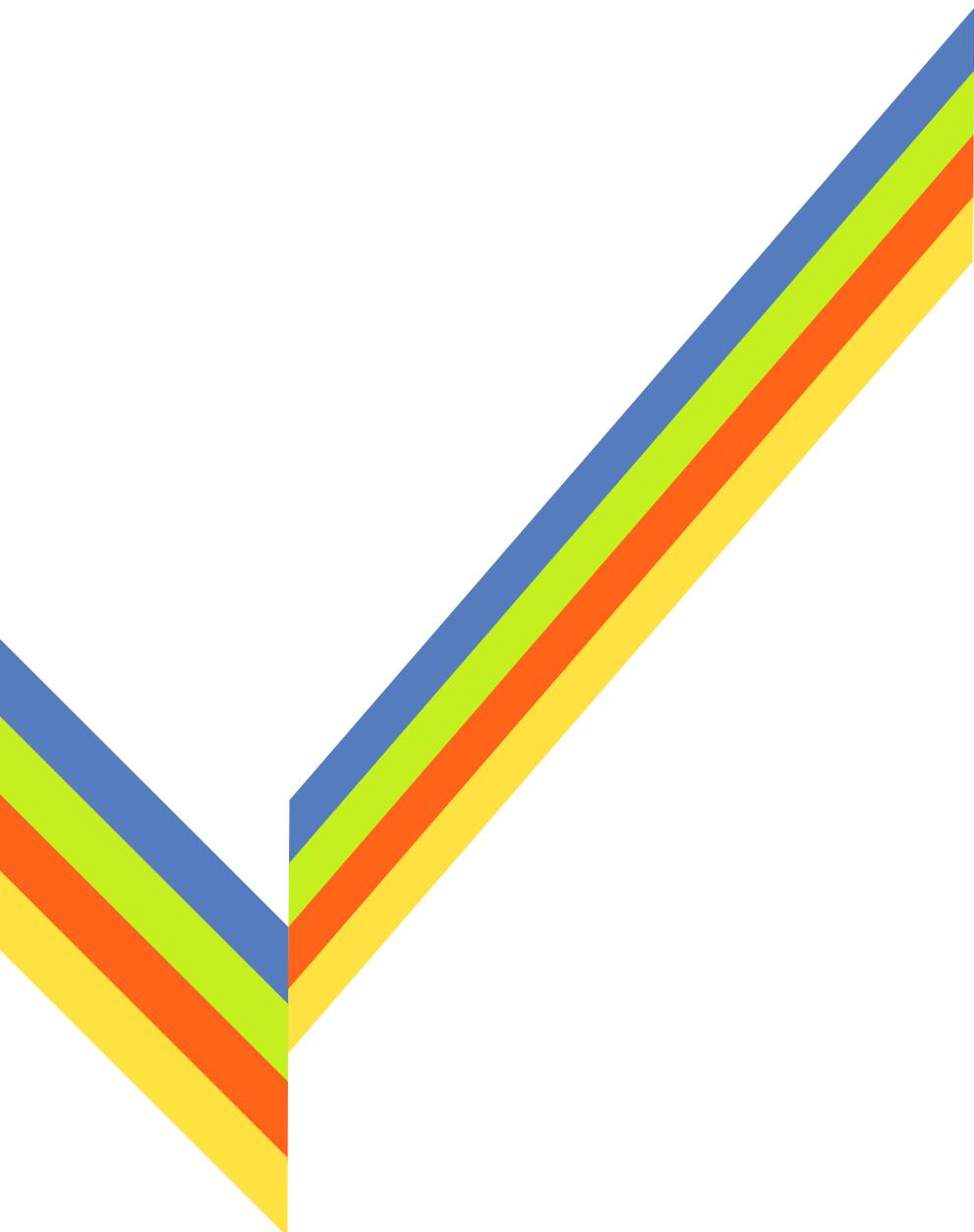
Curated by Morad Montazami and Madeleine de Colnet of Zaman books, this iteration expands their research into lesser known aspects of Melehi's work, such as his photographic practice. It also reveals his in-depth exploration of Afro-Berber art and craft.

