

Shining a spotlight on North African art

A show explores artists' responses to local and universal issues of their times and the influence of the pioneers on modern works

By Jyoti KalsiSpecial to Weekend Review Published: August 04, 2016
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Automne 2 by Atef Maatallah, oil on canvas, 2015 Image Credit: Supplied

The latest exhibition at Elmarsa gallery, “Yesterday is Tomorrow’s Memory”, celebrates the depth and diversity of art from North Africa through key works by leading modern and contemporary Arab artists from Tunisia, Algeria and

Morocco. The artworks include paintings, sculptures, ceramics and mixed media works from the 1960s to the present. By bringing together significant works by modern masters, leading contemporary artists and young emerging talents from the region, the show explores their individual responses to local and universal issues of their times, while also tracing the influence of the pioneers of modern art on subsequent generations of artists. The show's title, taken from a quote from Kahlil Gibran's book "The Prophet", highlights the connections that exist between these artists from different countries and different generations, and their shared visual language.

The featured artists include Aly Ben Salem, Hatim Elmekki, Nejib Belkhodja, Nja Mahdaoui, Khaled Ben Slimane, Meriem Bouderbala, Halim Karabibene, Gouider Triki, Emna Masmoudi, Asma M'Naouar, Omar Bey, Atef Maatallah, Thameur Mejri and Slimen Elkamel from Tunisia; Moroccan artists Farid Belkahia and Mohamed Rachdi, and Abdelkader Guermaz, M'Hamed Issiakhem, Baya, Mohammed Khadda, Mahjoub Ben Bella, Rachid Koraichi and Thilleli Rahmoun from Algeria.

It is interesting to see the common threads that link these artists, such as the abstracted figures of Issiakhem (1928-1985), a pioneer of modern Algerian art; Tunisian master Elmekki (1918-2003), and emerging Tunisian artist Mejri (b. 1982). Issiakhem painted abstracted male and female figures surrounded by various symbols and blotches of sombre colours. In his 1970 painting, "Femme Accoudée", displayed in this show, the barely visible female figure painted on a white background conveys a sense of suppression and silent suffering. Mejri's 2013 painting, "The Crisis – The Knife" is quite similar in terms of the pale palette and the abstracted figures, but the symbols surrounding the figures are inspired by the modern digital age and speak

about contemporary issues such as the violence and constant surveillance in our society.

“The body and its relation to the object is my main concern. I want to make my painting a means of protest and provocation by addressing topics that are considered taboo in this culture. My work questions the contempt and hatred inflicted on the body by religious dogma and the idea of suffering and then dying to meet the Creator. Aesthetically this means the visual breakdown of the body — its deconstruction to destroy the dogmas,” Mejri says.

Many of the modern pioneers from the region immigrated to France in the 1960s and became affiliated with the School of Paris. Among them was Guermaz (1919-1996), who moved to Paris in 1961. He is known for his minimalist, monochromatic, spiritual paintings, which were conceived as “abstract landscapes”, such as “Metamorphose”, an oil on panel work from 1974 presented in this exhibition. His influence on the next generation is visible in Paris-based Tunisian artist Masmoudi’s (b. 1964) painting “Jasmins d’Automne” from 2012. Executed in a palette of earthy tones, the emotional work depicts a barbed wire fence, falling flowers and tiny abstracted figures.

Tunisian artist Bouderbala (b. 1960) is also educated and based in Paris, and was recently awarded the Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government. She draws inspiration from both French and Tunisian culture to fuse Eastern and Western visions in her representation of the body. Her works in this show are from the “Bedouinas” series of 2013, where she used white fabric to depict the figures of Bedouin women. Her choice of material references the typically female tradition of working with textiles, and the floating, ghostly, sculptural forms reflect on the very nature of representation and construction of contemporary identity, while also questioning the Western perception of Arab women as depicted in orientalist art.

“For me the question is how to confront visual representation, and to approach the mystery which by nature is taken away from the eyes. Between art from the Orient and contemporary art, I am in pursuit of bonding both approaches together. On one hand, geometry opposes its codified narrative to the forbidden representation of the body. On the other hand, visual presentation is the answer to the established representation in Western contemporary art. My journey is an attempt to escape an alternative that I refute. I want to find the point where the human figure is both flesh and signs. These images of women represent the dead and the living, as if they were engendered by emptiness,” she says.

