

NEW WAVES: MOHAMED MELEHI AND THE CASABLANCA ART SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION

This is the first UK exhibition dedicated to Mohamed Melehi (b.1936), who is now regarded as a major figure of postcolonial Moroccan art and of modernism in the Global South. *New Waves* presents Melehi the painter, photographer, muralist, graphic and urban designer, art teacher and cultural activist. It also tells the story of the radical Casablanca Art School.

In Melehi's art we can sense the spirit of aesthetic revolution and the elation of post-Independence Morocco. A creative energy and visual inventiveness are tangible in this unique selection of key works by Melehi from the 1950s to the 1980s. It traces Melehi's artistic development in the 1960s from experiments with abstraction between Rome and New York to the maturation of his distinctive wave pattern in the 1970s. We also see his importance in transnational art histories. Melehi's work refused the East/West divide, which developed during the Cold War period. His wavy frescoes of a Third World take us on a cosmopolitan journey, joining the Mediterranean with the Atlantic.

Melehi has played an influential role in the local development of art pedagogy and experimental practices in Morocco. From 1964 to 1974, he and a small group led a radical development of art education at the Casablanca Fine Art School. Archives from the school shown here convey the spirit of collective knowledge through experimental displays and site-specific works. The school combined different studios of painting, photography, decoration, graphic design and typography/calligraphy and encouraged students to look beyond Western art history, to local art production for inspiration.

As a graphic designer and photographer, Melehi helped shape the aesthetics of artistic networks and political causes throughout the Maghreb and Pan-Arab regions. He designed prints for the Casablanca group and for avant-garde journals such as *Souffles* (1966-1969) and *Integral* (1972-1977).

Between 1985-1992 he took up a new position at the Ministry of Culture, contributing to the development of art spaces and cultural institutes in Morocco, 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.

The exhibition follows three chrono-geographical chapters, highlighting Melehi's urban wanderings between the cities of Rome, New York and Casablanca. The excitement of new visions and the dream of sharing them with a transnational community transcends the school, the art factory, the design studio... and eventually a nomadic museum for migratory forms.

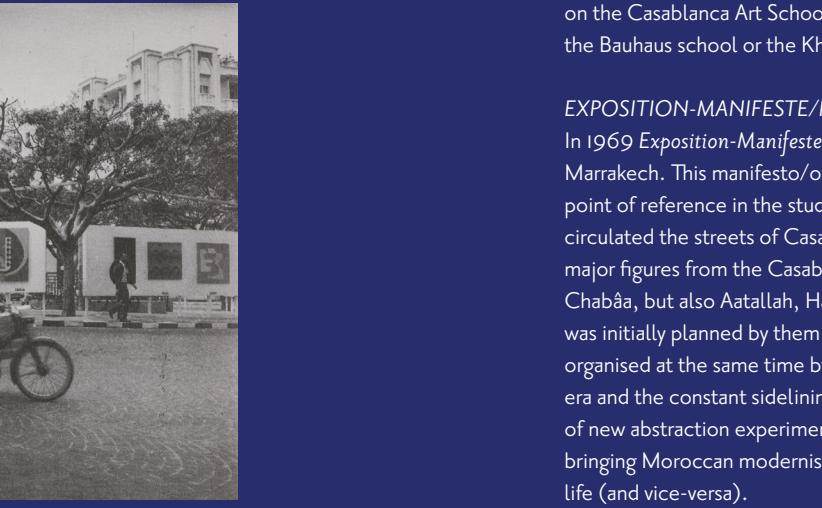
ROOM 1:

1957 – 1964 FROM ROME TO NEW YORK CITY, PRIMARY STRUCTURES AND SOFT EDGE PAINTING

It was in the 1950s in Italy, after a short time in Seville, Spain, that Melehi took his first artistic steps internationally; most notably in his timely collaboration with Galleria Trastevere founded by the visionary Topazio Alliata. His geometric experiments playing with horizontality and verticality were influenced by the environment of the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome; where he studied in Toti Scialoja's influential workshop *Bianco e Nero* (*Black and White*) alongside artists including Jannis Kounellis, Pino Pascali, Giulio Turcato.