This display follows four principal sections: it highlights Melehi's urban wanderings between the cities of Rome, New York, and Casablanca, the stimulation of new visions, and the dream of sharing them with a community that would transcend school, art factory, or design studio... and, finally, the nomadic museum or migratory forms.

In the spirit of Melehi's commitment to bringing art out of the gallery into the public realm, the exhibition extends into The Yard, with an adapted recreation of a mural from the first Asilah Moussem Festival of the Arts in 1978.



M. Melehi working on a fresco project, cafeteria of the Minneapolis Institute of the Arts, 1962. Photo Toni Maraini. Toni Maraini archives



Fibula, berber jewel, published in the journal *Maghreb Art*, n°1, 1965.  
Photo M. Melehi. Toni Maraini archives

## Section 1: 1957–1964

# FROM ROME TO NEW YORK CITY: PRIMARY STRUCTURES AND SOFT EDGE PAINTING

It was in the 1950s in Rome, Italy, after a brief stay in Seville, Spain, that Melehi took his first artistic steps internationally. This was primarily through his memorable collaboration with Galleria Trastevere, founded by the visionary Topazia Alliata. His geometric experiments, which played with horizontality and verticality on canvas, emerged from the environment of the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, where he studied in Toti Scialoja's influential Bianco e Nero (White and Black) workshop, alongside artists such as Jannis Kounellis and Pino Pascali.

From 1962-1964, Melehi lived and worked in New York, near the famous Five Spot Club. There, he pursued his love of jazz, attending concerts by great masters including Thelonious Monk and Charles Mingus. In the studio he shared with Italian artist Lucio Pozzi, he developed his own pictorial style, pitting experimental geometry against technology, speed, and the power of ubiquity. After his participation in Hard Edge and Geometric Painting at New York's MoMA in 1963, his compositions continued to evolve; with multi-dimensional squares laid out like sparkling windows, or dizzying impressions of the city's skyscrapers.

The artist's early works reveal that before the wave took over the canvas entirely, it first appeared at the work's edges. Around 1962, the wave surreptitiously turned away from the straight edges of the modernist canvas – as Melehi developed his own style of "soft-edge" painting, in which right angles seem to give way to the volubility of rounded, circular volumes.



M. Melehi exhibition at Bab Rouah gallery, Rabat, 1965.  
Photo M. Melehi. Safieddine-Melehi archives

## SECTION 2: 1964–1978

# FROM NEW YORK CITY TO CASABLANCA: A THOUSAND WAVES IN HYPERSPACE

By 1964, new waves had clearly developed along with Melehi's programme of divergent geometry. His multiple and overflowing variations on the "wave" suggest cosmic relations, playing out between the sun, the sea, the horizon; but also new possibilities for transnational solidarities and utopias. He explored this pattern beyond painting, through prints, posters, and books, in his role as a cultural activist with organisations such as the Union of Arab Plastic Artists, which met throughout the 1970s in Damascus, Rabat, and Baghdad – where Melehi and his Casablanca colleagues participated in the first pan-Arab Biennale, in 1974. The flame-wave became a sort of compass to navigate these constellations of cities, eventually dissolving in an ever-changing rhythm, its pulsating patterns suggesting water, earth, air and fire... But also, at times, an anthropomorphic eroticism, or a unique form of unconscious landscapes.

