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### *Najia Mehadji: a life in the folds*

Whether it was before the 1980s and the advent of the computer or much further back in time, one of the happiest memories of a child brought up in Cairo, Damascus or Algiers was their morning calligraphy practice. They had to master it to the best of their ability to start the day well. It didn't really matter whether it was the name of God that appeared on the paper (written in full, in fragments or just the first letter Aleph), or their mother's, father's or sister's first name... Sacred or profane, the same movement meticulously repeated, day after day, became part of the child like the inner discipline of a Shaolin monk or a chess player who sees the "moves" take shape in the mathematical ether before being produced in naked reality. Calligraphy is more than an art of movement and proportion – representing an immeasurable knowledge –, it is also an art of anticipation. Cultivating the sense of the eternal bond (the line of the Qalam never really breaks or becomes discontinuous), or one could say the vital cord, this art entails *pre-seeing* the circumvolutions of the line. It's as if the child was being remotely controlled in some way. The Qalam serves as the natural extension of their bifurcating and ductile thought; it extends beyond the simple tool, becoming like their phantom member. The essence of calligraphic movement is to expand and exceed writing rather than duplicating or enhancing it. In other words, rather than elaborated writing, we should see it as supra-writing - or magnetic writing. It's like Newton's laws of motion.

By concentrating all their efforts at the end of their hand, without letting go, except to take the necessary breath at the right moment and on each curve needed, the calligrapher is caught between two dynamics (the internal and the external): between their own body and the body of the writing which mirror each other. "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction..." (Newton). Or put another way, when one object exerts a force on a second object, the second object exerts a force that is equal in magnitude and opposite in direction on the first object. Similarly, calligraphy is not the reflection of the writing but the reflection of the writer.

Najia Mehadji's art is not calligraphy in concrete terms. For in her, movement, breath and conduction have been radically emancipated from the letter, in the literal sense, and from any ornamental perfectionism (to put it simply, emancipated from any rule).

The artist's recent works from the series *Ligne de vie*, exhibited at L'Atelier 21 – created entirely during the pandemic lockdown she spent in her studio in Essaouira – are undoubtedly the most striking manifestation of this. However, like calligraphy, her art can be characterised as supra-writing, and magnetic at the very least. This is even more apparent in some of the works included in the exhibition, especially the turquoises on a black background or the blacks on a red background which challenge the passive gaze with their intense vibration. Looking at one of Mehadji's paintings is often like detaching oneself from the illusion of a so-called "free" and subjective gaze and immersing yourself in a psycho-visual wandering, like looking at a Rorschach test or a Tibetan mandala: following each line or each

projection, faithfully and structurally, like in a maze that has no way out but is sufficient in itself by the complexity of its ramifications, to achieve a greater freedom than the freedom of looking randomly, beyond the lines. Like calligraphy, Najia Mehadji's art is fundamentally non-mimetic and Newtonian, it's more of a matrix; as described by Christine Buci-Glucksmann (the artist's philosophical *alter ego*) who speaks of her "capturing the energies, rhythms, constellations and radiations of all the flows of the world"<sup>1</sup>. If not calligraphic, Mehadji's art is cosmographic. It is deeply connected to the movements of the air, the turning of the stars, the circumvolutions of the clouds but also describes, in its own way, the *moment of universal birth*; or to put it another way, how raw matter comes into the world, above and beyond man's (catastrophic) domination over nature, to shape our perception of it – opening our eyes to see not only the lines in which this matter unfurls or folds itself but also between the lines. Like some monks or spiritual masters who, through their practice of asceticism, manage to see a whole landscape in a grain of rice, some of Mehadji's "abstract" paintings seem to reveal avalanches, waterfalls or hurricanes and other cyclones... giving her a certain affinity, previously demonstrated by her older works, with the poetry and thinking of metamorphosis so beautifully developed in the work of Ovid, Leonardo da Vinci or Paul Klee.

