Mohamed Melehi (1936–2020): Considered a major figure in modern and contemporary Moroccan and international art, Mohamed Melehi sadly passed away on 28 October 2020 after contracting the Covid-19 virus. This tragic loss of a creator who had been on the artistic scene since the late 1950s, plunges us into grief and we extend our deepest sympathies to his family and loved ones: Khadija Melehi, Faten Safieddine, Toni Maraini, Elena Ascencio, Kamal Melehi, Youssef Melehi, Nour Melehi-Maraini, Mujah Maraini-Melehi, Louloua Melehi and Ghita Melehi-Sollazzo.

A visual poet and ardent defender of creative freedom and art for all, Melehi was not only a painter but also a photographer, muralist, graphic designer, educator and cultural activist. Because he was as free as a migratory bird and as protective as a spiritual father, he will continue to live through his art, and he is currently gaining increasing acknowledgment from the art world and the museums, so his outstanding contribution is thus reaching out to an ever wider audience. As a still emerging art historian and a curator, I can only feel blessed and privileged that Melehi, whom I saw as a living legend, gave me the occasion to define a curatorial concept, design and narrative for his historical work. Through the almost daily conversations I had with him throughout the course of two years of collaboration, it always felt so natural to do so, like riding a wave. I will forever respect and continue to contribute to the general transmission of his flourishing legacy. May his soul overwhelm us.

Morad Montazami, December 2020

The following is an edited, revised and expanded transcript of a conversation between Mohamed Melehi and Morad Montazami that took place at The Mosaic Rooms, London, on 6 June 2019, during the exhibition ‘New Waves: Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School’, 12 April – 22 June 2019. Curated by Morad Montazami and Madeleine de Colnet for Zamân Books & Curating, the exhibition travelled to the Museum of African and Contemporary Art Al Maaden (MACAAL) in Marrakech, 21 September 2019–5 January 2020; and to Concrete, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai, 19 September–10 October 2020.
Morad Montazami: We welcome Mohamed Melehi this evening as a renowned international artist who is considered a landmark and a pioneer for postcolonial arts in Morocco and a major actor in their expansion through his diverse range of practices worldwide. We are lucky to be having this conversation with the artist on the occasion of his first solo show in the UK at the Mosaic Rooms in London. My questions mainly focus around the artist’s trajectory between the 1960s and the beginning of the 1980s. Mohamed Melehi has done so much, been to so many places and worked through so many platforms, right up to today, that it is impossible to cover everything. But we will still try to follow a comprehensive trajectory and overview of his achievements. Looking at some archival images initially will help us progress through some of the history. This first photo has raised some questions from some who have asked if that is really you playing the drums and if you were trained as a drummer. You are playing with quite a concentrated look, in front of one of your works from that period. We are in your studio, in Rome, where the photo was published in the leaflet for your exhibition at Galeria Trastevere. Can you tell us a little more about this time when you arrived in Rome and how you connected with the art scene there? I believe Signora Topazia Alliata, the founder of the Galeria Trastevere, was a key encounter for you. I am curious to know more about your view of Italian art and Italian modernism at that time, a time when you were producing fairly minimalistic and clear-cut, often black and white paintings.
**Mohamed Melehi:** It could be easy to answer your question... but it could also be long and difficult! Since I began learning about art, I was very ambitious to know and discover more. Before I went to Rome, I had spent two years in Spain where I studied Fine Arts at Isabel de Hungria in Seville and San Fernando in Madrid. Thus, I was becoming acquainted with these two Latin cultures in which painting is so important. And Spain was especially important to discover in relation to my homeland, Morocco. I come from northern Morocco, from Asilah, a zone that was under Spanish rule and where there used to be a Fine Art school in Tétouan, where I had started my art studies in 1953, three years before Independence. So I wasn’t able to feel completely happy in Spain as it was the time of Fascism and General Franco, and I came from a place with a history of protest against Spanish rule. Yet I had very good professors in Spain, very academic but good... but Italy was calling me. Italy, as everybody knows, was among the defeated countries in World War II, but in the post-war period it benefited tremendously from the international movements in art, in music, in everything... It was as if the after-effects of war also led to a certain cultural openness for this country that had lost attention but which welcomed many influences. In the losing countries of the war, the defeat in France, for instance, had left a bitter taste, and especially when it came to the integrating of foreign ideas – at least in my personal experience. In those years, Italy was at the centre of many international trends, and not to mention its role in cinema and the film industry with Fellini, Antonioni and Visconti. It was in Rome, in my first year there, that I saw a Jackson Pollock exhibition at the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in 1958. There used to be a gallery called the Rome/New York Art Foundation, created by an American lady by the name of Frances McCann who I met before Topazia Alliata. Their two galleries used to be next to each other. I encountered Frances McCann and her foundation around the time they were organising a Rabindranath Tagore exhibition. Frances was very supportive and introduced me to several galleries, helping to bring their attention to my work. She knew Morocco and happened to know a very important artist in our art history, Moulay Ahmed Drissi, who used to know Peggy Guggenheim from her trips to Marrakech.