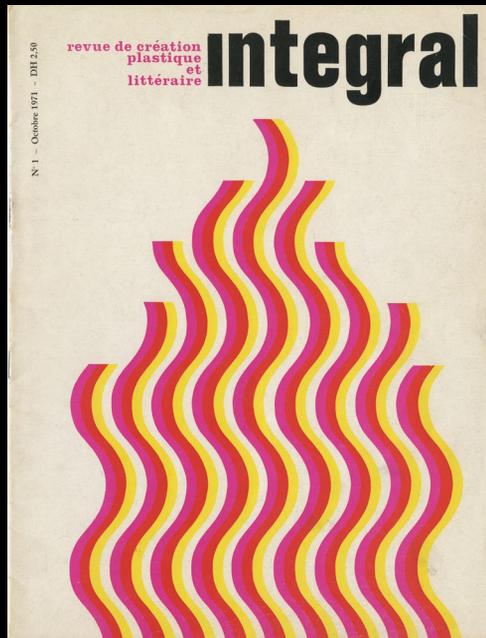
Melehi and his then partner Toni Maraini returned to Morocco from the US, and in 1964 joined the Casablanca Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He taught painting, sculpture, collage, and graphic design. Both of them were hired by artist Farid Belkahia, who had been appointed director of the school in 1962. Mohammed Chabâa was the other key member in the interconnection between graphic art, architecture, and painting. One should also mention the collector and anthropologist Bert Flint who, alongside Maraini, renewed the school's theoretical teachings. Their most compelling challenge would be to align the popular arts and crafts and architecture – which Melehi photographed extensively – with their modernist language. Today, scholars of comparative modernities and curators are opening new paths for the Casablanca Art School by stimulating dialogue with, for example, the Bauhaus or the Khartoum School.



Ali Noury, a student from the Casablanca Art School, annual exhibition, June 1968. Photo M. Melehi. Toni Maraini archives

## Section 3: 1980s

# REFRAMING THE WAVE: BETWEEN AFRO-BERBERISM AND POSTCOLONIAL ARCHITECTURE



Cover of the journal Integral, n°1, October 1971

Since the 1960s, artists and activists of the Casablanca Art School called for a return to African and Berber sources. Together, they encouraged their students to study rugs, jewellery, leatherwork, tattoos, “decorative” painting in mosque and zawiyas (religious schools or monasteries) of the Souss region; to seek the potential of these popular Moroccan art forms in terms of geometric abstraction and “modernism”. A multi-cultural repertoire of forms and symbols with complex interconnections between Berber and African, Islamic and Mediterranean, as well as the deeper archaeological layers of Mesopotamia and Phoenicia.

While Mohamed Melehi was fully involved in the development of mural paintings and urban design in the context of the Asilah Arts Festival, his works from the 1980s seem to open a new space for reframing the wave (either through craft objects or architecture). The wave is expanded and turned into a structural thread for the re-integration of decorative arts and everyday aspirations into his avant-garde project.

For his 1965 Galerie Bab Rouah exhibition in Rabat, he chose to display a Berber carpet (from the private collection of Bert Flint) next to his soft and angular paintings. From that time to the 1980s, Melehi’s works continued to maintain the flow of new waves as synonymous to “new craft” and to a certain aesthetic fluidity.

In parallel to these experiments, a selection of visual archives presents the architecture of various buildings and hotels (from the 1970s) where Belkahia, Chabâa and Melehi created in-situ reliefs, frescoes, and furniture design – in an “integrated art” style that was both minimalist and grassroots. Commissioned by architectural studio Faraoui & De Mazières, these structural and decorative elements demonstrate a timely dialogue between the labyrinthine patterns of these works and the modular shapes of buildings designed by Patrice de Mazières. It is a rare example of visual artists and architects from Arab regions (one might mention the Baghdad Modern Art Group in the 1950-1960s) coming together as an innovative and hybrid group to imagine a new kind of postcolonial architecture.

## Section 4: 1960s

# MELEHI THE PHOTOGRAPHER: DOCUMENTING MODERNITY



Manifesto-exhibition, *Présence plastique*, Jemaa el-Fna square, Marrakech, May 1969. Photo M. Melehi. Safieddine-Melehi archives Manifesto-exhibition, *Présence plastique*, Jemaa el-Fna square, Marrakech, May 1969. Photo M. Melehi. Safieddine-Melehi archives

Mohamed Melehi developed a compelling photographic eye and practice, from the early 1960s, mainly inspired by his travels, exhibitions and encounters. A display of selected photographs from this corpus is assembled here for the first time, revealing the diverse streams of his experience. Beyond his work as painter, designer and visual activist, Melehi often performed the role of a documentary photographer, commenting on the complex post-Independence Moroccan society, alongside the visual richness of its architecture, local arts, and creativity, both urban and outside the city. Hence, this unique selection of vintage photographs by the archivist of the Casablanca Art School takes us between the traditional landscapes, villages, and souks around Marrakech, and the modernised landscape of Casablanca – where the impulse for modernist art slowly makes it to the streets. In and out of exhibition spaces, the photographs also tell us about the fruitfulness of experimental displays shared and developed collectively by the students and the professors of the school. These images capture and chronicle the unique momentum of local avant-gardism, which echo and relate to the transnational history of arts and crafts — for instance, the renowned Bauhaus school.



