

Visual Arts

## Moroccan Modernism at Tate St Ives – postcolonial adventures in abstraction

The Casablanca Trio forms the core of a richly fascinating but frustratingly arranged exhibition



Untitled (1975) by Mohammed Chabâa © Chabâa Foundation

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In a 1969 photograph by the Moroccan Modernist artist Mohamed Melehi, a market woman in traditional skirts, bearing a heavy sack on her head, is halted in her tracks by an array of dazzlingly colourful abstract paintings on the mud-red walls of Marrakech's main square, the Djemaa el Fna. At this impromptu outdoor gallery, she is joined by a craning crowd. They are spectators at an experimental exhibition that became a defining moment in Moroccan art after independence in 1956, and is now seen as a landmark of Modernism in the global south.

Melehi, who died of Covid in 2020 aged 83, was a leading figure among the avant-garde artists behind *Plastic Presence*, which aimed to shift art from the salon to the streets. It continued on Casablanca's whitewashed walls on the Atlantic coast. All taught in the 1960s at Casablanca's École des Beaux-Arts, now the focus of an important exhibition at Tate St Ives. The town's Atlantic setting, and its history as a hub of British Modernism, seem apt for the first museum show of this constellation of Moroccan Modernists: *The Casablanca Art School: Platforms and Patterns for a Postcolonial Avant-Garde 1962-1987*.

Three disparate artists form the core "Casablanca Trio", and all have had works acquired by Tate since 2016. Farid Belkahia, the young director of the Casablanca school between 1962 and 1974, who died in 2014, was the subject of a retrospective at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 2021. He was a student in Paris and Prague, and his early oil paintings include the sombre-toned "Tortures" (1961-62), its figure excruciatingly hung upside-down from shackles, expressing outrage at the French crackdown on neighbouring Algeria's bid for independence.



'Cuba Si' (1961) by Farid Belkahia  
© Fondation Farid Belkahia

While Melehi shared Belkahia's political sympathies, his contrasting early experiments in abstraction proclaim the heady influence of New York, where he had a Rockefeller scholarship after art studies in Spain and Italy. The acrylic canvas "Minneapolis" (1963), its zones of black and red separated by a yellow strip, paid homage to Barnett Newman's colour-field painting before his own signature, the protean wave pattern, emerged. Melehi's memorable solo show *New Waves*, at London's Mosaic Rooms in 2019, was by the same curatorial team, Morad Montazami and Madeleine de Colnet, here working with Tate St Ives.

The Casa Trio's third figure was Mohamed Chabâa, who studied in Rome and died in 2013. His untitled acrylic of 1965, a stylised profile in red, black and orange, signals the graphic flair that would see Chabâa imprisoned in 1972 for his work in *Souffles*, a quarterly journal of art and revolution banned that year.

Standout works by the trio are dotted throughout the show, among pieces by some 20 other artists. Belkahia abandoned oils to experiment with local materials: natural pigments on leather hide in "Palaver Tree" (1989), or metal in semi-abstract bas-relief in the surreal "Battle" (1964-65), a "Guernica" in hammered copper. Melehi's pulsing waves and flames, in psychedelic or earth colours, range from the lyrical cellulose painting "Volcanic" (1985), with its molten peak and waxing moon, to the undulating, 36ft-high "Charamusca Africana" monument made for the 1968 Mexico Olympics (seen here in a snapshot). Chabâa's complex geometric abstractions encompass vibrant acrylics and sculptures in wood or copper.



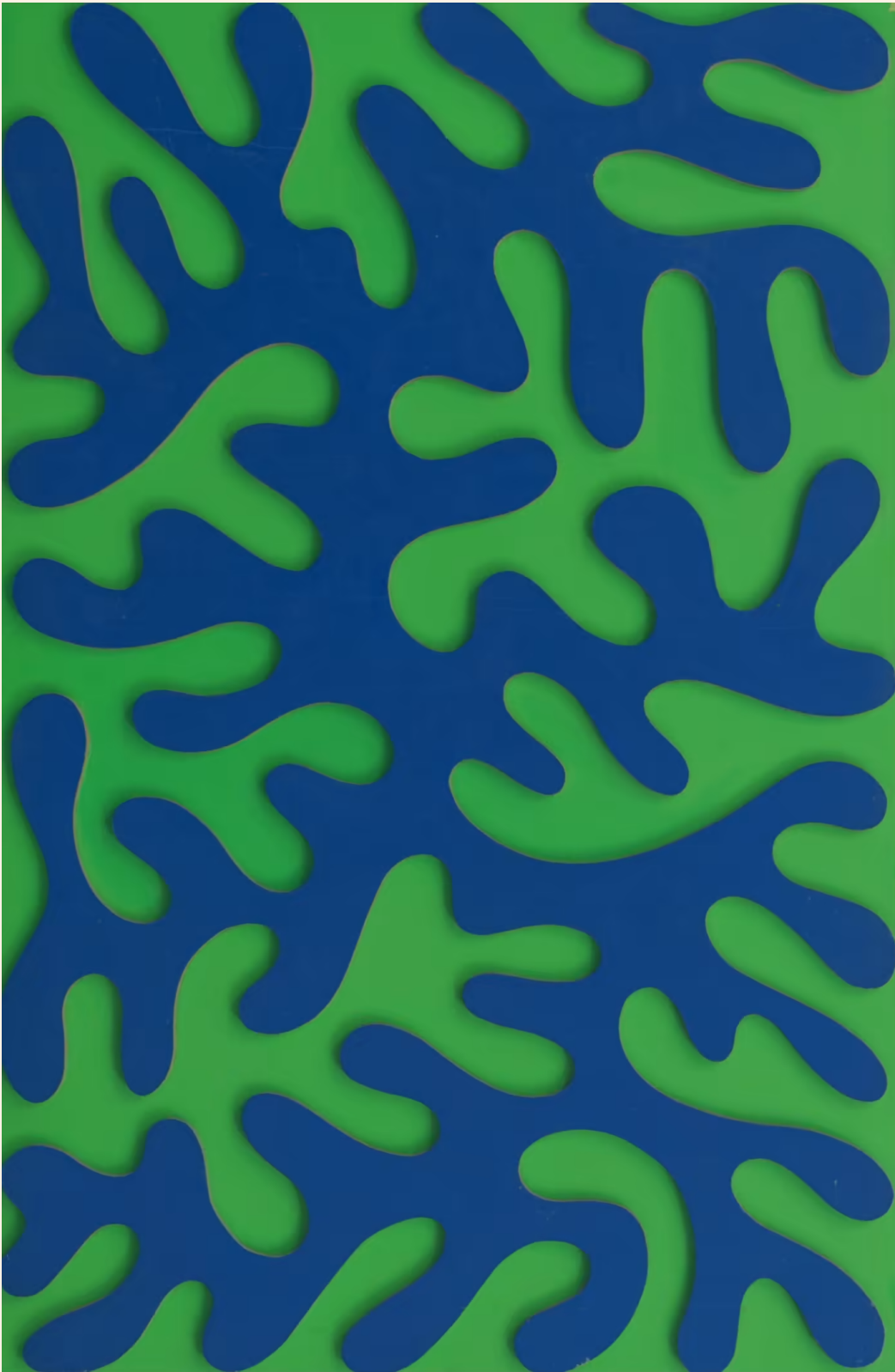
'Volcanic' (1985) by Mohamed Melehi © Mohamed Melehi Estate

