

# Tunisian Artist Thameur Mejri's Inevitable Journey



All images courtesy of Elmarsa Gallery, Tunis/Dubai

Observing a painting by Tunisian-born and based artist Thameur Mejri is an exercise in art historical, socio-political gymnastics. “I don’t give answers—on the contrary, I want people to ask questions, to feel uncomfortable, to get lost, to feel moved,” he explains of the vivid, cacophonous aesthetic of his large-scale paintings. Skulls, bulbous limbs, gestural lines and sharp geometrics dance through his perspective-bending compositions in a way that feels Basquiat-esque (*I’ll bury my love around you*, 2016). There is a dense amalgamation of mixed-media colours, shapes and drips that often converge in the centre of the frame, reading not unlike Rauschenberg (*Knives everywhere*, 2016). But that’s an outsider eye reading the brute attack on his canvases with vaguely naïve stylistics. There are also works such as *Untitled 2* (2014) or *Untitled 6* (2014) that employ minimalist, incomplete [architectural renderings](#) and contorted figures, recalling Francis Bacon’s anguished scenarios, or even [Picasso](#)’s multi-

perspective technique—both of whom Mejri says are inspirations. But then he adds in a third name: David Lynch, and it is through this reference that the complex world of Mejri’s creations begin to unfold.

The incorporation of unexpected intersections and encounters was something that Mejri felt early on would benefit the development of his visual language, and a large part of this included fusing various art historical references with current concerns. “I give more importance to the process of creation than to the final result because art is an experience, learned with improvisation and assisted by references from [art history](#),” remarks Mejri. This *mélange* of experiential and historical knowledge resonates through his body of work, as well as his role as a professor at the Tunis Institute of Fine Arts. It likewise permeated his foray into film with his brother, director Kays Mejri, for *The Plague*, which won the best experimental short film prize at the 2007 New York International Independent Film and Video Festival.



*Thameur Mejri. 2017. I dreamed about Picasso nearly every night this week. 2014. Oil on canvas. 200x150cm. © Pia Torelli*



A fresh and unconventional approach is critical in deciphering the diverse subjects Majri tackles. “There are too many themes I want to explore: religious dogma, masculinity, violence, death, loneliness,” he notes. “I want to confront the chaos that exists in our contemporary societies, particularly in the region.” Represented by [Elmarsa Gallery](#), which has branches in [Tunis](#) and Dubai, Mejri has been able to exhibit his—and what he views as necessary for the public as well—reflections on life, death and the world we live in. “It’s a journey through our mortality and the fragility of our lives,” he explains. In addition, Mejri, as a North African and Arab artist, feels a responsibility to question his nation’s origin, heritage, and way of thinking and living in order to forge a better future. So while speaking from a specific set of cultural and geographic values, he says, “We have to dig deeper and confront what is wrong with our past, but we have to use universal tools and concepts so we can take part in what’s going on around the world.”

Speaking to local and universal sentiments, Mejri’s imagery is rife with symbols nuanced by their dense contexts and environments. The motifs, combined with the energetic application of paint, create a sensation of tense vibration, a chaotic back-and-forth between receiving and interpreting stimulation, and oscillating levels of comprehension, for himself and the viewer. “The process is sometimes exhausting and very physical,” he says. He imbues his graphic drawings—“deformed and fragmented bodies, isolated in chaotic space without identities” —with verve, and the overwhelming result is just part of the mental play. “I want people to question their consciousness through these symbols which look familiar,” he says. “But the truth is that they are menacing.”



*Heretic space 4. 2017. Mixed media on canvas. 180cx140cm.*

Mejri explains that the tortured tone of the paintings—despite being depicted in vibrant bordering on cheery hues of lemon yellow or sky blue—mirrors the mind’s internal landscape. “It’s the expression of the pressures that I feel,” he says. “It doesn’t offer a clear vision of the future, and it’s not easy to question the origin and core of our problems, to understand where we are going and what we really want.” Not shying away from bleak existential propositions, Mejri uses paint as a vehicle in which to “face the oppressive powers that invade all layers of our lives.” His approach is not docile—a tangible sense of resistance or discord runs through his practice. “I’m trying to challenge the norms and established systems,” he clarifies. “I think we are under the threat of a destructive power that seeks to dehumanise us, break us, and then incite violence and promote chaos.” Life, Mejri says, is fragile and painful, and leads only to death. “It’s inescapable,” he laments. “I don’t believe in happy endings.” But that doesn’t mean that the journey is a passive one: his oeuvre shows that chaos may be the status quo, but it can be tackled with strength and daring.