# THE CASABLANCA ART SCHOOL: A GOLDEN AGE, OR A REVOLUTIONARY PARENTHESIS

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The arrival in 1962 of Farid Belkahia at the helm of Casablanca's Ecole des Beaux-Arts, (where he would remain until 1974), opened a new and drastically different chapter in the long history of an institution born under French colonial influence (the school remains active to this day). One might speak of a golden parenthesis, or 12 years of a vast pool of position statements and artistic revolutions. Belkahia demonstrated the radical yet coherent nature of his project for the school by gradually expanding the teaching staff to integrate personalities such as Mohamed Melehi and Toni Maraini, followed by Mohamed Chabâa and Bert Flint – while at the same time joining forces with them in what has proven to be the most legendary art collective in the history of Morocco. It should also be noted that three other artist-facilitators, Romain Ataallah, Mustapha Hafid, and Mohamed Hamidi, would occasionally join the ranks of the aforementioned artists.

Teaching methods such as easel painting, working from life or using statues as models, or more generally the Western tradition (post-cubist, post-impressionist, even orientalist) were replaced by an alternative pedagogy; resolutely oriented to the creative emancipation of students, sourcing perspectives for the future from within Moroccan arts and tradition.

A system which offered strictly commercial and artisanal opportunities was abandoned in favour of training that would produce authentic "artists". In the backdrop to these profound changes, national independence in 1956 had encouraged many young Moroccans to train for professional careers that would allow them to take part in the country's new economy. Paradoxically, new theoretical and practical courses restored a place of honour to the master artisan – in a non-traditional sense – drawing from his repertoire of gestures, forms and symbols to be reconsidered. Hence, Chabâa's teaching method, oriented towards the applied arts, would redefine classical calligraphy for use in the art of typography and poster design; Melehi's painting classes encouraged students to reinterpret the patterns and visual organisation of Berber carpets, thus evolving them into mural art (a media he shared with Chabâa).

Meanwhile, Bert Flint invited students to explore his collection of folk art and Berber jewellery, revealing to them the secrets of their symbolism as well as their plastic potential. Toni Maraini, the daughter of Italian writer and anthropologist Fosco Maraini, acted as the principal theoretician of the Casablanca Art School's group. It was she who wrote the manifestos, critical texts, and catalogues for Belkahia, Chabâa, and Melehi, from Marrakech to Baghdad. Furthermore, she initiated students to a transversal and previously unseen art history, claiming Africa and the Mediterranean as centres for outreach.

# FROM *INTEGRAL* JOURNAL TO SHOOF PUBLISHING: ARTIST, PUBLISHER, MIGRATOR

Together, they would contribute to the modification of mindsets and formal references for students — whether in the school’s studio workshops or in field research — to rediscover an entire heritage concentrated notably in rural zones, the mosques, and habitats created by villagers in the Souss and the High Atlas Mountains.

These experiences would give rise to *Maghreb Art*, a journal that appeared between 1965-1969 and in which all of this knowledge would be presented, classified, and analysed, but also supported by a real aestheticism. The carpets, jewellery, and painted ceilings create their own “montage” of rigorous photographs shot by Melehi, and analytical texts by Bert Flint and Toni Maraini. A journal that would become a valuable document, fundamental to understanding this reversal of the modernist paradigm via light cast by a creative community that, though anonymous, was undeniably powerful in the collective sense – which might then be thought of as Afro-Berber.