At this point, if you will allow me, I should make a brief statement about the beginnings of Moroccan modern art for those who may not know much about it. We lived under colonial administration. The French protectorate had created an art school, but late in the 1950s. Speaking of ‘modern’ art and artists, for that period, is quite difficult in terms of local roots and which artist could emerge that early, outside of the Western scope or influence. Names that come to mind are Hassan El Glaoui, Mohamed Sarghini, Moulay Ahmed Drissi and Meriem Meziane. The latter two had both graduated from the school of art in Madrid before I did. Other emerging artists happened to be mentored by people such as Paul Bowles, Brion Gysin, and also Peggy Guggenheim. The four artists I mentioned are examples of pioneers who represent how Moroccan painting did start quite early, but from scratch. There were no specific tendencies, no schools and no effective ideologies applied to art – beside the colonial rule. Therefore Rome definitely represented a rich and broad field for cultural outreach and cosmopolitan encounters. I also remember a large exhibition of ‘Zen art’, of Chinese classical painting, at the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome. It was Frances McCann who once said to me ‘Mohamed, you should read this…’ and she gave me a  

‘Mohamed Melehi in conversation with Morad Montazami’, *Third Text* Online, [www.thirdtext.org/melehi-montazami](http://www.thirdtext.org/melehi-montazami), 12 February 2021
small black book entitled *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1948) by a German philosopher, Eugen Herrigel, who travelled to Japan in the 1930s to learn archery. So that was the first book I happened to read on the subject – not very easily though, as my Italian was not very good yet. I had to read it many times, but it had a strong influence on me.

**Montazami:** This was a book about Zen philosophy?

**MM:** Yes, and I also read *The Way of Zen* (1957) by Alan Watts. Another meaningful reference for me at the time was Japanese cinema, especially Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950). These ideas and images were important to me. Zen philosophy reminded me of Islamic Sufism, and so paradoxically helped me to be in a position to recover my identity. I went to the West to learn Western things, but at the same time I came upon Eastern things, such as Zen, and this drove the evolution of my view on things. And in the same way, when I saw Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, their connection with jazz music made sense for me, mainly through a knowledge of Zen philosophy: the idea of composing through simple patterns but which were actively shifting and in constant motion.

**Montazami:** And that brings us back to the drums.

**MM:** Yes, I was definitely interested in becoming a drum player!

**Montazami:** So, could your interest in Zen philosophy and your readings at the time be related to the fact that colour had not yet come into your painting? You were mainly painting in black and white then; colour would come into your work a bit later. Is there any relation between this interest in Zen and the work you were doing in Italy, do you think?

**MM:** Yes, because in Zen philosophy you have to take up a position, or even an opposition, in relation to everything you may have learnt before. You need to clean your mind and your conceptual landscape, to be able to think from scratch.

**Montazami:** It is like a reduction to the fundamental elements.

**MM:** I started painting with vertical lines, eliminating colour almost completely, working with black on black, and white and grey. To me, at that period, to paint surfaces that were almost monochrome, with very minimalistic compositions, felt like making a prayer. I was materialising my Zen thinking, but I was also going back to my Islamic Sufi roots. To learn about Zen is quite easy, but very difficult at the same time. It is quite hard to explain in words, and difficult to communicate with another person about.

**Montazami:** There is a point that I would like to make here by referring to this image from 1962, where you are working on a fresco project in the cafeteria of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and before were awarded a Rockefeller Foundation grant.

**MM:** I originally went to Minneapolis as an immigrant, a lost person – the Rockefeller Foundation grant happened later, and actually gave me the opportunity to leave Minneapolis for New York. I had arrived in Minneapolis hoping to study and not just to paint. I originally wanted to study architecture, which had not been possible for me in Morocco. But I happened to meet a few people, such as Martin Friedman, the director of the Walker Art Center, who became very
interested in my Arab and African background, and shortly after I had explained to him my intentions to study art and architecture he offered me a position at the Minneapolis School of Art where I became an assistant to the artist Raymond Handler for his painting course. It was at that time that I also met the Iranian sculptor Parviz Tanavoli, a very dear colleague who had similarly been given a position at the school. I remember a dinner around 1962 where the school’s president, who happened to be a priest, insisted that Tanavoli and I, with our foreign cultures, could be helpful in raising the American students’ curiosity about the world around them. This very supportive surrounding gave me the chance, through the opportunity the school gave me, to extend my visa and to stay longer in the United States.

Montazami: This was actually quite incredible – for someone your age from Morocco to become an assistant teacher at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

MM: It was, and after two months I was asked to be an official painting teacher at the school. But to be honest with you, Minneapolis is a place that has four months of snow and where the temperature goes below 20 degrees. At the end of the course, I went to visit New York, because that, after all, was my goal. Then I applied for the Rockefeller Foundation fellowship, and when I was successful this opened a window for me to give up the job in Minneapolis.

Montazami: If we come back to these two images: in the first one, here you are in Rome playing the drums, and in the other you are painting the fresco in the cafeteria at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The point I wanted to make is that there seems to be an analogy between space and sound in your approach, where often something extends beyond the picture itself. We know the importance of music, of pulsation or rhythm in Moroccan tradition and history, and that same impulse for going beyond the frame can be felt with this fresco project. You were not just painting; you chose to occupy the cafeteria to create an environmental painting.