Between 1962-1964, Melehi lived and worked in New York, near the famous Five Spot Club. Here he pursued his love of jazz, seeing great masters including Thelonious Monk and Charles Mingus play live. In the studio he shared with American artist Jim Dine, he developed his own pictorial style, bringing experimental geometry to tackle issues of technology, speed and spatial ubiquties. After his participation in the exhibition, *Hard Edge and Geometric Painting*, MoMA, New York, in 1963, his compositions kept evolving; with his multidimensional squares set out like sparkling windows, dizzy impressions of New York's skyscrapers.

As revealed by Melehi's early years, before the wave took over the canvas, it made its first appearance at its edges. By 1962 the wave was surreptitiously turning away from the straight edges of the modernist canvas – as Melehi developed his own style of “soft-edge” painting in which harsh angles seem to give way to the softness of circular volumes.



Exposition-manifeste/Présence Plastique, Casablanca, 18 November Square, 1969.

ROOM 2:

1964 – 1978 FROM NEW YORK CITY TO CASABLANCA, A THOUSAND WAVES AND OUTER SPACE

By 1964 “waves” are clearly developed among Melehi's programme of diverted geometry. His multiple and overflowing variations on the wave suggests cosmic relations, played out with the sun, the sea, the horizon, but also new possibilities for transnational solidarities and utopias. He uses this motif through prints, posters and books to fit with his role as a cultural activist in organisations such as the Union of Arab Plastic Artists which met throughout the 1970s in Damascus, Rabat and Baghdad – where the first Arab Biennale was held in

1974, attended by Melehi. The flame-wave could indicate these constellations of cities; eventually dissolving in an ever-changing rhythmic, pulsing pattern suggesting water, earth, air and fire... but also at times with anthropomorphic eroticism or a unique sense of unconscious landscapes.

Melehi and his then-partner Maraini returned to Morocco from the U.S. and in 1964 joined the École des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca; here he taught photography, painting and sculpture. They were recruited by artist Farid Belkahia who had been appointed director of the school in 1962. Mohammed Chabâa also became a key

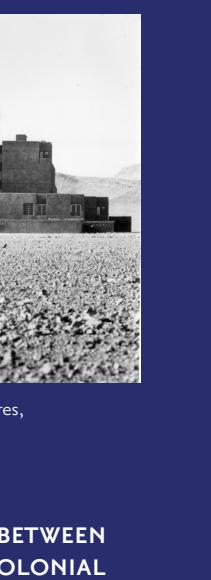
member, for the interconnection between graphic art, architecture and painting, alongside collector and anthropologist Bert Flint who, with Maraini, led the teaching of art theory. One of the most compelling challenges for Melehi was bridging the gap between local Moroccan-Berber crafts and modernist architecture - a built language he photographed extensively. Nowadays, scholars of comparative modernity and curators tend to open new perspectives on the Casablanca Art School; and ways of dialogue for instance with the Bauhaus school or the Khartoum school.

EXPOSITION-MANIFESTE/PRÉSENCE PLASTIQUE

In 1969 *Exposition-Manifeste* took place in Jma el-Fna Square, Marrakech. This manifesto/outdoor exhibition remains a central point of reference in the study of Arab modernities. The event which circulated the streets of Casablanca in the same year gathered the major figures from the Casablanca Art School; Melehi, Belkahia, Chabâa, but also Aatallah, Hafid and Hamidi. This “Plastic Action”

was initially planned by them in opposition to the Salon du Printemps organised at the same time by the state, a reminder of the colonial era and the constant sidelining of Moroccan artists. At the forefront of new abstraction experiments, the group was committed to bringing Moroccan modernist art onto the street and into everyday life (and vice-versa).

Alongside these experiments is a selection of architectural photography from various buildings and hotels (from the 1970s) where Belkahia, Chabâa and Melehi as the Casablanca group created in situ reliefs, frescoes and furniture design – in a both minimalist and



Fibulae, Berber jewellery, published in *Maghreb Art* n°1, 1965.
Photo M. Melehi

THE CURATOR

Morad Montazami is an art historian, a publisher and a curator who develops the publishing and curatorial platform, *Zamân Books & Curating* and publishes the journal *Zamân (Textes, images et documents)*. He published several essays on artists such as Zineb Sedira, Walid Raad, Latif al-Ani, Mehdi Moutashar, Faouzi Laatiris, Jeremy Deller, Francis Alÿs. Among his recent projects, he was a curator for *Volumes Fugitives : Faouzi Laatiris et l'institut national des beaux-arts de Tétouan*, Musé Mohamed VI d'art moderne et contemporain, Rabat, 2016; *Bagdad Mon Amour*, Institut des cultures d'Islam, Paris, 2018.