Ultimately, as an active, activist, and pedagogical group, the Casablanca Art School tended to fuse two separate dimensions: the initiatives of artist-teachers (beginning with Belkahia, Chabâa, and Melehi), their publications and beyond-the-wall exhibitions (or even “without walls”, such as the *Présence plastique* exhibition in 1969); but also, the polymorphous and less visible space of studio work, in constant interaction with students, thus reversing factors of pedagogical hierarchy. Certain artists who passed through the Casablanca Art School studio in the 1960s (Hossein Miloudi, Malika Agueznay, and Abderrahmane Rahoule among others) carry its traces in their work to this day.

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Melehi’s flame – one of the best-known variations of his wave matrix – appeared for the first time in *Peintures et sérigraphies* (Paintings and Serigraphs), the 1971 inaugural exhibition of the Rabat-based gallery L’Atelier, a foundational space in the history of Arab and Mediterranean art, which was founded by Pauline de Mazières — for whom Melehi also designed the L’Atelier logo (just as he created one as well for Leila Faraoui and Nadar gallery in Casablanca). That same year, the flame also appeared on the cover of the first issue of *Integral* (1971). This influential review, conceived within Morocco but resolutely Maghrebian, even pan-Arab in scope, brought together poetry, visual and graphic arts (self-described as “a journal of plastic and literary creation”).

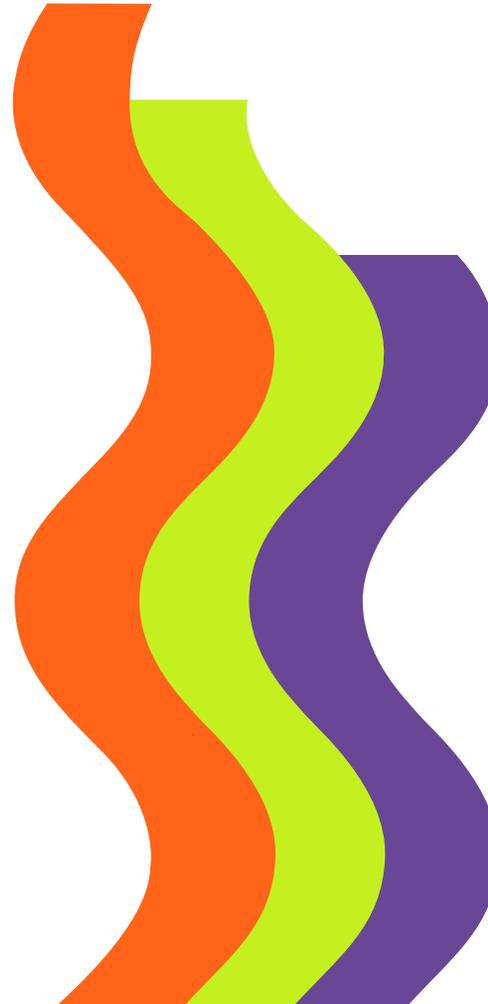


Melehi created the graphic charter of *Integral*, co-founded with Toni Maraini, Tahar Benjelloun, and Mostafa Nissabouri, who became its primary voices, each in his or her own area of interest, and later joined by prominent authors of contemporary Arab thought (Adonis, Abdelkebir Khatibi, and Abdallah Laroui among others). In reality, *Integral* offered more than new explorations between different artistic disciplines, inviting participation from dissident and independent voices at that. It also documented significant events of the modernist movement in the Arab world (photographs by Melehi accompanied coverage of the 1974 Baghdad Biennial in *Integral* n°9), bore witness to the collective formations that fuelled this movement (publication of the manifesto by the Moroccan Association of Plastic Artists in *Integral* n°8), as well as documented lesser-known performances: we see, for example, photographs from the *Présence plastique* exhibition, or the idea of organising travelling exhibitions, including the display of works by Belkahia, Chabâa, and Melehi in two Casablanca high schools (*Integral* n°1).

