

## Exhibition Review

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### **Ahmed Cherkaoui : Entre Modernité et Enracinement, Museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts (MMVI), Rabat, Morocco, 27.03.2018 - 27.08.2018.**

In the course of promoting national arts in Morocco and making them accessible to larger audiences, Museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts held a retrospective exhibition on one of the most prominent modern painters in postcolonial Morocco: Ahmed Cherkaoui (1934-1967). The exhibition displayed a selection of the artist's major works throughout six exhibition rooms, and it traced the evolution of his plastic vocabulary to narrate a story of artistic creativity and experimentation where questions of roots, tradition, modernity, individuality, popular culture and cultural diversity were central.

This exhibition plays a significant role in the Museum's exhibition programmes since it follows in a succession of exhibitions that strive to highlight the influence of the cultural encounters between Europe and Africa on the works of artists from both continents.<sup>1</sup> The Museum also promotes and celebrates the national arts through this exhibition that narrates the birth of modern art in postcolonial Morocco by showcasing a leading figure and one of the main founders of Moroccan Modern painting.<sup>2</sup>

The unique plastic vocabulary of Cherkaoui and the evolution of his style are substantially marked by the predominance of the sign, an ornamental element that has a spiritual and mystic force in the civilizations of his mother land. He finds his source of inspiration in symbolic, decorative signs of traditional pottery, Amazigh carpet motifs, Amazigh tattoos, Sub-Saharan pictograph and Arabic calligraphy, and he places them at the heart of his plastic research and experimentation to create a synthesis between a popular repertoire of symbols and lyrical abstraction of L'ECOLE DE PARIS (School of Paris). Cherkaoui's canvas is a space of encounter where the Occident and the Orient meet to yield new and hybrid artistic experiences and forms of expression. This idea is clearly communicated and illustrated through the visual and textual narration of four major periods in Cherkaoui's artistic journey.

An introductory exhibition space, a multimedia room and four thematic exhibition rooms introduced the audiences to the works of Ahmed Cherkaoui and provided them with accompanying interpretive labels that narrated the artist's life, education, encounters, cultural experience and influences in both Europe and Morocco; These narratives were related to his unique artistic creation that marked the history of Moroccan painting.

#### **The Introductory Room: Image, Text, Document**

In a well-lit, formal exhibition space, Cherkaoui's artistic journey was introduced generally throughout three different media: A video projection, a touch screen and a wall-label. This space highlighted and specified a context to guide the audiences, and it suggested a prism through which they would discover, interpret and understand the works of the artist. The exhibition invited the viewers to consider the different cultural influences that inspired this passionate modern painter. His origins and identity as a Moroccan artist and his stay in Europe enriched and shaped his unique artistic experience. The introductory room highlighted the substantial role of the sign in the works of Cherkaoui and explained how this artist used specific stylistic techniques to bring about a unique form of expression that marked the beginning of modern abstract painting in postcolonial Morocco.

### **Room 1: Landscape Makeover and Material Processing**

A large wall-text on a white background charted Cherkaoui's creation journey chronologically, and a set of monochrome photographs were displayed to illustrate some of the marking events in his artistic career, such as his participation in different art exhibitions: *Vingt Peintres Etrangers* (Twenty Foreign Painters) in the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, *Peintres du Maghreb* (Painters of the Maghreb) in the gallery of Gouvernail in Paris, *Rencontre Internationale* (International Encounter) in Rabat, Morocco, and in many other exhibitions and festivals across Europe and Africa.

A brief account on his origins, parents, childhood, life and early education in Morocco was introduced to the audiences to shape a general view on the cultural background that shaped his identity and personality. Cherkaoui's father was a Sufi Muslim<sup>3</sup>, and his mother was an Amazigh from the Mid-Atlas, a region known for feminine traditional weaving and tapestry. Cherkaoui attended the Koranic school and was later introduced to the art of Islamic Calligraphy. His passion for the signs and the mystic symbols in the decorative arts of his civilization would play a substantial role in the construction and evolution of his artistic compositions.