Madeleine de Colnet, assistant curator; Pooya Abbasian, Graphic production; Élie Colistro, leaflet design.

Restoration: Andrée Chaluleau-Photos and co., Kermes snc restauro beni artistici

COMMENT FROM RACHAEL JARVIS, DIRECTOR:

This exhibition is the last in our three-part exhibition series curated by Morad Montazami entitled *Cosmic Roads: Relocating Modernism* presenting important modernist artists from Egypt, Iran and Morocco. It is part of our programme celebrating the tenth anniversary of The Mosaic Rooms. We have been excited to show modernist and contemporary art from these three countries, and to work in partnership with regional institutions and curators.

Thanks to artworks lenders: Fondation Barjeel, Galerie Loft, Fondation Jardin Majorelle, Toni Maraini, M. Melehi estate, Slimane Naji, Moulay Idriss Yacoubi
Special thanks: Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, Sanaa El-Younsi, Maud Houssais, Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa, Mohamed and Khadija Melehi, Nour Melehi-Maraini, Mujah Maraini-Melehi, Salma Lahoul, Léa Morin, Faten Safieddine, Louloua Melehi and Ghita Melehi-Sollazzo



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

ZAMÂN
BOOKS & CURATING



Supported using public funding by

LOTTERY FUNDING

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

ZAMÂN
BOOKS & CURATING

LOFT
ART GALLERY
CASABLANCA

In support of the book project, Zamân Books
(due for release June 2019)



Hotel Boumalne, Studio Faraoui and De Mazières, Great South of Morocco, 1970-1971.

ROOM 3:

1980S REFRAMING THE WAVE: BETWEEN AFRO-BERBERISM AND POSTCOLONIAL ARCHITECTURE

THE CURATOR

Morad Montazami is an art historian, a publisher and a curator who develops the publishing and curatorial platform, *Zamân Books & Curating* and publishes the journal *Zamân (Textes, images et documents)*. He published several essays on artists such as Zineb Sedira, Walid Raad, Latif al-Ani, Mehdi Moutashar, Faouzi Laatiris, Jeremy Deller, Francis Alÿs. Among his recent projects, he was a curator for *Volumes Fugitives : Faouzi Laatiris et l'institut national des beaux-arts de Tétouan*, Musé Mohamed VI d'art moderne et contemporain, Rabat, 2016; *Bagdad Mon Amour*, Institut des cultures d'Islam, Paris, 2018.

Madeleine de Colnet, assistant curator; Pooya Abbasian, Graphic production; Élie Colistro, leaflet design.

Restoration: Andrée Chaluleau-Photos and co., Kermes snc restauro beni artistici

COMMENT FROM RACHAEL JARVIS, DIRECTOR:
This exhibition is the last in our three-part exhibition series curated by Morad Montazami entitled *Cosmic Roads: Relocating Modernism* presenting important modernist artists from Egypt, Iran and Morocco. It is part of our programme celebrating the tenth anniversary of The Mosaic Rooms. We have been excited to show modernist and contemporary art from these three countries, and to work in partnership with regional institutions and curators.

By the time he is fully involved in the development of mural paintings and urban design through the Asilah Arts Festival, Melehi's works of the 1980s seem to open a new space for reframing the wave (through the craft object, architecture and even film). From this first step 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. This interest had its origins as early as 1965 when Melehi in his Bab Rouah exhibition, Rabat, chose to include a Berber carpet (proposed by Bert Flint from his personal collection) next to his clear-cut and edgy paintings. From then up to the 1980s, Melehi works permanently keep the flow of new waves as synonymous to “new crafts” and to a certain aesthetic fluidity.