Melehi was already involved in creating the cover and graphic identity for *Souffles* (1966-1969), the cultural journal founded by Abdellatif Laâbi. But with *Integral*, he also assumed the mantle of artistic director. As a next step, Melehi brought about a new synthesis of his multiple talents as a photographer, layout artist, and activist-graphic designer when he founded SHOOF publishing in 1974. SHOOF was the first house to publish a monograph on Moroccan pioneer Ahmed Cherkaoui, and Melehi expanded its activity with a graphic design studio, producing commercial design for retail and private businesses in addition to publishing fine art books. This global approach is reflected in the official logo and letterhead of SHOOF: “Environment, graphic design, audio-visual, publishing, advertising”.

**“Any type of art you see, if you use it as a way of communication, a way of awakening attitudes, it could help broaden minds.”**

**- Mohamed Melehi**



# **PRÉSENCE PLASTIQUE: A MANIFESTO- EXHIBITION**

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In 1969, the manifesto-exhibition *Présence Plastique* (Plastic Presence) that took place a few weeks apart in both Jemaa el-Fna Square in Marrakech (May) and in November Square in Casablanca (June), represents a defining moment in the history of art in Morocco, and for Arab and Southern modernisms. This street exhibition brought together the artists Belkahia, Chabâa, and Melehi, as well as Ataallah, Hafid, and Hamidi, in opposition to the state-sponsored Salon du Printemps exhibition which was organised at the same time, and to a cultural policy that was reminiscent of the colonial era — an ideology inherited from the Beaux-Arts that served to lessen the singularity of Moroccan artists. The exhibition responded to a situation in which, 10 years after Independence, nothing had been organised for and by artists in Morocco to create not only conditions for their own visibility, but to strive to make modern art a key element of everyday, and community, life. Freely on display here, it spoke directly to the public through the words of the group's theoretician, Toni Maraini, in an unsigned manifesto distributed to passers-by, and claimed by all participating artists:

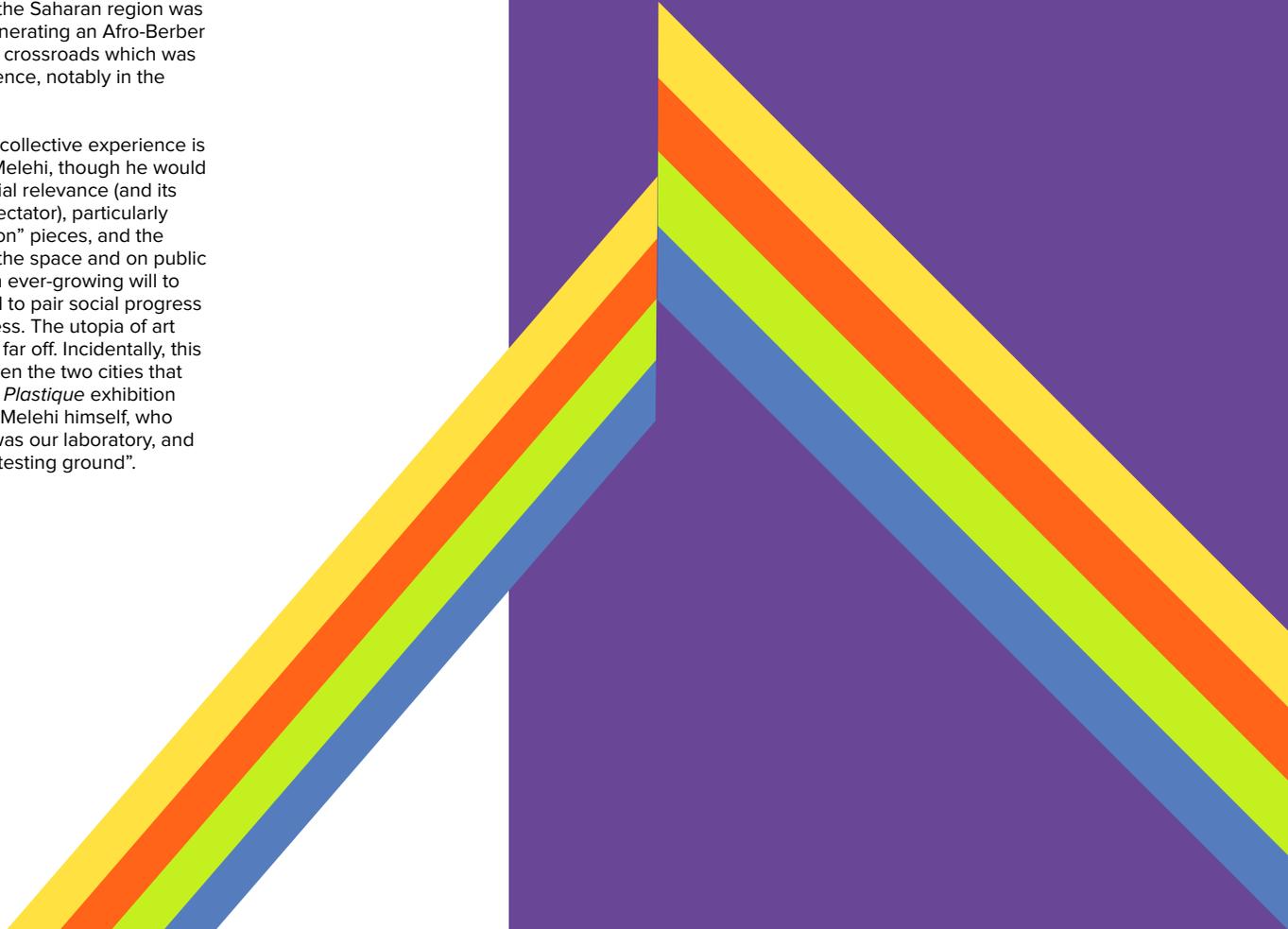
**“In Jemaa el-Fna, in Marrakech, different popular performances take place all day long. In this collective atmosphere, people from all walks of life (urban, rural, and every social class) gather in a unique state of mind. We hung our works here for ten days. We wanted to reach the general public where they live, in a casual and accessible way, and we proposed to them this living manifestation: paintings shown outdoors, in the public space. To show work outside of the closed doors of galleries and salons, where this audience had never been, and never felt the impact of any manifestation behind closed doors. Works that undergo the same atmospheric variations as do the people, the walls, the entire square.”**