A number of Cherkaoui's abstract paintings were displayed in a neutral and well-lit exhibition space to illustrate this period in his artistic journey. The viewers were invited to focus on both material and content. Cherkaoui joined *L'école des Arts et des Metiers de Paris* in 1956 and acquired new techniques to work on the material he used as canvas and background to receive the content. He started painting in 1959, and his style was nothing akin to the figurative representations of Orientalist painters or the first generation of Moroccan autodidact and naïve painters. Influenced by artists like Paul Klee (1879-1940) and Roger Bissière (1886-1964), Cherkaoui experimented with jute canvas and discovered new aesthetic and symbolic possibilities. He realized representational compositions of Moroccan landscape that favoured abstraction and free gesture and where content and form merged, which reflected his influence by *Tachisme*, French style of non-geometric abstraction and abstract expressionism popular in 1940's and 1950's. His palette ranged between monochrome shades of earthly and mineral colours, like brown and ochre.

### **Room 2: Place and Manners of Sign Reproduction**

This exhibition space displayed a set of monochrome drawings and paintings such as *Composition* (1961) and *Le Petit Chinois* (1962), (*The Little Chinese*), which illustrated a new phase in Cherkaoui's artistic journey. The sign, a major element in his plastic vocabulary, was at the heart of his research at the Academy of Fine Art in Warsaw. In 1961, Cherkaoui discovered Polish graphic design; his new discovery inspired further research on the subject of the sign and its rendering, and yet signs and symbols from rural and popular culture of Morocco continued to influence his artistic creation. In this phase, Cherkaoui worked on the poetics of space in his artworks. He used animal skin and jute as canvas and integrated the techniques of collage and graphism. Cherkaoui included a graphical frame in the middle of the canvas by means of clear bold lines, a closed space that would receive the element of the sign to create some sort of dissociation between background and composition. His technique was known as *Cartouche*, an ovoid or rectangular shape meant to isolate the background of the canvas from the space that would include the content, the sign. The point was to highlight the content, make it focal, and sacralize it by means of spatial division. This technique evoked the mystic nature of traditional talisman in his popular culture where the sacred element is marked by spatial isolation.

### **Room 3: Sign Drawn and Painted Gesture**

The paintings displayed in this exhibition, a series titled *Miroirs* (1965), (*Mirrors*), represented a turning point in the artistic career of Cherkaoui. The vivid palette and the new relationship between content and canvas reflected yet another phase of the metamorphoses of the sign. In these compositions, the closed space used to isolate content dissolved, and the sign extended to reach the edges of the canvas. Tension created by means of juxtaposing line, shape, and colour was a major stylistic shift for the viewers to consider. Intensity and vibration were evoked

by bright red, yellow, and cobalt blue, while pure white colour represented light sources so as to add an atmospheric dimension.

Adult Path (1965) was the focal point of this exhibition. This oil painting was described as emblematic of the pictorial transformation of the artist. Through the use of the colour white, the artist created an aura and a halo that presupposed the limits of the sign. In this painting, the tension that the artist created between line, shape and colour in his series was obviously diminishing to pave the way for another turning point in his artistic rendering.

#### Room 4: Sign Figures and Expansion of Pictorial Space

This exhibition displayed a set of paintings that Cherkaoui realized in 1966 and through which it traced the evolution of his plastic journey. The exhibition also showcased two sketchbooks of the artist in the course of tracing his plastic research that revolved mostly around popular and traditional signs and symbols in his civilization. It showed the many ways the artist could creatively write-draw these signs and symbols in abstract compositions. The accompanying interpretive labels guided the viewers and helped them to single out some of the techniques the artist used to evoke mysticism and energy in his works and suggest the concept of infinity of matter in the imagination of the viewers. The paintings in this space, *Solstice* (1966), *Mosquée Bleue* (1967), (*Blue Mosque*), *Atlas Songs* (1967), and *Red Talisman* (1967), had a mystic aura that evoked free movement in an infinite space. Writing and painting were combined, and the cursive signs, rendered through free gestures on a white background, seemed to float in a cosmic space. The tension between line, shape and colour dissolved even further, and the sign, focal point of Cherkaoui's works, seemed to transcend the canvas and become infinite. The source of light created in those paintings by means of white colour suggested openings through which a mystic light burst and expanded beyond all that is material, tangible.