“Entre les Femmes d’Alger” by Rahmoun (b. 1978) also references a famous work of orientalist art. In her version, the young Algerian artist has depicted various roles played by women in contemporary society alongside symbolic references to the restrictions and traditions that continue to tie them down. “I think that the major part of an artwork rests on the presence of a foreign body, which is a crossover of immoderation, discrepancy and poetry. The fragile protagonists I throw into my world are at the same time actors, victims and unconcerned witnesses; and to this I add sensations picked out from the surroundings in a theatrical mise-en-scene,” she says.

Other prominent women artists featured in the show include M’Naouar (b. 1965) and Baya (1931-1998). Tunisian M’Naouar, who has studied and lived in Italy, is well-known for her complex, layered, abstract paintings. The artist takes inspiration from American action painting as well as Italian Renaissance art to infuse her work with light, vibrant colours and energy. Her painting in the show is a work from her 2011 series titled “Architecture”. “In this series I have overlaid calligraphic designs with many layers of

complementary colours. The calligraphy is illegible because it is not meant to create a narrative. Rather I have used it to imbue the paintings with action and movement,” she says.

Baya’s work and life were quite different from M’Naouar’s. She was orphaned at a young age and was brought up by a French couple living in Algeria. She was a self-taught artist and sculptor and thanks to the support of her adoptive family, she had her first exhibition in 1947 at the age of 16 in Paris at Galerie Maeght, which represented artists such as Picasso and Braque. Picasso even invited her to work with clay in his country home. As can be seen from her 1969 gouache on paper work, “L’Offrande”, her paintings are a mix of colourful, surreal, childlike images of wild plants, imaginary creatures, exotic birds, dancing women, mystical symbols and ornamental elements that reflect her Arab-Berber identity.

Baya’s vibrant, figurative, expressionist painting resonates with Tunisian master Ben Salem’s (1910-2001) painting, “Le Jardin d’Eden” from 1950, featuring two beautiful female figures surrounded by colourful birds, flowers, plants and traditional ornamentation. Ben Salem was the first Tunisian to attend the Tunis School of Fine Arts, and the also the first Tunisian Arab artist to be actively involved in the revival of traditional art techniques such as weaving, glass painting and jewellery making through his work. He became a central figure in the cultural scene of Tunis by hosting gatherings of leading poets and writers such as Armand Guibert, André Gide and Saint-Exupery in his studio. The artist lived in Paris for a few years before settling down in Sweden, but his distinctive style remained rooted in his culture.

The colourful exuberance of Baya and Ben Salem is also seen in the works of Triki (b. 1949), Karabibene (b. 1962) and Ben Bella (b. 1946). Triki, a leading modernist from Tunisia, has created his own artistic vocabulary with symbols from nature, animals and human figures set in dreamlike, imaginary

landscapes that evoke a sense of organised chaos. He spent many years in Paris, where his colours and compositions were influenced by Surrealism, Cubism and Expressionism. His 2014 painting “Massacre” looks bright and joyful from afar, but a closer look reveals myriad scenes of violence, anger and hatred, making a strong statement about the chaotic state of our world today.

Karabibene, also from Tunisia, is known for his surreal, sardonic collages and paintings depicting an alternative universe playfully staged with a range of mythical neo-pop characters. His 2011 painting “Eclotions” presented in the show is filled with imaginary figures and symbols depicting the thoughts and ideas incubating in the minds of human beings.

Algerian Ben Bella studied art in Paris and currently lives in the North of France. His distinct language of evocative forms, shapes and colours is inspired by Arabic calligraphy. His untitled oil on canvas painting from 1980 is a great example of how he expresses himself through beautiful arrangements of motifs and chromatic scales. Renowned Tunisian artist Mahdaoui (b. 1937) also draws inspiration from Arabic calligraphy to create his poetic, rhythmic abstract compositions. The artist, who is known as a “choreographer of letters”, is represented in this show with a beautiful piece done with Indian ink and paint on papyrus, featuring his signature combination of lines, geometric shapes and letters.

