

# MOHAMED MELEHI & THE CASABLANCA ART SCHOOL

27 MAY 2023 – 14 JANUARY 2024

This viewing room provides a unique retrospective insight into the multi-faceted career of Mohamed Melehi (1936-2020, Asilah, Morocco) and explores

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Mohamed Melehi (in chair) at the Casablanca Art School with a group of teachers (including Mohammed Chabâa and Farid Belkahia) and students (among them, on the far right, Malika Agueznay). Photograph by Toni Maraini. Photo: Courtesy of Malika Agueznay

### THE CASABLANCA ART SCHOOL AT TATE ST IVES

The first ever exhibition in the UK devoted to the Casablanca Art School opens on 27 May 2023 at [Tate St Ives](#). It's a moment described by its curator, Morad Montazami, as one of 'rehabilitation'. He means that it shows how avant-garde art wasn't produced solely in Europe and North America — despite traditional, Western accounts of art history long suggesting that it was.

Works by 22 artists will be brought together to demonstrate the wide variety of the Moroccan 'new wave', from vibrant abstract paintings and urban murals to applied arts, typography, graphics and interior design. The exhibition will also include a selection of rarely-seen print archives, vintage journals, documentary photographs and films.

'This wasn't simply an aesthetic revolution, but a pedagogic one,' says Montazami. 'Students were encouraged to look beyond Western academic traditions and focus on local ones instead.'



Mohamed Melehi (1936-2020), *Untitled*, 1983. Cellulosic paint on wood. 150 x 200 cm. © Mohamed Melehi Estate

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## MOHAMED MELEHI

1936 - 2020

Mohamed Melehi was a painter, graphic designer, teacher, muralist, cultural activist and a pivotal and leading figure for postcolonial Moroccan art. Alongside peers Farid Belkahia and Mohammed Chabâa, Melehi was an influential figure in Moroccan modernism and a key member of **The Casablanca Art School**, an avant-garde group that radically questioned cosmopolitan abstraction and art pedagogy within the context of colonialism. His work resists the East/West divide, resulting in a dialogue between popular and traditional Moroccan craft. Melehi's work is also connected to the hard edge painters of the 1960s.

In Melehi's art we can sense the spirit of aesthetic revolution and the exaltation of post-Independence Morocco. His creative energy and visual inventiveness are palpable in his works, dating from the 1950s to the 1980s. They trace Melehi's artistic developments in the 1960s, from experiments with abstraction in Rome and New York to the full realization of his iconic wave motif in the 1970s. Additionally, Melehi's significance in transnational art history becomes evident in this period. Melehi's work resists the East/West divide that developed during the Cold War period. His wavy Third World frescoes take us on a cosmopolitan journey, joining together the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.

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M. Melehi, mural painting, Nouasser airport, Casablanca, 1973

CASABLANCA’S ECOLE DES BEAUX-ARTS

The French colonial presence in Morocco grew steadily throughout the 19th century. The nation was given French protectorate status in 1912. The following ten years saw the founding of the Casablanca Art School in Morocco’s capital. It adopted the teaching methods of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where lessons frequently involved easel painting and working from statues or life models.

Morocco’s nationalist movement grew after World War II and reached its zenith with its separation from France in 1956. ‘Artistic change took longer to happen, though, than political change,’ says Montazami. ‘Colonialism doesn’t stop affecting a culture the minute a country is independent. It lasts until such a time as a local ecosystem incubates and emerges to subvert it.’



When Farid Belkahia was appointed as the director of the Casablanca Art School, the incubation process got under way in 1962. The

During the 1960s, alongside Farid Belkhaia, Mohamed Chabâa, Toni Maraini and Bert Flint, Melehi participated in a turning point in art education, at Casablanca's Ecole des Beaux-arts. Archives from the school, shown here, convey a spirit of collective knowledge through interdisciplinary displays and site-specific works. The school combined different studios for painting, sculpture, decoration, graphic design and typography/calligraphy, encouraging students to look beyond Western art history and develop interest in local artistic production and artisanry.