**- Toni Maraini**

The statement reveals the role of painting from being a tool for social connection or an instrument for class struggle, to painting as an ephemeral ecosystem. Certain photographs have immortalised the event; notably, those taken from a distance that capture the busy square, with paintings hung on the outdoor wall panels of the central building, standing out against the cityscape like so many map symbols, direct manifestations of the Abdelkebir Khatibi's cherished *motif migration*.

The people of the Drâa, the Souss, descendants of Andalusian Moors, and Rehâma tribes from neighbouring plains would gather at this time, forming the ecosystem of Jemaa el-Fna Square. While Berber was spoken, the Saharan region was also represented, generating an Afro-Berber legacy unique to this crossroads which was clearly a strong influence, notably in the work of Belkahlia.

The influence of this collective experience is clear in the work of Melehi, though he would later question its social relevance (and its distance from the spectator), particularly in all of his "integration" pieces, and the different frescoes in the space and on public buildings – part of an ever-growing will to beautify daily life and to pair social progress with aesthetic progress. The utopia of art for the masses is not far off. Incidentally, this concomitance between the two cities that hosted the *Présence Plastique* exhibition was underscored by Melehi himself, who recalls: "Marrakech was our laboratory, and Casablanca was the testing ground".



# THE AFRO-BERBER MUSEUM: *BACK TO FUTURE ROOTS*

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Bert Flint is an eminent collector, anthropologist, and expert in the Afro-Berber arts, a category that he patiently forged and established, notably through the Musée Tiksiwin, which he founded in Marrakech in 1996.

At the heart of his research, particularly intense in the High Atlas and Anti-Atlas Mountains, Bert Flint understood how to reveal the fundamental role of Saharan populations within the multi-cultural heritage of Morocco. They represent, for him, the genuine vector of Afro-Berberism, demonstrating that civilisation is not produced by urban and trading centres alone, but also by the desert and its nomadic populations. It is thus imperative to retrace the deep cultural transfers, from one side to the other of a sub-Saharan border that loses relevance, as these exchanges take place far beyond the context of national or colonial borders. The dialogue between Bert Flint and Mohamed Melehi, which had begun as early as the late 1950s, struck its testing ground at the moment when they both joined the teaching staff of the Casablanca Art School, in the mid-1960s.