The exhibition *Ahmed Cherkaoui: Entre Modernité et Enracinement*, which Museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts (MMVI) mounted for almost six months, was accessible to different audiences who were eager to discover the journey of the artist in particular and the beginning and history of modern painting in Morocco, most specifically abstraction. The exhibition could have displayed more works to pay homage to one of the founders and leaders of modern painting in postcolonial Morocco Cherkaoui, an artist with a short history of artistic creation (1959-1967) yet prolific (around 200 oeuvres). Most of the paintings displayed were borrowed from other national and international cultural institutions, yet the exhibition could create an engaging and very informative narrative through the collection at hand.

The labels in the exhibition were in two languages: Arabic and French, and a print guide of the exhibition offered interpretations and explanations about the displays in three languages: Arabic, French, and English. The labels were informative, precise and quite accessible apart from the use of some technical and professional concepts in the realm of modern painting that needed some knowledge background. Also, the labels in English required some editing and revision to handle French interference, which made it difficult for English-speaking and international visitors to follow.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts has mounted a number of exhibitions that strived to attain specific ends in its cultural agenda, among which was introducing the national and international audiences to the hybrid and rich cultural experience of the Moroccan society. The purpose of these art exhibitions was to narrate and highlight the cultural influence of the encounters of Europe and Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on some Orientalist and modernist artists. Exhibitions like *Giacometti: Retrospective*, Museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts (MMVI), Rabat, Morocco, 20.04.2017-04.09.2017 and *Facing Picasso*, Museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts (MMVI), Rabat, Morocco, 18.05.2017-31.07.2017 put emphasis on the African references that artists like Giacometti and Picasso made in their artistic creations. The exhibitions aimed to show how African cosmogony, mythology, folk art, and

traditional popular culture inspired a number of artists from Europe in the first half of the twentieth century and enriched their plastic vocabulary. On the other hand, easel painting was introduced to Africa by European artists during the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Those cultural encounters and exchanges brought about hybrid forms of artistic expression in terms of style, technique, material and content.

- <sup>2</sup> The first national museum of modern and contemporary arts, Museum Mohammed VI (MMVI) was first inaugurated in 2014. Prior to its inauguration, the Moroccan artistic landscape had lacked a national museum of arts for more than half a century. This museum came to collect, host, preserve, interpret and present the national arts to local and international audiences. Narrating the life and works of Ahmed Cherkaoui and other Moroccan modern painters in this museum is a part of a programme that traces the birth and history of modern art in Morocco and presents its evolution and development. Ahmed Cherkaoui belongs to the second generation of modern artists who joined art academies in Europe and received formal education and training, in contrast to the first generation of autodidact and naive artists that followed L'École Coloniale (the colonial school) and Orientalist artists such as Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Jacques Majorelle (1886-1962). The second generation of modern Moroccan artists established a rupture with the figurative style of the colonial school and aimed at creating an original and autonomous artistic experience and pictorial expression. See more in Maraini T. (2014) *Écrits sur l'Art*, Casablanca: Éditions Le Fennec, 37-57.
- <sup>3</sup> Sufism is an unorthodox version of the faith of Islam that favours mysticism, asceticism, spirituality and music as forms of prayer and meditation to reach deeper knowledge and understanding the divine. The Sufi movement arrived to Morocco around the twelfth century and was revived by Moroccan spiritual Sufi saints in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. See more in Morris B. (2006) *Religion and Anthropology: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 102-104.

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