MM: At that time the feeling driving me was literally that of being ecstatically aware of a firework of artistic movements and trends to follow up with and to try to challenge in my different interventions. It is a specific thrill when music and painting can come together, and to express...
common patterns in different temporalities. I also remember being conscious of a general thirst to learn through each artistic language available to us, and that the options were limitless.

**Montazami:** What was the general response at the cafeteria when people saw you working on this installation, this painting environment?

**MM:** The atmosphere was quite spontaneous, although they probably never expected to have a work like that in the cafeteria. It was, for me, an early start with the idea of ‘integrated arts’ as a means for occupying unusual places, to go out beyond painting and to apply art to the everyday.

**Montazami:** Into non-museum spaces, let’s say… or beyond painting in the sense of beyond the museum as well and into public space.

**MM:** Yes, this was a primary concern.

**Montazami:** I wanted to share with you this great view of your studio in New York, in the Bowery, from 1963. What’s interesting in this photo is how the city of New York and its vibrancy is captured in the very atmosphere of the studio, and more specifically in the painting on display on that back wall there. We know the urban environment and the city landscape were, and are, important for you, and New York seems to be reflected through your paintings here. The small squares on the surface of the canvas play like metaphors of the New York skyscrapers (gratte-ciels in French) and the nocturnal urban lights.

**MM:** That’s right. My New York painting carried a lot of that. Manhattan at night left a strong impression on my visual memory, when everything becomes dark in the city and the play of the lighted windows in the skyscrapers begins as they turn on and off… This specific experience with
New York as a high voltage city, in constant visual and phenomenological communication, also confirmed another theoretical shift or combination – between Zen philosophy and cybernetic sciences and literature. It was actually before New York, when I was in Rome and studying at the Academia delle Belle Arti that I first heard about cybernetics and communication theories in the painting course called ‘Bianco e Nero’ run by the poet and painter Toti Scialoja.

Montazami: It sounds as if was you were going through an intense melting pot of ideas and theories.

MM: Indeed, a blast of different ideas to experiment with. But don’t forget, I never lost the sense of being Moroccan, a Muslim, an Arab, or that I am half-Arab, half-Berber/Amazigh anyway, and African. These things are in your mind constantly, and it is always a battle about where to stand, how to behave, what to do. But being in New York and knowing it was a city where artists like Mondrian, and others, went as immigrants made a difference. I still have a sense of love for the city; it is a hectic but great place to be, and especially in the 1960s.

Montazami: You were also included in an exhibition called ‘Formalists’ in the Washington Gallery of Modern Art in 1963, alongside works by Piet Mondrian.

MM: Yes, and I felt all the more proud of this as our respective names – Melehi/Mondrian – happen to be close in the alphabet, so Melehi came before Mondrian in the exhibition catalogue!
Montazami: Related to the cybernetics again, there is a painting of yours entitled *I.B.M.* that by now has become an iconic one. This reddish, almost irradiant, painting, composed with these idiomatic and minimalistic squares, is immediately reminiscent of modern communication systems and devices. It was included in the 1963 ‘Hard Edge and Geometric Painting and Sculpture’ exhibition at MoMA in New York. The same work can also be seen in another image of the first acknowledged exhibition of the three artists later known as the ‘Casablanca Art School’ artists (Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chabàa and yourself), an exhibition that took place in the hall of the Mohammed V Theatre in Rabat in 1966. So we are talking here about a key work within key exhibitions. Could you tell us a little bit about this *I.B.M.* painting and what your ideas were around this title?

![Mohamed Melehi’s I.B.M. painting (right) included in ‘Hard Edge and Geometric Painting and Sculpture’, MoMA, New York, 1963, photo by Mohamed Melehi, courtesy of the Safieddine-Melehi archive](image)

MM: Most people today don’t remember how it was to deal with a computer back then, in the early 1960s. I’m talking about those perforated cards, which carried a huge amount of information. That impressed me! Those cards were another conceptual reference for the play on squares in the *I.B.M.* painting. If you turned them upside down, they looked like a New York building. But to be brief, this discovery was like coming across an industrial brain with infinite possibilities for communication, just as the variety and flashing lights of all the artistic trends animating the city resonated in me. But this also generates a kind of pressure that can lead you to slow down the pace and be more meditative. *I.B.M.* (which was actually the first painting I did in New York, and I titled

---

1 ‘Hard Edge and Geometric Painting and Sculpture’ was an exhibition in MoMA’s Penthouse Restaurant organised by the Museum’s Art Lending Service (ALS); the works in these exhibitions, on consignment from artists or their galleries, were also for rent or sale.
that IBM (after those early computers), can be seen as a visual statement pointing at this consciousness for a globalised as well as fragmented world.

**Montazami:** What is also intriguing to me is that for the 1966 Rabat exhibition your work is sort of super-cybernetical, super-geometric and super-radical in its hard-edge style, while the poster that you designed for this exhibition (now in MoMA’s collection of graphic art) uses a more post-calligraphic style. There is a kind of contrast between the paintings and your graphic work from the time, with the use of the Arabic script.