At first, this was through the interaction of the wave patterns painted by Melehi and the ornamental studies conducted by Flint, primarily of Berber carpets and jewellery, within which he decoded signs and symbols. It was also Melehi who would document and patiently photograph all of the discoveries that Flint would produce; notably, all of the painted ceilings in the mosques and *zawiyas* of the Souss, which they would exhibit in the pages of the *Maghreb Art* review – published as the school research report. Texts published by Flint in the review would enrich those contributed by Toni Maraini, whose research into the same objects contributed to the rehabilitation of the Mediterranean influence inherent in the Moroccan “popular arts”. Beyond the cartography of objects and their stylistic classification, the high point of the dialogue between Flint and Maraini is without doubt the revalorisation of the artisan. The challenge was to go beyond a vision of artisanry, guided by a purely systematic and therefore subordinate knowledge, in comparison to “art”. On the contrary, they encouraged the students at the School to explore the work of an artisan to discover therein an operating knowledge, full of its own plastic forces and promises for the future – an approach that is reminiscent of Germany’s renowned Bauhaus School, or of teaching in Santiniketan in India.



# THE ASILAH MOUSSEM- FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS: REINVENTING THE CITY

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In 1978, Melehi co-founded with Mohamed Benaïssa the Asilah Moussem-Festival of the Arts – in their hometown north of Morocco, near Tangier. Together, and with the support of the El Mouhit Association, they created a new existence for Asilah, turning the ancient city (at turns Phoenician, Umayyad, Portuguese, or Spanish) into a veritable artistic land. Here, painting, sculpture, and ceramic exhibitions were organised, and studio workshops led by Toni Maraini were open to the children and young people of the city. Motivated by his travels and encounters, Melehi mobilised an artistic community from Arab, African, and Asian countries, as well as Europeans and Americans, to create a bridge between East and West. As reminded by the curator and researcher Maud Houssais: “For the first edition, artists from Palestine (Nacer Soumi), the Sudan (Mohamed O. Khalil), Iraq (Salem Debbagh), America (Robert Blackburn), or Italy (Nilde Carabba) were invited to lead the print workshops. While Farid Belkahlia, Mohamed Melehi, Miloud Lbied, Mohamed Hamidi, Mohamed Chabâa, Saad Hassani, Hossein Miloudi, Mohamed Kacimi, and Abderrahmane Rahoule were joined by the schoolchildren of Asilah to produce a series of fresco murals on the walls of the medina. The frescoes were part of an effort to rehabilitate the old medina, abandoned to its state of neglect and decrepitude.

In addition to conferences and film screenings at the Raïssouli Palace, programming included modern and traditional music sessions on the square below the Portuguese tower, as well as many street performances. The festival signalled the need for a decentralisation of the economic and cultural axis formed by Rabat and Casablanca”.

From its inception, the Moussem gave itself the mission to combine the avant-garde with the popular, and to defend an anti-elitist vision of culture, that would become part of the lives of the city’s inhabitants — in order to enable those who grew up without access to museums to feel an ownership of their cultural patrimony, of their shared heritage. The city became its own ephemeral museum.

Year after year, Asilah renders its parade of frescoes, covering the labyrinthine walls of the timeless city, like blooming gardens in springtime, from the narrowest alleyways to every street corner. This festival, which celebrated its 40th anniversary last year, constitutes one of the many platforms created by Melehi and the Casablanca Art School generation, to compensate for the lack of visibility of local artists; to contribute to the production of the utopia where art meets life; to synthesise painting, landscape, and architecture. The dreamscape of Asilah and its kinetic moonlight are implicitly present in many of Melehi’s paintings from the 1980s.



**Texts by Morad Montazami, approved  
by Mohamed Melehi and Toni Maraini.**

**Thanks to our lenders:**

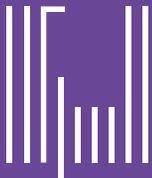
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