In this post-anthropological perspective (namely in the midst of an anthropological crisis), it is all the more remarkable that the works exhibited here are all the fruit of the experience of the major lockdown, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, which paradoxically cut people off from each other, while plunging them into a common planetary condition. So, these works speak to us of the artist facing the great void of unconnected humanity, suddenly reverting to its most vital and therefore lowest functions; while unlearning or relearning the moral, spiritual and cultural elevation allowed through connecting with the Other. In this case, these new paintings represent the culmination of a technique already rooted in Mehadji, through her mastery of a big brush she uses as a seismographic compass, capable of taking the environment's pulse. So, we should see these cosmic exercises as worthy of celestial gymnastics, like the clouds of the human soul (or the breath-movement) taking refuge in the recesses of the sky hidden from us by planetary pollution, before the global quarantine and sudden interruption of frenzied productivism allowed them to reappear.

Beyond metamorphosis, these paintings re-teach us to look with our body but also to envisage a *life in the folds* (of matter) according to a movement Gilles Deleuze describes in his own unique way: "Folding-unfolding doesn't just mean stretching-relaxing, contracting-dilating anymore, but enveloping-developing, involuting-evolving (...) when an organism dies, it is not annihilated but involuted, and quickly folds back into the re-dormant seed, skipping the stages" - and through Deleuze, Leibniz: *The world is the infinite curve that touches in an infinity of points an infinity of curves*<sup>2</sup>. We see this same force of the fold used in Mehadji's painting (revealing the affinity with the post-baroque in the broad sense) to achieve the slenderness of the stucco clouds sculpted by Bernini in the 17<sup>th</sup> century or more recently the allegorical fantasy of Georgia O'Keeffe's bulbs.

<sup>1</sup> Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Crystals and flowers in the art of Najia Mehadji*, *Art Absolument*, n°10, Autumn 2004, p. 11

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Pli*, Paris, Minuit, 1988, pp. 13-34

Far from considering her relationship to space and the Other in a *simple mise en abyme* between microcosm and macrocosm, the cosmographic artist has to rise to a higher stage of humanity which is still a utopia but a desperately urgent one all the same. This is reflected as an unfurling of waves that both blur and purify the surface of the work (in the series of paintings applied on screen prints of the fist behind bars)<sup>3</sup>. This clamouring utopia is none other than the right to global citizenship, at a time when, to say the least, the right to asylum is being violated and human rights crushed and we are seeing the unending crisis caused by dramatic population movements, particularly in the Mediterranean, as a result of famine, unemployment, exploitation and oppression. As if all these afflictions could be put into boxes and categorised by various other administrative criteria, policies of acceptance and integration are gradually being replaced by abandonment or even repression. We are entering the infernal cycle of a state of emergency and the normalisation of rules of population control.

Conversely, in the spirit of agit-prop (between pop culture and politics), we need to acknowledge that it is through circulation – the art of curves, deviations and constellations – that human community can be created. An exigency that brings us back to the Marxist-inspired distinction between *emancipation* and *freedom*: “Emancipation is the entry of new nations and new peoples into the imperial society of control, with its new hierarchies and segmentations; freedom, on the other hand, means the destruction of borders and patterns of forced migration (...) If, initially, the multitude requires each state to legally recognise the migrations necessary for capital, it must (...) be capable of deciding if, when and where it will go”<sup>4</sup>. These are the terms used by Hardt and Negri, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, to diagnose the counter-attack by the people and the multitude faced with the disastrous migration policies of the European Union and the United States, oscillating between a complete lack of hospitality and new forms of apartheid. Najia Mehadji’s new paintings bear witness to a unique experience, in which the body and mind of the painter resume the fundamental points of her general practice and take it further, in the social void and inner tumult of a period marked by isolation and refocusing on Oneself, but also by a determined political engagement. However, oneness finds its ultimate form in the multitude (and not in simple subjectivity), namely in the amalgamation of biomorphic forms (whether botanical, animal or geological), intended for the movement of the masses; even if this amalgam finally gives rise to a being, a body, a monad... In this case, in the same way as a fold never comes alone but provokes within it a host of other folds, in a self-regenerating movement; these works somehow connect the viewer to the secret, the unfathomable, but with a dynamic amplitude and a graphic virtuosity that make the secret difficult to keep or fold away.

<sup>3</sup> These works entitled *Liberté j’écris ton nom* belong to a series made for the exhibition against the death penalty *Le droit de vivre* at the MACMA in Marrakech from October 2021 to February 2022

<sup>4</sup> M. Hardt et A. Negri, *Empire*, Paris, Exils, 2002, p. 438-481



*Liberté j’écris ton nom*, détail