

the mosaic rooms



CONTEMPORARY CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD



NEW WAVES MOHAMED MELEHI AND THE CASABLANCA ART SCHOOL 12 APRIL – 22 JUNE 2019

To complete the tenth anniversary modernist series The Mosaic Rooms presents *New Waves: Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School*, the first exhibition in the UK dedicated to Moroccan artist Mohamed Melehi (b. 1936). This display of unseen paintings, posters, photographs and archival material will look at three significant periods of Melehi's career.

Firstly the exhibition explores the period 1957 to 1963 during the artist's encounter with a cosmopolitan post-war art scene principally between Rome and New York, two cities where Melehi sharpens his very singular appropriation of hard edge painting.

The exhibition moves on to the period 1963 to 1975 when, fulfilled by his participation in the New York art scene, Melehi nevertheless chooses to return to a post-colonial Morocco. There he triggers a cultural and artistic revolution at the *École des Beaux-Arts* of Casablanca with artists Farid Belkhatia (1934–2014) and Mohamed Chabâa (1935–2013).

Finally the exhibition investigates the 1980s when the artist's knowledge of Moroccan popular craft and architecture is invested in a series of pivotal works "reframing" the waves through neo-decorative structures and panels.

The exhibition will reveal Melehi's key role in the local development of art pedagogy and experimental practices in Morocco as well as his significant work in graphic design and mural painting which has contributed heavily in shaping the aesthetics of significant artistic networks and political causes throughout the Maghreb and the Pan-Arab alliances.

Melehi's work has featured in numerous solo exhibitions including a retrospective at the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, 1995 and the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, 1984. He has participated in group shows in Casablanca, Tangiers, Rabat, Marrakech, Baghdad, Algiers, London, Paris, Rome, Zurich, New York, Chicago and Montreal as well as the Marrakech Biennale 2016. His work is held in international museum collections such as Centre Georges Pompidou, Beaubourg, Paris, Tate Modern, London, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, MOMA, New York, and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha.

New Waves: Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School is the final exhibition in a series at The Mosaic Rooms highlighting modernists from the Arab world and Iran, entitled *Cosmic Roads: Relocating Modernism*, curated by Morad Montazami with assistant curator Madeleine de Colnet.

Key dates:

- **1936:** Mohamed Melehi born in Asilah, Morocco.
- **1953 – 1961:** Melehi's formation years draw on intense Mediterranean travels. He studied at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Tetouan, Morocco before going to study abroad at the *École supérieure des Beaux-Arts Isabel de Hungria* in Seville; the *École supérieure des Beaux-Arts San Fernando* in Madrid; the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* and the *Istituto Statale d'Arte* in Italy and the *École nationale des Beaux-Arts* in Paris.
- **1956:** Morocco becomes independent.
- **1958-1959:** Melehi exhibits internationally at the second edition of the Alexandria Biennale and at the *Première Biennale des Jeunes* in Paris.
- **1962 – 1964:** Melehi is a recipient of the Rockefeller Foundation scholarship to study at Columbia University. He encounters and hones his love of jazz music in New York as well as that of hard edge painting. In 1963 he takes part in the group exhibition *Formalists* at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art alongside artists such as Josef Albers, Frank Stella and Max Bill.

- **1964 - 1969:** Melehi returned to Morocco and became a professor of painting, sculpture and photography at the École des Beaux-Arts of Casablanca. Alongside artists Farid Belkhalia and Mohamed Chabâa with support from the art historian Toni Maraini and the anthropologist of art Bert Flint, the school developed a reputation for its innovative teaching: it rejected the Western academic legacy of easel painting in favour of an abstract artistic vocabulary, reformulating historical avant-gardes while remaining aware of the cultural and historical traditions of Morocco and its Amazigh, Arab-African, and Mediterranean components. The three painters' association – informally known as the Casablanca art school – is marked by a group exhibition at the Mohammed V Theatre of Rabat, 1966.
- **1966-1974:** As a cultural activist close to the postcolonial Left, Melehi becomes an influential editor and graphic designer, beginning with the iconic design of the journal *Souffles* (founded by Abdellatif Laabi) from 1966 to 1969; with the journal *Integral* founded and directed by Melehi (alongside Toni Maraini) from 1972 to 1977; he also co-founds *Shoof* publishing in 1974.
- **1969:** Melehi co-organised the manifesto exhibition, *Présence Plastique*, the first open-air group exhibition, held in Marrakech medina's Jamaa el-Fna Square in Morocco with a group of artists from the Casablanca school (Ataallah, Belkahia, Chabâa, Hafid, Hamidi). Their intention was to reconnect as contemporary artists with the people and reclaim public space for such art.
- Since the 1960s Melehi's body of work has been based around the recurrent motif of waves and cosmic landscapes. The canvases are consistently playing with edges, angles and curves, exploring various optic abstractions in clearly delineated lines and invisible paintbrush strokes.
- **1970s:** Melehi was actively involved in significant Pan-Arab exhibitions and networks as a painter and a graphic designer; Al-Wassiti Festival in Baghdad (1972), the PLO "International Art Exhibition for Palestine" (1978).
- **1971:** Melehi is the first artist to exhibit in one of the first Moroccan independent art spaces, L'Atelier in Rabat, founded by Pauline de Mazières, where Melehi would also contribute as a designer to the gallery's visual style and communication.
- **1985 – 1992:** Melehi is Director of Arts for the Ministry of Culture and also President of the Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts.
- **1999-2002:** Melehi is the cultural consultant to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Co-operations.
- Melehi lives and works in Marrakech and Tangier.

