

# ARTS & CULTURE

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## Cornwall show celebrates the radical postmodern Casablanca Art School

► The show, 10 years in the making, shows ground-breaking Moroccan work from the 1960s to the 80s



Farid Belkahlia's *Cuba Si*, painted in 1961, one year before the then-27 year old assumed control of the Casablanca Art School. Photo: Foundation Farid Belkahlia / Tate



“Even until the 2000s, these artists were totally forgotten,” says Morad Montazami about the group of artists who coalesced around the Casablanca Art School in the 1960s. “It took until the time of the new interest in non-western modernism for them to be remembered outside of [Morocco](#).”

Tate St Ives's new exhibition, running until January 14 in Cornwall, England, explores this moment – widely acknowledged as one of the most significant postcolonial movements in modern art. The exhibition, which is co-produced by the [Sharjah Art Foundation](#), will come to the UAE next year.

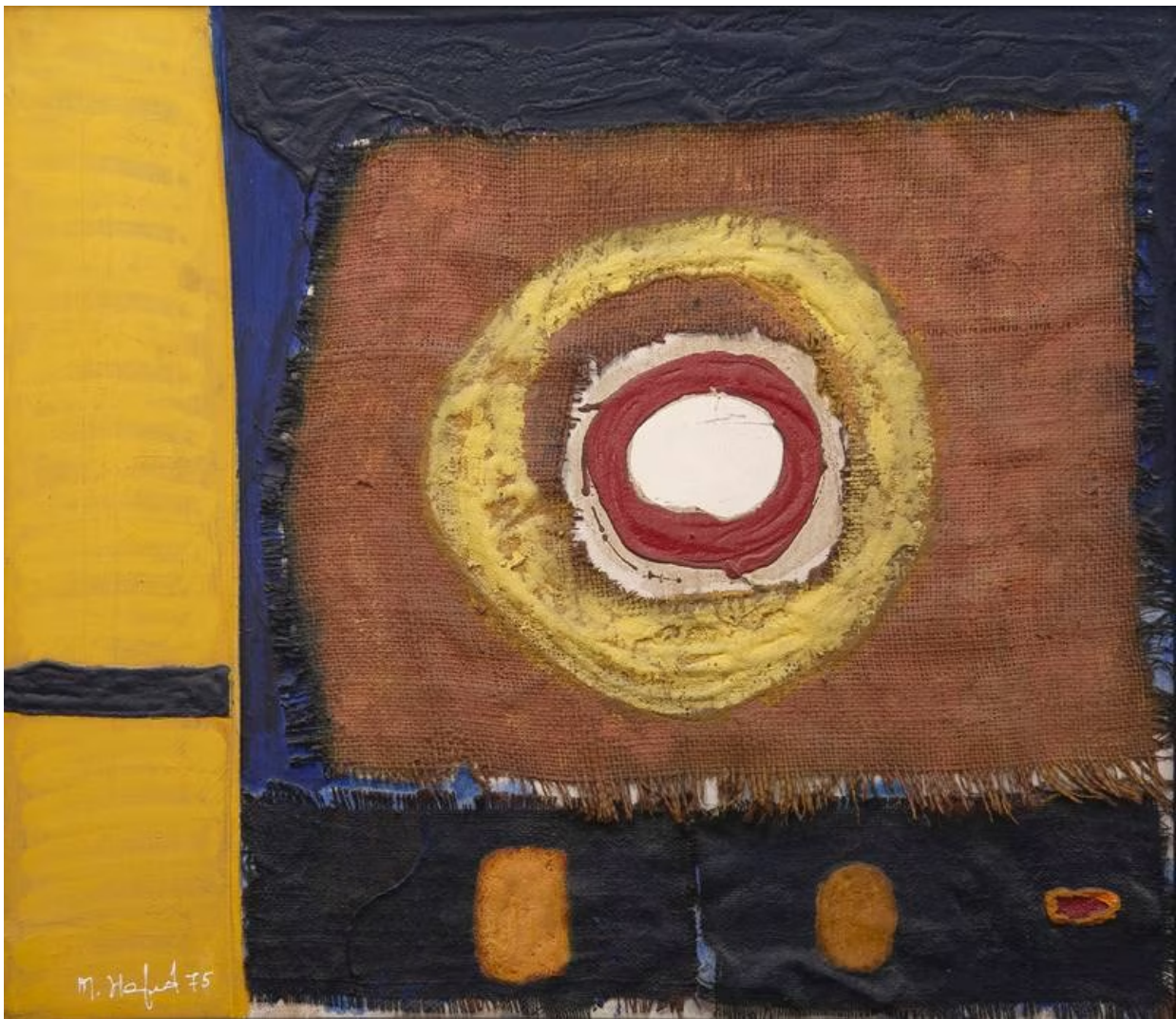
Curated by Madeleine de Colnet and Morad Montazami in conjunction with Tate St Ives director Anne Barlow and assistant curator Giles Jackson, the Casablanca Art School exhibition shows the artists who were working in the Moroccan coastal city from the 1960s to the 80s.

The group exemplifies the radical promise of a generation of young artists at the time, who matched the political excitement of independence with art that simultaneously celebrated their country's tribal and new national identities.

The change in Casablanca began when the artist Farid Belkahia became head of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1962.

Belkahia overhauled the school's French-led curriculum to look towards local and Amazigh (Berber) motifs and practices: painting on calfskin – as Amazigh tribesmen did – instead of canvas; and taking inspiration from local tattoo scarring, not European landscapes.

He also appointed new artists to the faculty, including most famously Mohamed Melehi and Mohammed Chabaa, who translated the geometric patterns of vernacular Moroccan artistry into brightly coloured graphic canvasses that rang out with boldness and unbridled energy.