**MM:** If you look more closely at this poster, you can see some Japanese and Asian influences also. Script was always active in our visual vocabulary, inevitably – even though it was not the main subject, since we were claiming a ‘plastic language’. But parallel to this, we also developed specific trends and methods for modernising calligraphic script and Arabic typography, a mission in which my dear colleague Mohammed Chabaa played an instrumental role.

**Montazami:** Now we should turn to your coming back to Morocco, in 1964, and when you were hired at the Ecole des Beaux Arts de Casablanca (the Casablanca Art School) where you were an important teacher. We have some nice images here of that era: you in your very elegant suit, next to a cheerful group of students; or here, sitting on a chair with this much larger group of professors (including Mohamed Chabaa, Farid Belkahia and Agostino Bonalumi behind you) with the students surrounding you. And there are photos of your experiences as a professor showing the innovation and transformation that you brought to the school. We should be careful though, because when we
speak about the Casablanca Art School context in relation to your collective work and initiatives, we are only talking about a brief time. You arrived at the school in 1964 and left in 1969, but in that short time you achieved an astonishing body of radical pedagogic transformations. There is an image that was taken in your studio with some of your students, and it is sensational to see that some of their work clearly looks very similar to, or at least familiar with, your aesthetics. But it is great to see how they could be inspired by seeing your work. Some of them even introduce the wave pattern… and we can see that you introduced them to collage and photography, and to combining painting with collage, and it definitely shows something of the American background that you provided for them (I am thinking of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns).

**MM:** My coming back to Morocco felt like an earthquake in terms of the concept of art I was shaping for myself, and I had the chance to realise it in Casablanca. But I would like to point out something that is very important: my contract for the Rockefeller Foundation fellowship specified that I would go back to my own country in order to allow it to benefit from my experiences, to give back so to speak. So, instead of following the line that was beginning to be drawn with exhibiting at MoMA in New York and the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, I dropped this and went back to my homeland in order to comply with those terms, but I also had a genuine impulse to start teaching and to spread an artistic language and vocabulary that would provide a new way of looking.

The Casablanca Art School, at that point, was a rich and intense hub of artists, some of whom welcomed my approach with some hesitations. But there were others who immediately recognised a common ideal to share and put into practice, and they were receptive to my proposals and we shared common views at a time when the concept of art in Morocco was ready for some transformation. This was something that was palpable with both professors and students. Many of us were animated by the ambition to modernise and rethink the role of the artist in society. We were ready to come together, and I was able to feel empowered as a central actor who could help gather together writers, philosophers, engineers, poets, filmmakers, architects, jazz artists… helped, of course, by the hectic and cosmopolitan life of Casablanca and Marrakech in the 1960–1970s. I will only mention the cultural journal *Souffles*, founded by Abdellatif Laâbi, the great poet, who must be praised as well for bringing us together in this specific context. In a thought-provoking blend of poetry, literature and cultural critique, the journal was an outstanding ‘reader’ for the whole post-Independence generation, those who felt everything is possible through the fight for freedom but who would also learn about the historical roots of colonisation. *Souffles* was fundamental for bringing the artistic diaspora together, as the independence of Morocco in 1956 also meant displacement for thousands of young Moroccans who now had the opportunity to study abroad, which they had been unable to do during the Protectorate era. I was actually part of that wave of artists and intellectuals returning after their experiences in Europe or North America. I felt genuinely committed to participating in Abdellatif Laâbi’s initiative with *Souffles*, and I began by designing the cover. The diversity and commitment of the voices and ideas brought into *Souffles* paved the way in redefining the concept of culture in Morocco, towards a proper dynamics of social progress and emancipation.
I look at it as the golden age in the outcome of our struggle for independence. In saying all this, I want to give you a sense of what was going on at the time, with a general will for change and not just to paint beautiful paintings.

Montazami: I think it is also fair to remind everyone of the groundbreaking innovations the students at the Casablanca Art School experimented with, which was quite inconceivable before you arrived there. Looking at another view of your painting studio at the school, we can see in the background a carpet, a Berber carpet, found by Bert Flint, one of your colleagues at that time. It is a small detail but a telling one, if we consider how the students were actually being encouraged to experiment with a cultural object from the popular arts and crafts. I remember the first thing you told me when we looked at this picture together: ‘Well, I removed some of the Greek and Roman busts in the studio, the classical art and the plaster body fragments, to replace them with the rugs made by Berber women’!

MM: Of course it takes some effort, and sometimes ruptures, to make a change in that classical – and in our case colonial – fine art school methodology, which foregrounds the Greek and Roman heritage and encourages students to reproduce fragments of statues and limits them to working with landscape or still life. This was definitely something I was committed to making a break with. There was a vital need to go beyond the Western canons for teaching art, which consciously ignored both the Western avant-garde movements and the locally emerging Moroccan avant-garde. To turn this into another provocative statement about that specific time of rupture: as soon as I arrived in 1964, I used to say that the Berber jewellery should become our new ‘still lives’ and that we should look at our rugs and popular weavings as our ‘impressionist landscapes’. I was certainly no prophet in removing the statues from the school’s studio – but I was probably inspired by Moses and his throwing away of all the idols and statuary, telling people that they should not worship dead objects!
Montazami: That is an interesting paradox… And we should mention, also, that much of this Berber jewellery was photographed by yourself, as a way of documenting and testifying to the ‘modernity’ inherent in these local and popular crafts with their very long, pre-Islamic history.

