

ART

The Colorful Waves Generated by Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School

Artists in postcolonial Casablanca created a specifically Moroccan form of Modernism, merging the influences of Pop art and Hard-edge painting with the rich tradition of abstraction in Berber craft and architecture.

Naomi Polonsky June 11, 2019



Mohamed Melehi, "Untitled" (1975),
Cellulose paint on wood, 110 x 95cm
(Image courtesy of the artist)

LONDON — There's a double meaning to *New Waves*, the title of the current exhibition at the Mosaic Rooms on the Moroccan artist Mohamed Melehi. It describes the colorful, undulating lines which became Melehi's painterly signature, or in his own words, his "handwriting." It also refers to the new wave of cultural activity which the artist sparked in his native Morocco.

Melehi, now 82 years old, gained his artistic education in Europe and America. In New York, he shared a studio with Pop artist Jim Dine and encountered Abstract Expressionists like Franz Kline. It was Times Square, however, which he credits with introducing him to the power of

popular images.

When he returned to Morocco — eight years after it had gained independence from France — Melehi joined his friends and fellow artists Farid Belkahia and Mohammed Chabâa at the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca, where he taught painting, sculpture, and photography. These artists rejected the traditional academic style of

painting left over from the colonial era, but they also refused to simply parrot the art they had encountered in Europe and America. Instead, they decided to create a specifically Moroccan form of Modernism, merging the influences of Pop art and Hard-edge painting with the rich tradition of abstraction in Berber craft and architecture. In this way, they formed the unofficial Casablanca Art School.

Mohamed Melehi, "Untitled" (1975),
Cellulose paint on wood, 110 x 94 cm
(Image courtesy of the artist)

Melehi and his entourage staged myriad indoor exhibitions, but their practice also extended beyond the gallery walls. They subscribed to the

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Ql Yl úll Öül ! wÄÜDr r k the display
shows archives of The Casablanca Art
School Manifesto Exhibition of 1969:
Plastic Presence. (Photograph by Andy
Stagg, courtesy of the Mosaic Rooms)

Bauhaus notion that no hierarchy should exist between art, craft, design, and architecture. In 1969, they covered the walls of the buildings in Jamaa el-Fna Square, Marrakech's medina, with marvelous, psychedelic paintings. The outdoor display was a protest against the concurrent Salon du Printemps exhibition (a relic of Morocco's colonial past), but it was also a statement of intent: art could be part of everyday life.

In staging *New Waves*, the first solo exhibition on Melehi in the UK, the curators at Mosaic Rooms faced a hefty challenge. How can Melehi's subversive, often site-specific practice, be displayed in a converted London townhouse? How can the artist's vibrant, exuberant work be shown in a sterile "white cube" space? The curators have ingeniously solved this problem by capturing the spirit and atmosphere of Melehi's life through a series of moments (or, as the exhibition leaflet pompously calls them, "chrono-geographical chapters").

The first room recreates the displays of Melehi's works in group exhibitions at MoMA and the Galleria Trastevere in Rome. To the soundtrack of Thelonious Monk and Charles Mingus (whom Melehi saw perform live and whose improvisational style he was inspired by), we can inspect Melehi's paintings, as well as Polaroids and typewritten letters about them. One of the letters, from a curator at the Guggenheim to one at the Trastevere, dated November 1962, reads: "Dear Topazia ... I saw the work of Melehi and I must say, I think he has come on marvelously in the past couple of years. From being, I thought, rather weak, he has developed a very clear statement."

However, Melehi's true statement was yet to come.

In comparison to his later works, Melehi's paintings from the early 1960s are cold, slightly unmemorable, abstract works in black, white, yellow, and maroon.

In comparison, the next room is an explosion of color. One wall, painted in different shades of pink, is the backdrop to a smorgasbord of posters, photographs, book covers, and newspaper clippings. A couple of TV screens show footage of Melehi's outdoor murals. Then, of course, there are his famous waves. A dozen paintings and screen-prints created in the 1960s and '70s show the development of Melehi's wave motif, while a small-scale white sculpture in the corner of the room brings out the waves' dynamic, sculptural quality.

My favorite painting is "Flamme" (1975) — a stylized flame composed of navy blue and baby pink stripes

Installation view of fi Ġy t' l YĠYġ
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Ďù D r i k at the Mosaic Rooms (Photograph
by Andy Stagg, courtesy of the Mosaic
Rooms)

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by Andy Stagg, courtesy of the Mosaic
Rooms)

Mohamed Melehi, "Flamme" (1975),
Cellulose paint on wood, 109.5 x 95.5cm
(Image courtesy of the artist)

on a sage-
colored
background,
with what

looks like a lightning bolt striking through. It's as trippy as it is metaphysical, using sugary, pop-esque shapes and colors to reference the symbolism of astrology in Islamic culture. Arab and Berber influences on Melehi's work are drawn out further in the third and final room, which contains traditional objects, from a cedar wood mosque pillar to an enameled silver amulet box.

The exhibition is refreshingly minimal on text. A hand-out gives background on the artist's biography and his significance as a "major figure of postcolonial Moroccan art and of modernism in the Global South." However, some of the writing is a bit impenetrable. (What, for example, does the phrase "spatial ubiquities" mean? I'm not sure.) All the more reason not to read the text. In this exhibition, visitors are encouraged to learn about the art by looking at and experiencing it, rather than digesting reams of writing. And I get the feeling that this is what the colorful, irreverent Mohamed Melehi would want.

Installation view of fi Ġy t' l YĠYĠ
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by Andy Stagg, courtesy of the Mosaic
Rooms)

New Waves:
Mohamed
Melehi and
the
Casablanca
Art School,
curated by
Morad
Montazami
with
assistant
curator
Madeleine de
Colnet, runs

Mohamed Melehi, "Volcanique 1 and 2"
(1985), Cellulose paint on wood (Private
collection. Photograph by Andy Stagg,
courtesy of the Mosaic Rooms)

at the Mosaic Rooms until June 22, 2019.

Mohamed Melehi, "Untitled" (1980),
Cellulose paint on wood, 84 x 84 (Image
courtesy of Loft Gallery)

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