Mustapha Hafid's layered *I Am Yours*, from 1975, shows the play with materials and tactility among the artists. Photo: Mustapha Hafid / Yasmine Hafid

Most importantly, the show's lead curator Montazami says, the artists of the Casablanca school formed an infrastructure in which new artwork could develop.

Montazami says they did not just create a school in the sense of making a school in the building, but in the sense of creating a Global South platform that didn't exist in other developing countries.

"I'm talking about a modern art museum, academia, art history, an art critical establishment. The Casablanca school created all of that, in addition to being an incredible pedagogic hub. They created makeshift museums, makeshift streets displays, makeshift magazines, makeshift assemblies, and even delegations. That's why they're so impressive and that's why they're so compelling."

Many of the works at Tate St Ives are being exhibited to the public for the first time in years, and the show draws on a decade of research by

Montazami, who first started looking into the school when he was a curator at Tate in the 2010s.

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It features work by the Casablanca trio – Belkahia, Melehi, and Chabaa – as well as 19 others: artists who also taught at the school, such as [Andre Elbaz](#); students, such as Houssein Miloudi and Mustapha Hafid; and European artists

who worked in Casablanca at the time. The result is a vision of Casablanca as a much more networked site than conventional histories have it, and much more diverse in terms of artwork and artists.

Though it is well-known that Belkahia discarded canvas for vellum, he also worked in copper – a common material for Moroccan artistry – which he beat into quasi-calligraphic forms and stick-like figures. Chabaa, too, carved versions of his geometric experiments into wood, in reliefs and intricate, even claustrophobic sculptures.

In the work of the student Hafid, the circular forms of Amazigh motifs are ripped into the canvas. Strange little ceramics by Abderrahman Rahoule, who exhibited with Hafid at the 1968 student exhibition, resemble towers designed for circulating water or air, or a city flowing out into everything around it.

There were also a number of visiting European artists, demonstrating the extent of the school's influence. Bert Flint, a Belgian anthropologist, was Melehi's co-traveller on his road trip across the High Atlas mountains.

Installed opposite an Amazigh carpet is an extraordinary textile work by the Polish artist Anna Draus-Hafid, who met Hafid on an exchange programme in Warsaw (Morocco looked to the USSR for support at the time). The pair married and returned to Casablanca, splitting their time between the two countries.

This is the first time the work has been shown publicly and suggests a connection between Moroccan textiles and Eastern European experiments of the same time, with Draus-Hafid even setting up a tapestry workshop at the school.



This work by Abdelkrim Ghattas from 1977 shows the diversity of experiments into hard-edged abstraction in Casablanca at the time. Photo: Abdelkrim Ghattas / Private Collection, Marrakesh

Montazami and Jackson also explore the work of Chabaa and Melehi, with its nods to New York's hard-edged abstraction – again rounding them out with paintings by lesser-known artists, such as Malika Agueznay and Mohamed Ataallah, and the superb works of Abdelkrim Ghattas, in which rigid order seems to fracture into joy before one's very eyes.

They also include documentary material from Chabaa and Melee's experiments with *Souffles* and *Integral*, the two journals in which the artists developed postcolonial ideas as political and theoretical projects – a crucial part of the Casablanca project, which can only be understood through the artworks on show.

"All of them had a drive or a strategy, which could be collective and shared or even individual, to deconstruct and get rid of the easel painting model," says Montazami.

"It was theorised by Mohammed Chabaa, because Chabaa was really a theoretician. He's the first art theorist in Morocco. He began to write exhibition reviews and art theory since the 50s, and [alongside the 1966 Rabat exhibition] he published an important text in the Moroccan press about how to escape the easel-painting and how to be modern."

To emphasise the importance of the infrastructure that the Casablanca school created, the curators have organised the exhibition via four major exhibitions, restaging them as far as possible.

This includes the famous Presence Plastique exhibition in Jemaa el-Fna Square in 1969, in which the artists showed their work on the streets of Marrakesh. The show features work by all the exhibitors – Belkahia, Melehi, and Chabaa, plus Ataallah, Hafid and Mohamed Hamidi – as well as the newly uncovered venues for the show. It travelled to 16 November Square in Casablanca a week after opening in Marrakesh, and then featured at two girls' schools in the city, allowing the artists to further take their work out of the gallery and into the space of daily Moroccan life.



Melehi took this photo of the Plastic Presence exhibition, installed in 16 November Square in Casablanca, June 1969. Photo: Mohamed Melehi

Other rooms show the connection of the Casablanca School to postcolonial movements across the Arab world, such as the 1974 Baghdad Biennial, another high-water mark for Arab contemporary art, when the different scenes that had developed in each postcolonial context converged and were exhibited together.

Belkahia curated the Moroccan delegation of 12 artists with his own work and Chabaa's graphic experiments, as well as messier, painterly works by Miloud Labied and Saad ben Cheffaj.

The exhibition finishes on the Asilah festival, created in 1978 by Melehi and Mohamed Benaissa in the northern coastal town. There, again, they integrated artwork into daily life, working with local communities to paint the city's white walls in striking shades of blues, yellows and greens, and acting as a meeting point for artists across the Global South.

As a closing chapter for the show, it's an apt one. The lines of influence for the Casablanca school extend broadly – and then abruptly close off. Mired in the political trouble of Morocco in the 1980s and 90s, and ignored by a western-facing art world, the sphere of influence of the Casablanca school artists retreated inwards and only now reappear.

*The Casablanca Art School is at Tate St Ives, Cornwall, until 14 January 2024*

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