MM: Yes; the problem was really turning into a psychological dilemma. When we went to Europe to study art, we began to wonder: do we have a national, Moroccan art? And could it be considered ‘modern’, similar to Italian art or Spanish art? That was the big question for us. In our own assessment, from within our Berber and African roots, there was no ‘society’ without artistic lineage and tradition. In this my colleague and friend Bert Flint must be praised for the groundbreaking research that he began in the 1960s. It was a fulfilling time and experience that we spent together on the rediscovery and documentation of that tradition with its own system of aesthetics and the beauty in the design of each object – in the fabrics, the jewellery, the traditional and rural architecture. Taking pictures of these things and bringing them into the studio was a way of inspiring the students with their own but ignored cultural roots; to lead them to believe that there is a strong and local, not foreign, artistic expression in Moroccan culture, with its own right to modernity.

Montazami: So this return to Berber/Amazigh popular arts and craft was a rediscovery of an unconscious visual modernity, probably not considered so by any official museum but still instrumental in order to relocate Morocco into modernity – without necessarily any cultural transfer or influence from the West.

MM: Yes. It is a part of a social production, dynamics and economics… The French colonial system in place in Morocco from the beginning of the twentieth century always neglected the richness and diversity of Berber and African arts and crafts, in favour of more random and devitalised arts and crafts, necessarily more driven by an orientalist and Islamic look. In a way, emancipating the Berber visual culture and saving it from marginalisation was a way to emancipate ourselves, in the deepest sense. Nowadays there is nothing more fashionable than this return to the Berber visual geometries and patterns.

Montazami: Shall we look at another picture from that intense period of experimentation between the professors and the students? This is a view of the annual students’ exhibition, an exhibition encouraged and organised by the professors, such as Mohammed Chabâa, who taught decoration and graphic design, and yourself, who taught painting, photography and graphic design, but put on and executed in collaboration with the students from the school. This was in 1968 in the Fine Arts Gallery of the Arab League Park, in Casablanca, a public hall turned into an exhibition space for the art school. We can clearly see how the students not only produced artworks to hang on the wall, but how they dealt literally with the space and the scenography as well. What a colourful, inspiring and dynamic environmental approach to making art! And this was in line with your idea that art should be integrated into different spaces and not just be a still painting on the wall. It is a fascinating display of ways of combining wall pieces, mural paintings, photography and decorative shelves for ceramics and other sculptural elements.

MM: That was the idea, to make the end-of-year graduating students’ exhibition something more engaging and more lively, to bring the students not only to think about how to place their works in combination with each other, to create a certain visual flow and narrative out of this ephemeral space we call an exhibition… but to take responsibility for it and for the viewers’ experience.

Montazami: I also want to look at some early photos of your first solo exhibition once you were back in Morocco from the US and Europe, at the Bab Rouah Gallery in Rabat in 1965. I like this photograph because of what it says about the local audience; they are looking at your work with an irresistible curiosity. You can feel how really close they come to the painting to get something out of it. They are doing more than just looking. I am also captivated by the diverse ways in which they are dressed, with some in a more traditional or Muslim fashion, while others are wearing a modern urban suit. Ultimately the most striking thing is probably seeing that the daily Moroccan visitor to the Bab Rouah Gallery didn’t feel like going into a
museum or ‘gallery’ (in the Western definition), since this is a place very much open to the streets of Rabat. It is a very different relationship for them to be looking at your paintings here, than if they had come to your gallery and museum exhibitions in Rome or New York.

**MM:** You could say that there was quite a feeling of newness everywhere, and of being into everything, as in the post-Independence era with its high hopes and new visions, upon which I believe we were taking a double position. We felt like generating our own ‘wave’ through our own independent means, but also taking part in a larger wave of challenging artistic ideas and social progress. To be honest, even though the ideas we were defending at that time involved the display of arts and the development of proper exhibition space, we were not obsessed by the idea of the Museum. Otherwise maybe we would not have been so active in organising street exhibitions, in publishing collective journals and leading experimental research… so I assume that everything felt as fresh and new for us, as artists, as it did for the audience. As an anecdote to that attitude of starting something new, or opening up your visual scope, sometimes I would surprise my students by not asking them to paint or to assemble something, but, rather, raise such basic a question as ‘Do you know how to nail a box?’ I would give them a hammer and nails – and they didn’t know how to use them properly. I now realise that there was something Zen here in this again, in this gesture of asking them to show me how they used a hammer as one of my first lessons.