Alongside these experiments is a selection of architectural photography from various buildings and hotels (from the 1970s) where Belkahia, Chabâa and Melehi as the Casablanca group created in situ reliefs, frescoes and furniture design – in a both minimalist and

THE MOSAIC ROOMS

BOOKSHOP

A wide range of fiction and non-fiction books, limited edition artwork, gifts and DVDs. In-store and online: mosaicrooms.org/shop

STAY IN TOUCH

Sign up to our e-newsletter at mosaicrooms.org

CAFÉ

Tuesday–Saturday, 11am–6pm

VISIT US

The Mosaic Rooms
226 Cromwell Road
London SW5 0SW
mosaicrooms.org

Follow the current exhibition #Melehi
+44 (0) 20 7370 9990
Open 11am–6pm

Tuesday–Saturday
Free Entry

/TheMosaicRooms
@TheMosaicRooms
TheMosaicRooms

Follow the current exhibition #Melehi

COMMENT FROM RACHAEL JARVIS, DIRECTOR:
This exhibition is the last in our three-part exhibition series curated by

Morad Montazami entitled *Cosmic Roads: Relocating Modernism* presenting important modernist artists from Egypt, Iran and Morocco. It is part of our programme celebrating the tenth anniversary of The Mosaic Rooms. We have been excited to show modernist and contemporary art from these three countries, and to work in partnership with regional institutions and curators.

Thanks to artworks lenders: Fondation Barjeel, Galerie Loft, Fondation Jardin Majorelle, Toni Maraini, M. Melehi estate, Slimane Naji, Moulay Idriss Yacoubi
Special thanks: Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, Sanaa El-Younsi, Maud Houssais, Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa, Mohamed and Khadija Melehi, Nour Melehi-Maraini, Mujah Maraini-Melehi, Salma Lahoul, Léa Morin, Faten Safieddine, Louloua Melehi and Ghita Melehi-Sollazzo

By the time he is fully involved in the development of mural paintings and urban design through the Asilah Arts Festival, Melehi's works of the 1980s seem to open a new space for reframing the wave (through the craft object, architecture and even film). From this first step 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. This interest had its origins as early as 1965 when Melehi in his Bab Rouah exhibition, Rabat, chose to include a Berber carpet (proposed by Bert Flint from his personal collection) next to his clear-cut and edgy paintings. From then up to the 1980s, Melehi works permanently keep the flow of new waves as synonymous to “new crafts” and to a certain aesthetic fluidity.

Alongside these experiments is a selection of architectural photography from various buildings and hotels (from the 1970s) where Belkahia, Chabâa and Melehi as the Casablanca group created in situ reliefs, frescoes and furniture design – in a both minimalist and

AN A.M. QATTAN FOUNDATION PROJECT

NEW WAVES: MOHAMED MELEHI AND THE CASABLANCA ART SCHOOL

12 APRIL – 22 JUNE 2019

the
mosaic
rooms

M R
1 0

FREE



PUBLIC PROGRAMME

CURATOR TOUR:

New Waves

Saturday 13 April, 2.30pm

FREE

Curator Morad Montazami offers insights into Mohamed Melehi's work and life as an artist and cultural activist, and looks at the wider Moroccan and international art community he was part of.

BOOK LAUNCH:

Season of Migration to the North

Thursday 23 May, 7pm

FREE

Artist Mohammad Omar Khalil launches his book of prints paying homage to Tayeb Salih, author of *Season of Migration to the North*. Mohammad will be in conversation with artist and publisher Abed AlKadiri.

DISCUSSION:

The Casablanca Art School

Wednesday 12 June, 7pm

FREE

Discover the history of this innovative and influential art school which rejected Western academic styles in favour of abstraction and Moroccan visual culture. With Maud Hous, Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa and Salma Lahiou.

FAMILY FUN:

My garden! Where are you?

Saturday 25 May, 2.30-4pm

FREE

Ghassane Koumiya traces the establishment of the New Left in post-independence 60's-70's Morocco. The New Left marked a revolutionary alternative to the traditional Communist parties and the nationalist movement.

ARTIST'S TALK:

Mohamed Melehi

Wednesday 15 May, 7pm

FREE

Artist Mohamed Melehi speaks to curator Morad Montazami about his first UK solo exhibition. The talk will trace his career as a major figure of postcolonial Moroccan art and of modernism in the Global South.

FAMILY FUN:

Kan Ya Makan

(once upon a time)

FREE

Leila and Sami are trying to find a common language to speak to each other. Meet author and illustrator Nadine Kaadan and make art inspired by their story.

TALK:

Souffles: an artists' advocacy for a humanist project in Morocco

Thursday 30 May, 7pm

FREE

Souffles was one of the most influential cultural and political journals to emerge in postcolonial North Africa. Cultural journalist Kenza Sefrioui traces its history from its start in 1966 to being banned in 1972.