During the 1970s, the influence of the Casablanca Art School extended beyond Morocco, gaining recognition internationally. The 1974 Baghdad Arab Art Biennial, featuring over 600 works, showcased the talents of artists from the emerging Moroccan art scene. Additionally, the Asilah Cultural Moussem-Festival, founded by Mohamed Melehi and Mohamed Benaïssa in 1978, remains a lasting testament to the cultural activism of the Casablanca Art School, taking place across the public spaces of Asilah.



Fresco by Mohammad Chabaa, Assilah Moussem, Late 1970s. Photographed by Mohamed Melehi. © M. Melehi archives/estate

Since the 1960s, artists and activists of the Casablanca Art School called for a return to African and Berber sources. Together they encouraged their students to study rugs, jewellery, leatherwork, tattoos, "decorative" painting in mosque and zawiya (religious schools or monasteries) of the Souss region; to seek the potential of these popular Moroccan art forms in terms of geometric abstraction and "modernism". A multicultural repertoire of forms and symbols with complex interconnections between Berber and African, Islamic and Mediterranean, as well as the deeper archaeological layers of Mesopotamia and Phoenicia. While Mohamed Melehi was fully involved in the development of mural paintings and urban design in the context of the Asilah Arts Festival, his works from the 1980s seem to open a new space for reframing the wave (either through craft objects





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During his time teaching as a professor of painting, Melehi pushed his students to reimagine the geometric designs found in ancient Berber carpets and Islamic ornaments. He preferred using wood as a foundation rather than canvas, and he oversaw the creation of numerous murals.

The wave was expanded and turned into a structural thread for the reintegration of decorative arts and everyday aspirations into his avant-garde project. He had chosen, for his 1965 Galerie Bab Rouah exhibition in Rabat, to display a Berber carpet (from the private collection of Bert Flint) next to his soft and angular paintings. From that time to the 1980s, Melehi's works continued to maintain the flow of new waves as synonymous to "new craft" and to a certain aesthetic fluidity.

In parallel to these experiments, Belkahia, Chabâa and Melehi created in situ reliefs, frescoes and furniture design – in an "integrated art" style that was both minimalist and grassroots. Commissioned by architectural studio Faraoui & De Mazières, these structural and decorative elements demonstrate a timely dialogue between the labyrinthine patterns of these works and the modular shapes of buildings designed by Patrice de Mazières. It is a rare example of visual artists and architects from Arab regions (one might mention the Baghdad Modern Art Group in the 1950-1960s) coming together as an innovative and hybrid group to imagine a future called "postcolonial architecture".



Mohamed Melehi (left) at his studio in Casablanca with Mohammed Chabâa.

Photo: © M. Melehi archives/estate



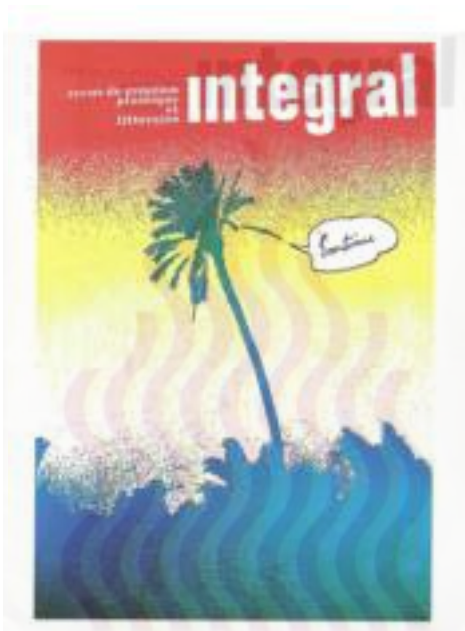
Painting and collage workshop with Mohamed Melehi (right) at the Ecole des Beaux Arts de Casablanca, c 1965, courtesy of the Toni Maraini archive



Mohamed Melehi, Flame, 1976, Cellulose paint on cut-out panel, private collection.

aligned with the Russian Constructivists' belief that art should be a means of production rather than a means of individual expression. Melehi's adoption of these methods meant that he utilized tools and accessories traditionally associated with workers and industry rather than those of a painter. He even delegated the production of his works, which was consistent with a history that began with Moholy-Nagy's order for paintings executed in porcelain-enamel from a sign company in 1922.