Yet, rather than tracing the core artists' trajectories, their work, perhaps confusingly for a new audience, is separated by "platforms" according to where it was shown.

The trio first coalesced at a joint exhibition in Rabat in 1966. Their works were not for sale, Melehi told me in an interview in 2019, “to show students that art is a message, an idea, not . . . a luxury piece of furniture [but] a signal for freedom”. Seizing the reins of a school founded under the French Protectorate and still teaching Orientalist figuration, this first generation of artists to study abroad threw out academic easel painting for transnational abstraction, photography and field trips to the Atlas mountains, trawling the past for their unique take on Modernism. “Abstraction is not foreign to Morocco,” Melehi told me. “It’s the real expression of north Africa.”

A section on “Afro-Berber heritage” shows how Mediterranean, sub-Saharan, Arab and Amazigh (Berber) ornament inspired abstract patterning that recurs, from posters and book covers to hotel decor, medina murals and ceramics (Abderrahman Rahoule’s earthenware pots are rare survivors from the 1960s). Motifs from Amazigh jewellery and painted ceilings — seen in photographs by Melehi, displayed alongside a Berber rug — echo through the show.

Among other key abstract artists were Mohamed Ataallah, who studied in Rome and died in 2014, whose paintings include the diptych “Multiple Marrakech/Multiple Flame” (1969), and Mohamed Hamidi (born 1941), who returned from Paris and favoured overlapping blocks of sumptuous colour. Malika Agueznay, known as Morocco’s first woman Modernist, painted biomorphic shapes resembling calligraphic algae. She was Melehi’s student when she made the show’s navy blue on sea green acrylic relief, in 1968.



Composition (1968) by Malika Agueznay © Artwork and image courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

The cosmopolitan Casa Group tutors included the Dutch anthropologist Bert Flint — who coined the term “Afro-Berber” — and the Italian art historian Toni Maraini (Melehi’s then wife). Ahmed Cherkaoui, who died young in 1967, was a forerunner. His gestural ink drawings, sparked by Amazigh talismans, valorise artisanship that was dismissed as decorative in colonial times. The Bauhaus view of the artist as an “exalted craftsman” spurred fabulous collaborations with architects. Spectacular wall reliefs and ceilings, glimpsed in showreels, range from the Hôtel les Roses du Dadès in the High Atlas to the Casablanca Tri Postal.

Yet a focus on the school rather than the artists who made it unique leaves much in the dark. An accent on anti-colonialism and Moroccan roots obscures the input of action painting, jazz, cybernetics, Japanese Zen philosophy and Sufism, all of which, in the case of Melehi, combined “like ratatouille” in pulsating bursts of rhythmic colour: all these influences birthed Morocco’s transatlantic Modernism.

Generic section headings on “Creating Collectively”, “Making Art Public” or “Pan-Arab Solidarity” do little to illuminate this astonishing syncretism. Nor does the show give much sense of why the grouping collapsed over divergent political tactics during King Hassan II’s autocratic rule in the 1970s and 1980s, the “Years of Lead”.



One lasting legacy is the Asilah Arts Festival, co-founded by Melehi in 1978 in his seaside home town, where international muralists work alongside Moroccans such as Chaïbia Talal, a self-taught artist. Her vibrant oil painting “The Marriage Ceremony” (1983) concludes an exhibition richly fascinating and frustrating in equal measure. Mesmerising showreels — largely created from Melehi’s prodigious photography — are among its delights, hinting at alternative ways of telling this momentous story.

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