WORKSHOP:

I survived London (or I was here...)

Lena Merhej

FREE

Discover the brilliant colours of artist Mohamed Melehi and create artworks inspired by his paintings and graphic design, with artist Dia Batal.

LISTENING FORUM

+ ART CLASS:

EAST x Mosaic Rooms

FREE

Four world-renowned scholars, Susan M Akram, Hassan, Thanks to archives lenders: Omar Berrada, Touda Bouanani, Chabâa family, Dar el Ma'mûn Library, Ali Essafi, Safieddine-Melehi family, Kristine Khouri, Toni Maraini, Pauline and Patrice de Mazières, Yasmina Naji et Rasha Salti.

EDWARD W SAID LONDON LECTURE:

Is Justice Still Possible?

Palestine, International Law, and Public Discourse

FREE

We have all had incidents on the street: a strange encounter, a fall or an insightful walk. Draw your own experience with award winning illustrator Lena Merhej to create a collective poster of street life.

LISTENING FORUM

+ ART CLASS:

Royal Geographical Society

FREE

Artist-led networking group EAST (Eating At The Same

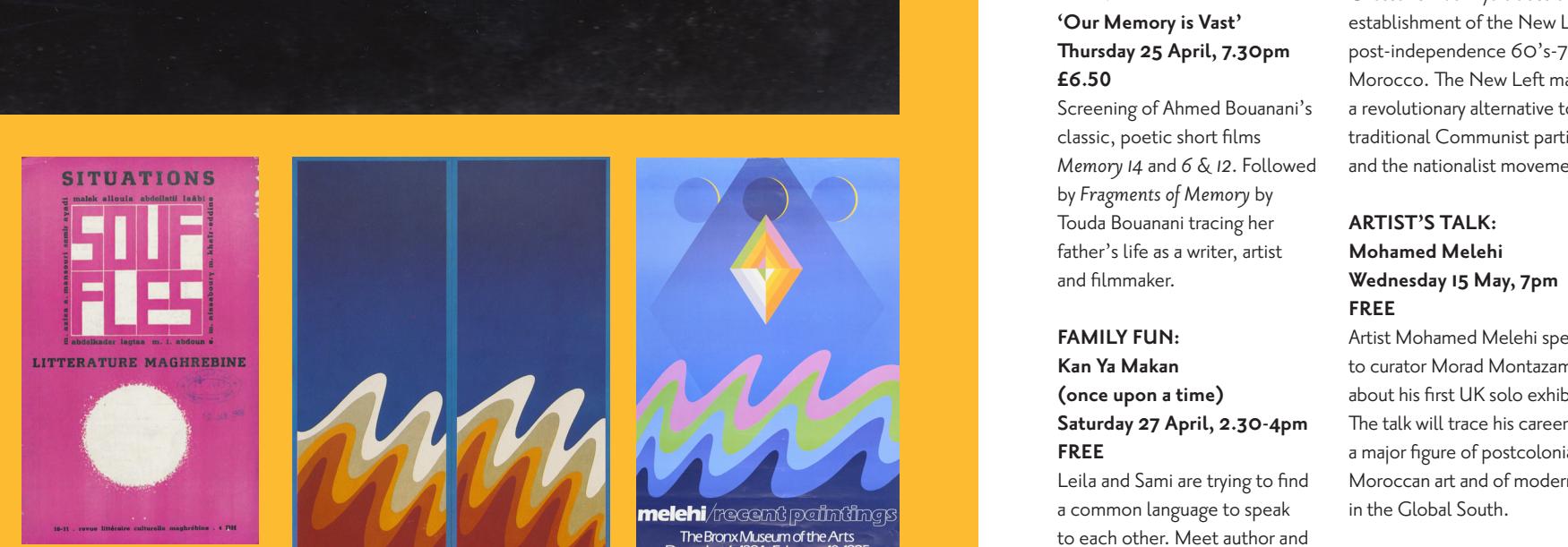
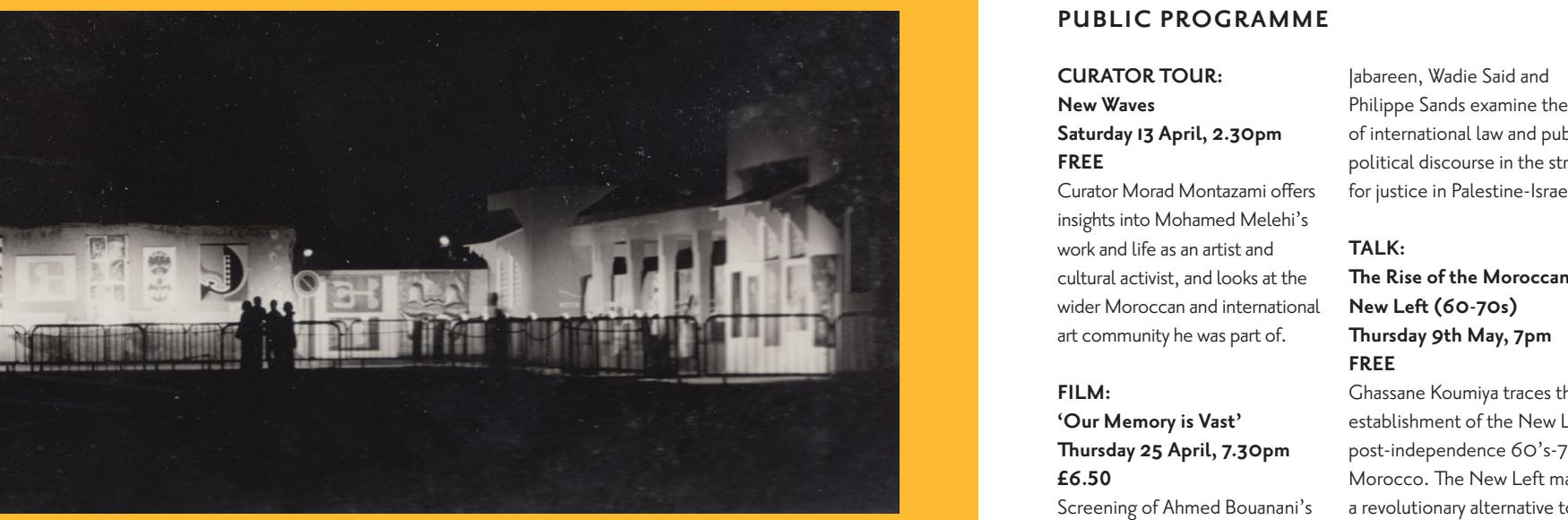
LISTENING FORUM