Initially being produced in a workshop, the cellulose works were then created in the artist's studio, which was adequately equipped for the task. Despite this industrial production process, Melehi's works remained true to their origins. The humble motifs he borrowed were entirely removed from the grand ambitions of traditional art and were faithful to their artisanal origins.



As a graphic designer and photographer, Melehi helped shape the visual culture of political causes throughout the Maghreb and Pan-Arab artistic networks. His graphic design and editorial work for the Casablanca group and for avant-garde journals such as *Souffles* (1966-1969). In 1972, Melehi co-founded the journal *Integral* alongside Toni Maraini, which he directed until 1977. This publication, like *Souffles*, was an important forum for cultural and political discourse and helped Melehi further cement his position as a leading figure in the artistic and intellectual communities of the time.

1. Cover of the publication 'Integral', created in 1971, co-founded by M. Melehi, T. Maraini, T. Benjelloun and M. Nissabouri. Design M. Melehi. Archives Toni Maraini.

2. First issue of *Integral* magazine, October 1971, co-founded by M. Melehi, T. Maraini, T. Benjelloun and M. Nissabouri. Design M. Melehi. Archives Toni Maraini.





Mohamed Melehi

*Flame*, 1970

Silkscreen on paper

Signed and dated lower right 'MELEHI, 1970' and numbered lower left 47/50

84 x 61 cm

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In 1974, Mohamed Melehi unveiled his graphic design studio, aptly named SHOOF, meaning 'Look' in Arabic. More than just a publishing house which played an essential role in disseminating ideas and fostering critical discussions in postcolonial Morocco, SHOOF served as a place for Melehi to delve into developing his wave pattern graphic design work.

Melehi's wave pattern in graphic design culminated in a poster produced for Palestine, which he created during this period and published in the journal *Souffles*, which Melehi also co-founded. It featured his signature wave motif cleverly transformed into a flame, serving as a powerful symbol for the Palestinian struggle.

1. Flame of Palestine poster by Mohamed Melehi published in the journal 'Souffles', Liberation Graphics Collection (RMF).

2. Poster for Melehi's solo exhibition at Galerie l'Atelier, Rabat, in 1971: design by Mohamed Melehi. Photo: Mohamed Melehi/Pauline de Mazières Archives



Mohamed Melehi at his L'Atelier Gallery solo exhibition in Rabat where his silkscreens were exhibited, 1971.

Melehi was one of the first artists to exhibit in one of the first Moroccan independent art spaces, L'Atelier in Rabat, founded by Pauline de Mazières. The exhibition featured the silkscreen *Flame*, 1970 among others and Melehi would continue to contribute as a designer to the gallery's visual style and communication.

Between 1985-1992 he took up on a new position at the Ministry of Culture, contributing to the development of art spaces and cultural institutions in Morocco and leading major restoration projects, including the Tinmel mosque in the High Atlas. Between 1999 and 2002, he worked as a cultural consultant to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The exhibition follows three principle chapters. It highlights Melehi's urban wanderings between the cities of Rome, New York and Casablanca, the stimulation of new visions, and the dream of sharing them with a community that would transcend school, art factory, or design studio... and, finally, the nomadic museum or migratory forms.





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'Melehi's recent works revive the paradox of the wave, that which is both organic and ornamental, but also ultimately has no beginning and no end. They reinforce Melehi's contribution to the rethinking of decorative function and grammar of art, and echoes his lifetime commitment to mural painting and urban design. Melehi's waves resonate both in the past and the present, as a visual metaphor for breaking the rules, expanding our vision, and broadening our minds.'