**Montazami:** Now, I have to ask you about one of the most important platforms that the Casablanca Art School is remembered for, as you just referred to: the street exhibitions. The infamous one was the 1969 ‘Manifesto exhibition’ entitled ‘Présence Plastique’ (Plastic Presence) by a group of six painters from the school (Mohamed Ataallah, Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chabâa, Mostafa Hafid, Mohamed Hamidi, Mohamed Melehi), in which you were one of the leading figures. This outdoor exhibition was organised in the middle of the famous Jemaa El-Fna square in Marrakech. Another venue of this outdoor exhibition was Place de 18 novembre in Casablanca, a much more urban location with high rise buildings, which could be found in Casablanca but not in Marrakech. Many people have heard of this avant-garde outdoor exhibition, where for the first time Morrocan painters brought their paintings to the street, to the people, in a gesture of confrontation to the postcolonial exhibitions that were ongoing in Morocco. And something that I would like to hear you say something about is that you were even interested in just letting the paintings be exposed to the weather!

**MM:** Yes, it was very important. The initiative for this exhibition was as a protest against the Ministry of Culture. The new Minister of Culture was told that he should organise the salon, the yearly exhibition that gathered all the artists together. So the Casablanca group, we decided to go to the meeting with the Minister and to read our manifesto and then leave the room. The Minister was shocked, he didn’t know what had happened! They continued with the plans for the exhibition, the salon du printemps, but we decided we would quit the Ministry of Culture’s programme and do our own… we didn’t like the policy of the ‘empty chair’, as the salon called it, so we said we would organise an exhibition about the demystification of the work of art. So we went to this very popular square in Marrakech and hung our paintings on the wall under the sun and the rain for ten days, to
show people that art is not a precious object, that it is an idea, a philosophy. We had many talks with people during the exhibition, and they had a positive response to us. But the people in the establishment, they were against us. They said, you are just doing something that doesn’t mean anything – especially some of the left-wing people, their view was that ‘you don’t show the misery of people’. But we said, we are not here to show the misery, we want to produce a type of culture that can help those people. So this was an exhibition that marks the start of the modern movement of the visual arts in Morocco, in the Jemaa el Fna, in 1969.

**Montazami:** Before we take some questions from the audience, I would like to take a few more minutes with you because we have some incredible archives here to share with people. This was one of your numerous fresco projects, a wall painting on a large scale that you were commissioned to do in a suburb of Paris. At the same time you were opening your graphic design studio called SHOOF, which means ‘Look’ in Arabic, that was not only a publishing house but a proper graphic design studio where you could work on your wave pattern in graphic design work. There is an example of your wave becoming a flame, which was actually a poster produced for Palestine that was published in the journal *Souffles*. Another, although not so well-known, is the one with the Cuban cigar on this wave of yours, produced for an article about the Cuban revolution that was to appear in *Souffles*. So the wave almost becomes this tool that would connect not only the Third World, the anti-imperialist struggles like Cuba and Palestine, but also the suburbs of Paris with this large scale fresco. People
are maybe not aware of all this production that you were engaged in. Can you tell us about this moment when you also accomplished all this as a graphic designer?

**MM:** It is difficult to find the link between these images. I remember for the image of the cigar, I had to smoke a cigar and try to keep the ash on the cigar during the shooting… The cigar was a symbol of our interest in the Cuban revolution, because it was an object inseparable from Che Guevara.

**Montazami:** So instead of showing an image of Che, you could just show the cigar.

**MM:** Yes, exactly. Therefore the article in *Souffle* about the Cuban revolution came to be illustrated by the cigar, or should have been… Around the same time, I was also commissioned by an engineering company to paint a large-scale fresco on the parking space walls of a department store in Rungis, next to Paris’s Orly airport. And at the same time again, the poster for Palestine came out in *Souffles*, and later in *Integral*. So I see those as the paradoxical situations in which one finds oneself, or
the crossroads where your brain takes you while carrying different concepts through different places, different systems of representation.

Montazami: Looking at some other examples where you expand from strict painting to a much more diverse practice and platform, there is this incredible wave monument that you put up in Mexico for the international sculpture symposium during the 1968 Olympics. It is still there in Mexico City, anyone can go and visit it. Other international artists also created sculptures all along this road, people like Herbert Bayer from the Bauhaus …

MM: Yes, they called it ‘The Route to Friendship’. The event took place just before the Olympic Games. We were seventeen artists from different parts of the world, and I was the only one representing Africa and the Arab world. It is a monumental sculpture, 11 metres high. The idea was to introduce an African dynamic. I entitled it Charamusca Africana. In Mexico, they used to produce a candy in the shape of a snake, related to the Mayan god, Quetzalcoatl… candies for children called charamuscas. And when I discovered this, the analogy struck me between the snake and the wave. That’s how the title Charamusca Africana came about. The final element of the red metal frame, all around the white wave, was a very industrial concept, nothing connected to the fine arts really. I think it highlights the sensual, white shape of the sculpture by creating a contrast when you come across it while driving on that road in Mexico… as it should be.
Montazami: The wave has its own sensuality, and then you add this industrial feel to it, somehow containing it as well, on the road like some organic shape bursting out of the landscape.

MM: The aim was to symbolise Africa’s historical awakening and fight against colonialism; you could say that the metal frame stands for colonialism, from which Africa has to eventually expand beyond and find freedom. It all makes more sense when you know that I was invited by a German artist, Mathias Goeritz, who was a refugee in Morocco during the Second World War before fleeing to Mexico; he was the organiser of this sculpture symposium. There were artists from different countries, although I was the only one from the African continent, and Mathias, who insisted on organising lectures and roundtables, connected me on a panel with the Israeli artist Yitzhak Danziger, to show the audience in Mexico that Arabs and Israelis can talk to each other, and it was, indeed, a very successful talk.