+ ART CLASS:

EAST x Mosaic Rooms

FREE

Table) invite guests to listen and respond to a curated playlist inspired by Mohamed Melehi's love of jazz music and his hard edge, abstract painting style.



1. M. Melehi, L'Atelier Gallery, solo exhibition, Rabat, 1971.
2. M. Melehi, mural painting, Nouasser airport, Casablanca, 1973.
3. Exposition-manifeste/Presence Plastique, Marrakech, Jma el-Fna Square, 1969. Photo M. Melehi
4. Exhibition leaflet, M. Melehi, Bab Rouah Gallery, Rabat, 1965.
5. Book cover for A. Laâbi, *L'oeil et la nuit*, Atlantes, Casablanca, 1969. Design M. Melehi
6. M. Melehi documenting the Exposition-manifeste, Marrakech, Jma el-Fna Square, 1969. Photo M. Chabâa
7. Exhibition leaflet, M. Melehi, Nadar Gallery, Casablanca, 1975.
8. Exhibition poster, M. Melehi, L'Atelier Gallery, Rabat, 1971. Design M. Melehi
9. Cover for the journal *Souffles* n°10-11, 1968. Design M. Melehi

10. M. Melehi, Pyramidal, diptych, cellulose paint on wood, 1984. M. Melehi estate
 11. Exhibition poster, M. Melehi, Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1984-1985.
 12. M. Melehi, Circular, cellulose paint on wood, 1975. M. Melehi estate
 13. Cover for *Maghreb Art*, n°2, 1966. Design M. Melehi
- Thanks to archives lenders: Omar Berrada, Touda Bouanani, Chabâa family, Dar el Ma'mûn Library, Ali Essafi, Safieddine-Melehi family, Kristine Khouri, Toni Maraini, Pauline and Patrice de Mazières, Yasmina Naji et Rasha Salti.