- Morad Montazami, Curator of Casablanca Art School exhibition at Tate St Ives

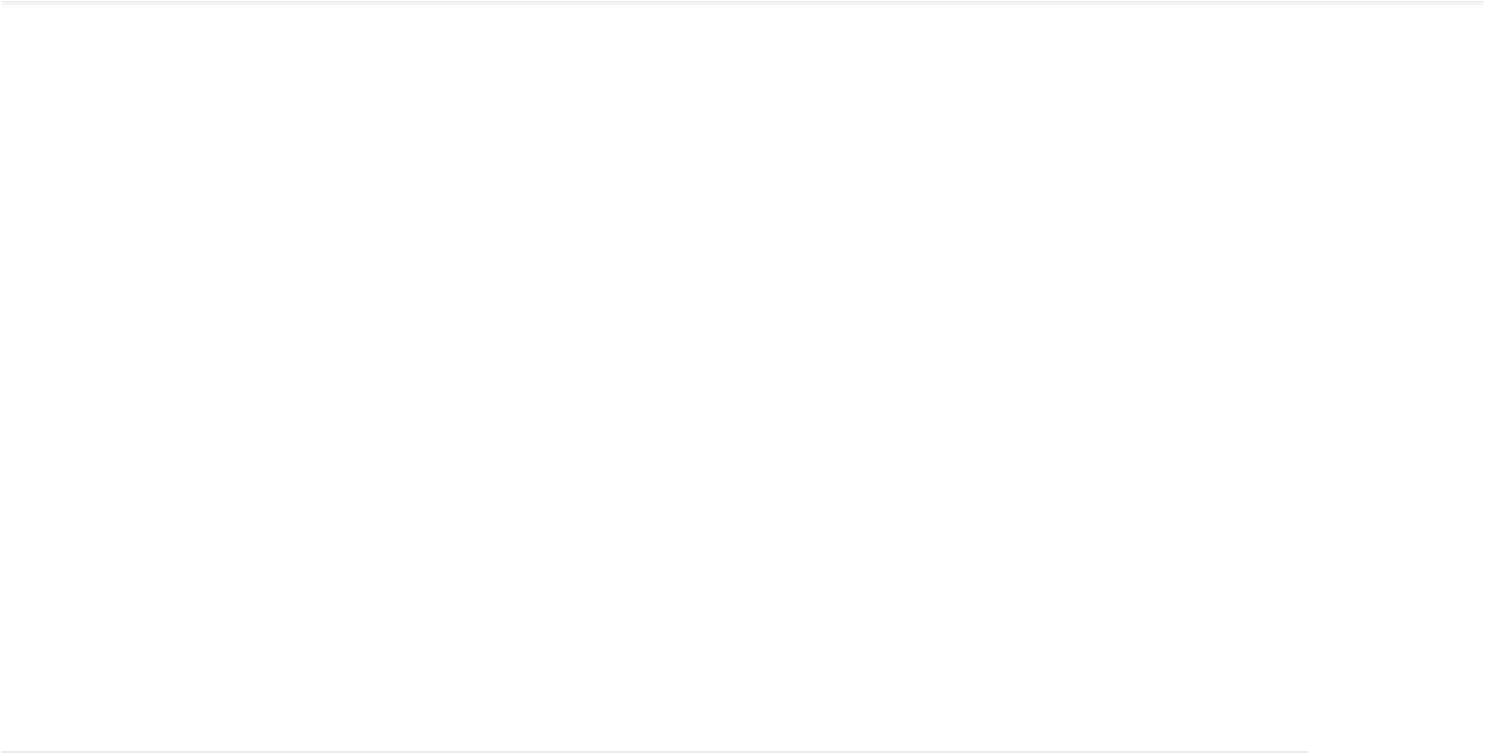
His most recent *Moucharabieh* (2020) series is reminiscent of his bold graphic compositions from the early 1970's, where he produced the now-familiar wave motif in block colours, yet now on a much grander scale. The motif of the wave is, for Melehi, all about movement and change. It is as much about electromagnetic radiation as it is about water, and when vertical it becomes a flame. The series strips away the waves to their bare essentials – they become

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