NOTES TO EDITORS

- The Mosaic Rooms are situated on the corner of the Cromwell Road and Earl's Court Road in Kensington, London, a short walk from the V&A and Design Museum
- Entry to the exhibitions are free. The Mosaic Rooms are open from 11am–6pm Tuesday to Saturday.

About The Mosaic Rooms

The Mosaic Rooms are a non-profit art gallery and bookshop dedicated to supporting and promoting contemporary culture from the Arab world and beyond in London. We do this through our free contemporary art exhibitions, our multidisciplinary events (including film screenings, current affairs talks, book launches and more) artist residencies and learning & engagement programme.

We work in partnership with local, national and international organisations to disseminate our combined arts programme to the widest possible audience – in London and beyond. Our previous collaborations include partnerships with The British Museum, ICA, Shubbak Festival, London Design Festival and London Festival of Architecture, amongst many others.

We believe in the importance of creating a cultural space that presents new thinking and daring creativity, illuminates ideas, inspires understanding, and interrogates contemporary issues. Our vision is for a London audience with a more informed, engaged and critical understanding of Arab culture and society.

We are a non-party political, non-religious organisation, and we are a project of the A.M. Qattan Foundation, a registered charity number 1029450.

About The Qattan Foundation

The A.M. Qattan Foundation (AMQF) is an independent, not-for-profit developmental organisation working in the fields of culture and education, with a particular focus on children, teachers and young artists.

Founded and registered in 1993 in the UK as a charity (no 1029450) and as a charitable company limited by guarantee (no 2171893), it has had a registered branch in Palestine as a non-profit organisation (no QR-0035-F) since 1998. The Foundation's operations are mainly in Palestine, with interventions in Lebanon through *Selat: Links Through the Arts*, and in the United Kingdom through The Mosaic Rooms.

Omar Al-Qattan, Chair of the A.M. Qattan Foundation

Omar Al-Qattan was born in Beirut and moved to the UK at the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. Following a degree in English language and literature from Oxford University, he studied film directing at the Institut National Supérieur des Arts du Spectacles (INSAS) in Brussels. His first film, *Dreams & Silence*, an early exploration of political Islam, won the 1991 Joris Ivens Award. In 1994, he produced Michel Khleifi's *Tale of the Three Jewels*, shot entirely in the Occupied Gaza Strip. The film premiered at Cannes and won a host of international awards. He has since worked on numerous films, most recently producing Khleifi's *Zindeeq* (2009 Muhr Award for Best Arab Feature, Dubai Film Festival).

In 1999, Al-Qattan launched the A.M. Qattan Foundation's cultural track, including a few years later, the Palestinian Audio-visual Programme. The Foundation also runs a children's library and cultural centre in Gaza City and an educational research and development programme focused

on Palestinian school teachers. The Foundation opened its new state of the art cultural centre and head office in Ramallah, Palestine in summer 2018.

In 2008, he established The Mosaic Rooms in London, a space focussed on the cultures of the Arab World, which has become a leading institution in its field. He was also Chair of the Shubbak Festival of Contemporary Arab Culture in London in 2013 and 2015. He has been a member of Taawon-Welfare Association since 1999, and was chair of The Palestinian Museum from 2012 to 2017 during which time he oversaw the inauguration of its building in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and launched its 2017-2019 programme. The Museum's first exhibition opened to the public in August 2017. In addition, Al-Qattan chairs Al-Hani Construction and Trading Company in Kuwait, a leader in the construction of large-scale public projects such as the recently completed Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Centre.

He also contributed chapters to two books: *Dreams of a Nation* (on Palestinian cinema) and *Nakba: Palestine, 1948 and the Claims of Memory*.

Rachael Jarvis, Director of The Mosaic Rooms

Rachael Jarvis is Director of The Mosaic Rooms, and was previously the Head Curator (2010-2014). Jarvis curates The Mosaic Rooms' exhibition programme and the gallery's public programme of weekly talks and events. Recent curatorial and exhibition projects include a site responsive exhibition by Nadia Kaabi-Linke, *Future Rewound & The Cabinet of Souls* (2014), the first UK solo show by leading Syrian artist Marwan, *Not Towards Home But The Horizon* (2015), an exhibition of new film and installation work by Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour, *In The Future They Ate From The Finest Porcelain* (2016), and a group show of emerging contemporary women artists from Saudi Arabia, *Shift* (2017). She holds a first class degree in English Literature and Fine Art from University of Exeter.

GUEST CURATOR

Morad Montazami

Morad Montazami is an art historian and curator. His research interests are cosmopolitan modernisms and histories of the avant-garde in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. He has published essays on Farid Belkahia, Bahman Mohassess, Behjat Sadr, Hamed Abdalla, Jordi Colomer, Latif Al Ani, among others. He curated the exhibitions *Hamed Abdalla: A R A B É C É D A I R E* and *Behjat Sadr: Dusted Waters* in 2018 at The Mosaic Rooms. He also curated *Baghdad Mon Amour* at Institut des cultures d'Islam, Paris (2018) and *Fugitive Volumes and Faouzi Laatiris: Catalogue déraisonné* at the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rabat (2016) and co-curated the exhibition *Unedited History: Iran 1960-2014* at Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris and MAXXI, Rome (2014). He is the director of Zaman Books Publishing and its related journal Zamân.

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LISTINGS INFORMATION

New Waves: Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School

12 April – 22 June 2019

Exhibition preview: 11 April 6 – 8pm

The Mosaic Rooms

226 Cromwell Road, London, SW5 0SW

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Open 11am – 6pm | Tuesday – Saturday | Free Entry

www.mosaicrooms.org

Image caption: *Composition*, Mohamed Melehi (1970). Acrylic on panel. Courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, photographed by Capital D.