Paris-based Algerian master Koraichi’s (b. 1947) practice is also anchored in Arabic script and poetry, and deeply influenced by his Sufi heritage; but it has a contemporary look and universal resonance. His mystical, spiritual, calligraphic works in the show include an untitled engraving from 1985 and a steel sculpture from 2015.

The graceful forms in Ben Slimane’s (b. 1951) conceptual works are also

derived from calligraphy. The Tunisian artist, who studied ceramic art in Spain and has trained with legendary Japanese ceramists such as Yu Fujiwara and Arakawa Toyozo, is presenting a series of ceramic works and an abstract acrylic painting decorated with calligraphy and other graphic symbols. Through these works the artist explores concepts of time, the universe and infinity. It is worth noting that the artist has worked with Miró and Tapies, and in 2011 his ceramic works were exhibited alongside those of Miró and Braque in an exhibition at the Ceramic Museum in Barcelona.

Khadda (1930-1991), recognised as one of the founding fathers of modern art in Algeria, also wove together the fluidity of Arabic writing with the formal language of Western abstraction in his meditative paintings. He was at the forefront of the Auchem (Arabic for tattoo) and the School of the Sign movements that emerged in Algeria after independence from French colonial rule.

Tunisian artist Belkhodja's (1933-2007) abstract paintings also have elements of stylised Arabic writing, but they are mainly inspired by the traditional architecture of the medina. The artist, who was born in the medina in Tunis, initiated an art movement in Tunisia called the African Medina', which explored the architecture and life around the medina, then the heart of all African cities. His oil on canvas painting from 1964, "Abstraction Numero 45", illustrates his unique style of abstraction with a distinct Tunisian character.

Belkahia (1934-2014), a pioneer of the modern art movement in Morocco, took inspiration from Tifinagh letters of the Amazigh alphabet and traditional Moroccan motifs from rugs, tattoos and architecture in his work. After studying in Paris and Prague, he returned to his homeland to serve as the director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca from 1962 till 1974. Under his leadership, the school moved away from the colonial French model of

easel and still life painting, and focused on Moroccan visual culture and architecture. During this period, the artist himself moved away from painting and began working with hammered copper, and with leather that he treated using traditional techniques and painted with natural dyes such as henna. The show includes an iconic “hand-shaped” work on vellum by the artist, which is covered with a variety of traditional motifs and henna patterns.

The current generation of Moroccan artists is represented in the show by Rachdi (b. 1964), whose work explores themes of memory, desire and the human figure. His contribution is a work from his 2011 series, “Les Rosaces du Désir”, featuring two intertwined figures drawn on thin paper doilies, evoking the fragility of human relationships.

The works of young Tunisian artists Bey (b. 1973), Maatallah (b. 1981) and Elkamel (b. 1983) reflect the ongoing political unrest in Tunisia and the region, and comment on the pressures and challenges of modern life. Bey’s themes are centred on the paradoxical excess of modern human existence. The artist often uses contrasting and seemingly incompatible materials to explore the bizarre nature of the human condition and likes to describe himself as a “contrastivist”. His composition of 20 etchings, “Once Upon a Time”, is a powerful depiction of the effect of negative thoughts on the human mind and the vulnerability of the human condition.

The figures in Maatallah’s drawings and paintings are based on the people he remembers from his childhood. The haunting images of these ordinary people express a sense of longing and evoke an air of transience. His paintings in the show are from the “Autumne” series of 2015. They depict two tragic figures against a bleak, grey background. The works evoke a sense of alienation and express the feelings of his generation as they deal with an autumn of anger and tragedy after an Arab spring where flowers never bloomed. On another level, the figures reflect the autumn of life, when one is grey and faded and in

a state of waiting.

Elkamel uses found media images to create narratives about contemporary life in his mixed media paintings. His 2016 painting “Adam the Solitary” speaks about the loneliness of modern urban life and the incessant bombardment of images, emotions, temptations and opinions from the media that shapes our perceptions and beliefs, and blurs the border between the real and virtual world.

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“Yesterday is Tomorrow’s Memory” will run at Elmarsa gallery, Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz, until August 15.

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