Montazami: I would like, just for a minute, to tackle the issue of your relationship to photography. You have some very beautiful examples of, you could say, ‘street photography’, some raw and beautiful documentation of Marrakech, and Casablanca as well. You were documenting for the journals you were publishing with your colleagues from the Casablanca Art School, first and foremost the one entitled Maghreb Art, where the photos of the Berber jewellery and tapestry discovered by Bert Flint and yourself were printed. But you were also taking photos for yourself. I’m curious to know if photography allowed you to go deeper in your relationship to the city. Is there anything about the social dynamics in Marrakech or Casablanca that you understood through this media, or was it just a way of documenting this local heritage that was threatened by oblivion?

MM: It certainly wasn’t, for me, about producing postcard images. I see photography mainly as a tool to connect with people, and for allowing people to speak. To begin with, the students, most of them anyway, were not very used to expressing themselves or in taking any position. That is why I opened the darkroom at the Casablanca Art School. We gave the students cameras for free and taught them how to develop the negatives, and so on. We asked them to go out everywhere into the streets, inside and outside the medina, and to take photos. It was, eventually, the best way to get the students to express their ideas and to find their creative field.

Montazami: So photography would make them speak…

MM: I learned this when I attended photography classes at Columbia University in New York, from colleagues in the psychology department who were learning photography and integrating it into their methodology. It was actually the first time that I was exposed to the idea of non-artistic photography and its different function. They explained how psychologists use it to understand the behaviour of a person, his or her mode of interaction, etc.

Montazami: What about the photograph of that monument, or fountain, in the streets of Marrakech?
During my youth that monument was covered over with earth and garbage, but it was rediscovered and better preserved after Independence – like the Saadian graves in Marrakech. When the King, Moulay Ismail Ibn Sharif (who was contemporary to Louis XIV, in the eighteenth century), the second ruler of the Alaouite dynasty, took power he destroyed almost everything from the dynasty before him. So when he saw the Saadian graves, which are very beautiful, he was so angry that he could not destroy them so he had them covered up with mud. With time, everybody saw the earthy hill in the middle of the medina, but nobody knew what was inside. Then in 1929, when the French began their archaeological missions, they removed the earth and discovered this marvellous monument from the seventeenth century.

Now, as an architectural component, the fountain – as we can see in the photograph – is an issue in itself. Marrakech (like Rome) is a city of fountains… each neighbourhood has its fountain. This one is a beauty, a testament to the Moroccan people’s soul and their sense of art and beauty. They named this fountain ‘shrub o stuff’ (drink and look). It has been quite damaged over time, but some sponsorship was found through the Habsburg family when they came to visit Marrakech and were invited to see the fountain. I was the host for this visit, and they sponsored the restoration; this photo was taken before it was restored.

Montazami: So, thank you, Mohamed Melehi, for all these fascinating ideas and images you have shared with us. But before we conclude, we have a few interesting questions from the audience:

Q&A session

Questioner 1: While we have learned a lot about your experience as someone from Africa, from the Arab world, who came to the West, I am very curious about your experience with the Arab world itself, during the 1960s and 1970s onwards – specifically with Iraqi, Lebanese or Egyptian art schools. I can see there are many parallels that can be drawn between the Casablanca Art School
and the use of heritage imagery with the Baghdad Modern Art Group, in Jewad Selim or Shakir Hassan Al Said’s works, for example. Perhaps you could shed some light on that?

**MM:** Moroccan artists were happy to have a link with the Iraqis in the early 1970s, thanks to the first Al Wasiti festival in 1971. That was the start of the Arab movement in art and the international art scene, at least for my generation. That period of contact with artists in Iraq became very important by the time of the 1974 Baghdad Biennale. It was crucial for us to create this point of contact with the dynamic scene in Baghdad. We didn’t have that much contact with Egypt, unfortunately, but artists like Adam Henein came to exhibit in Rabat and were also in the Baghdad Biennale. Eventually the new geographical reality that was achieved thanks to these collective platforms made us think of Morocco and Iraq as two borders of the same continent…

**Montazami:** Mohamed Melehi actually documented the 1974 Baghdad Biennial and there was a report about it in issue 9 of the journal *Integral*, with his own photographs accompanying an essay by Toni Maraini.

**Questioner 2:** My question is about this being your first UK solo exhibition. Is it hard for an artist from regions such as North Africa to make a breakthrough in the UK, to be acknowledged? The Mosaic Rooms does an amazing job of introducing artists to a UK audience, but is it hard generally, either because of language, or other things?

