

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 Topazia 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 ubiquities. 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/Presence 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 Belkhaia 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, Belkhaia, 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).



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

INTEGRAL AND OTHER PRINTED MATTERS

Melehi's flame is another pattern variation, first appearing at his 1971 L'Atelier exhibition, a ground-breaking gallery in Rabat for the history of Arab and Mediterranean arts, founded by Pauline de Mazières; and on the cover of the first issue of *Integral* (1972), an influential Pan-Arab magazine for poetry, visual and graphic arts which was designed by Melehi and co-founded with Maraini. Melehi also founded Shoof publishing in 1974, a vanguard graphic design studio that issued art books (the first catalogue of Ahmed Cherkaoui in 1976) but also commercial design works for street shops and private companies. A diverse range of visual practices is presented here alongside other archival discoveries, including his posters, typographic work and his 1968 wave monument in Mexico City.

ASILAH ARTS FESTIVAL

In 1978 Melehi co-founded the Asilah Arts Festival with Mohamed Benaïssa, in northern Morocco near Tangiers – among other instrumental activists was Faten Safieddine, his partner of the time who actively took part in the organisation between 1985 and 1992. The festival of live art, music and visual art is especially famous for its murals and street exhibitions by Moroccan painters and guest artists often from African, Asian and Arab backgrounds (among them Etel Adnan, Mohammed Omar Khalil, Robert Blackburn, Nasser Soumi, Mona Saudi...) The Asilah festival still runs annually, one of the many enduring legacies of Melehi's cultural activism.



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 Casablanca group called for a return to African and Berber sources. Together they encouraged their students to study and to grasp the potential for geometric abstraction and “modernity” from within popular Moroccan arts: rugs, jewellery, leatherwork, tatoos, decorative painting in mosques and *zawiya*s (religious school or monastery) of the Sous. They all belong to a multicultural repertoire of forms and symbols with complex interconnections that link the Berber with the African, the Islamic and the Trans-Mediterranean – this last term refers to the trade between the Americas, Europe, the Maghreb and the rest of the African continent – as well as Mesopotamia and Phoenicia for deeper layers of archaeology.

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 Belkhaia, Chabâa and Melehi as the Casablanca group created in situ reliefs, frescoes and furniture design – in a both minimalist and

grassroots style unique for their time. Commissioned by the architect studio Faraoui & Patrice de Mazières to implement those structural and decorative elements, they demonstrate a timely dialogue between the wavy and fragmented patterns of these “Integration” works and the modular and deconstructive shapes of the building primarily designed by Patrice de Mazières. It is a rare example of visual artists and architects from the Arab world (another meaningful example is the Baghdad Modern Art Group in the 1950-1960s) coming together to imagine a future named “postcolonial architecture” and operating as an innovative and hybrid group.

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 Alijs. Among his recent projects, he was a curator for *Volumes Fugitifs : Faouzi Laatiris et l'institut national des beaux-arts de Tétouan*, Musée 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 Najj, Moulay Idriss Yacoubi

Special thanks: Sultan Sooud Al-Quassemi, Sanaa EL-Younsi, Maud Houssais, Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa, Mohamed and Khadija Melehi, Nour Melehi-Maraini, Mujah Maraini-Melehi, Salma Lahlou, Léa Morin, Faten Safieddine, Louloua Melehi and Ghita Melehi-Sollazzo



Supported using public funding by
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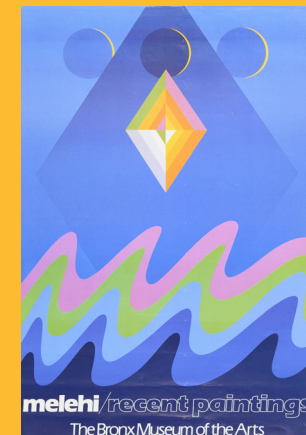
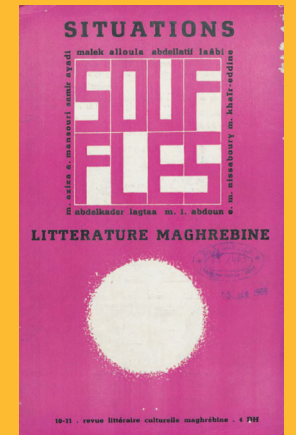
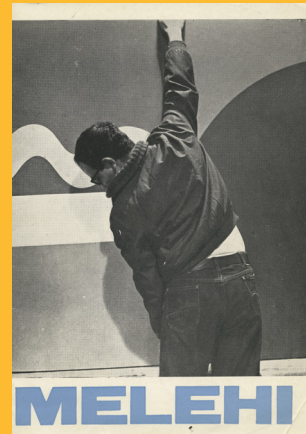
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#Melehi





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. Laabi, *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. Chabba
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, cellulosic paint on wood, 1984. M. Melehi estate
11. Exhibition poster, M. Melehi, Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1984-1985.
12. M. Melehi, *Circular*, cellulosic 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, Chabba family, Dar' el Ma'mun Library, Ali Essafi, Safeddine-Melehi family, Kristine Khouri, Toni Maraini, Pauline and Patrice de Mazières, Yasmina Najai et Rasha Salti.

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.

FILM:
'Our Memory is Vast'
Thursday 25 April, 7.30pm
£6.50

Screening of Ahmed Bouanani's classic, poetic short films *Memory 14* and *6 & 12*. Followed by *Fragments of Memory* by Touda Bouanani tracing her father's life as a writer, artist and filmmaker.

FAMILY FUN:
Kan Ya Makan
(once upon a time)
Saturday 27 April, 2.30-4pm
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.

EDWARD W SAID
LONDON LECTURE:
Is Justice Still Possible?
Palestine, International Law, and Public Discourse
Thursday 2 May, 7pm
Royal Geographical Society
£8/£14

Four world-renowned scholars, Susan M Akram, Hassan

Jabareen, Wadie Said and Philippe Sands examine the role of international law and public political discourse in the struggle for justice in Palestine-Israel.

TALK:
The Rise of the Moroccan New Left (60-70s)
Thursday 9th May, 7pm
FREE

Chassane 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.

WORKSHOP:
I survived London
(or I was here...)
Lena Merhej
Wednesday 22 May, 7pm
£15/£10

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.

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.

FAMILY FUN:
My garden! Where are you?
Saturday 25 May, 2.30-4pm
FREE

Find out how to tell a story with pictures with award winning illustrator Lena Merhej. Read her book together and play games to understand tricks of perspective.

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.

LISTENING FORUM
+ ART CLASS:
EAST x Mosaic Rooms
Saturday 8 June, 2-6pm
FREE

Artist-led networking group EAST (Eating At The Same

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.

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 Houss, Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa and Salma Lahlou.

MUSIC:
Taqasim Foundation:
Music of the Maghreb
Thursday 20 June, 7pm
FREE

A night of traditional music from the Maghreb with Oud Master Ahmed Mukhtar. Discover emotional *maqams*, mystical rhythms and classical forms from Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria.

FAMILY FUN:
Waves of Colour
Saturday 22 June, 2.30-4pm
FREE

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

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