**MM:** It was and still is very difficult, I believe. Although now the situation is changing… but the West still thinks of modernism as its own property, that non-Western cultures don’t have any kind of art, or modern art, in the profound sense. Islamic art has sometimes, or always, been considered decorative. But what does that mean exactly? That it is of lower value when compared to classical or modern Western art? It is the very concept of modernism that is changing. A good artist can appear in any place on earth. But the West, mainly the Americans, cannot really digest for other cultures, to produce a new message or a new concept in a modern vision. Now, there are more and more African and Black artists being given consideration by Western museums. Artists such as Ibrahim El-Salahi, for example, who has been living in the UK, in Oxford, for forty years, is now considered one of the pioneer Black African artists. By the way, I knew Ibrahim; he came to the Rockefeller Foundation after me. I remember a letter we exchanged in 1964 before I left…

But yes, the concept is changing…

**Questioner 3:** I wanted to ask you a question in relation to your time in New York. Could you say something about whether you felt any aesthetic relationships with the New York School and artists such as Mark Rothko, for example? I feel that there are at least some similarities there, so I just wondered about those connections.

**MM:** Yes, I think something does show in my work – some familiarity and similarity with the New York movement that I absorbed during my time there: Barnett Newman, for example, and Rothko of course. I loved the work of Tom Wesselmann, for instance, which was between hard edge and Pop Art. We haven’t mentioned the influence of the Bauhaus movement in our work, but it was somehow fundamental to encourage the Casablanca wave with the idea that art exists everywhere
in everything. This lead us to also recognise the importance and value of rural and popular arts. And remember, the New York School is the daughter of the Bauhaus movement, through Black Mountain College in North Carolina, with Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, Robert Indiana, and where Jackson Pollock was taught. This is all related to the New York movement, which was spreading around the world, whereas the French movement, on the other hand, found itself in a very weak position. In the 1960s, the Venice Biennale definitely set the temperature for artistic trends worldwide. The Americans used to have a very strong presence, with the French losing their position to the point that André Malraux, who was the first minister of culture under General de Gaulle, made use of his influence. But still, the Venice Biennale in the 1960s was generally dominated by American art.

**Question 4:** I would be interested to know if there are any younger artists from the new generation that you particularly admire or follow, maybe a Moroccan artist, or from elsewhere?

**MM:** Young artists develop really well nowadays in Morocco, and especially young women, which is unusual in Arab-Muslim countries where women artists are not promoted so often. But remember, we are speaking of the situation in Morocco, where we have a limited number of galleries and barely any modern art museums. Nevertheless, there are some indicators that there is a national market growing up. The Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rabat was created about four or five years ago, sponsored by the King, and we have several national collections now in development. But don’t forget that this is possible in a country with political stability. It is stability that allows for development in every field: culture, finance, industry…

**Question 5:** You said that your sculpture in Mexico was to symbolise Africa coming out of the frame. Has it come out yet? Has it emerged?

**MM:** Yes, Africa is emerging quite well! As an example, there is a pipeline being built between Nigeria and Morocco, which was unimaginable before our present context. This is a strong symbol, and today, most global powers have to count Africa in.

**Question 6:** I would like to ask how you see the role of art in politics.

**MM:** As artists, we are enamoured with art and don’t always like to deal with politics in a direct way. Or that is what we think… but then it is hard sometimes to keep the balance. If artists could have a clear concept about politics, let’s say, it might save their work! In reality, politics is like oxygen, you cannot get rid of it. All the problems of the world are about politics.

**Question 7:** My question is about the Wave, actually. Do you remember the first time that this form struck you and why it is something you have returned to?

**MM:** The wave is force, strength of sensuality; it is water, it is fire. If you look through traditional African art, there is always a wave, and I took the wave many years ago as my alphabetic tool. I use it the way I wish to, and I wander through it. You can see that; I am happy with it. By the way, I actually concentrated my studies more in sculpture than in painting. I consider myself a painter.
afterwards. As you can no doubt notice, my work is very sculptural. The wave is a source of tension and energy for the mind, and for the body as well; it creates movement.

**Montazami:** And with that, we should bring this conversation to a close. Thank you once again, Mohamed Melehi, for some fascinating insight into your life, work and ideas.

---

**Mohamed Melehi** was born in Asilah, Morocco, in 1936. He studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Tétouan in Morocco from 1953–1955, and in Seville, Madrid, Rome and Paris before crossing the Atlantic to Minneapolis and New York, spending time at Columbia University with a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship. He returned to Morocco in 1964 and was an influential teacher at the School of Art in Casablanca as well as a founder member of the ‘Casablanca group’ of artists that included Farid Belkahia and Mohamed Chabâa. He was also arts director at Morocco’s Ministry of Culture (1985–1992) and a cultural consultant at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation (1999–2002). His work has encompassed being a publisher, graphic designer, sculptor, painter, muralist, teacher, organiser of exhibitions and festivals. He is a key figure for global South modernism.

**Morad Montazami** is an art historian, publisher and curator. As a director of Zamân Books & Curating, he is committed to transnational studies of Arab, Asian and African modernities. He has published several essays on artists such as Zineb Sedira, Walid Raad, Latif al-Ani, Bahman Mohassess, Michael Rakowitz, Hamed Abdalla, Jeremy Deller, Francis Alÿs and Eric Baudelaire. He was a curator for ‘Volumes Fugitifs: Faouzi Laatiris et l’institut national des beaux-arts de Tétoua’n, Musée Mohamed VI d’art moderne et contemporain, Rabat, 2016; and ‘Bagdad Mon Amour’, Institut des cultures d’Islam, Paris, 2018.