

Arborescence.

2001, craie sanguine
sur papier, 76 x 57 cm.

Najia Mehadji, or the Contemporary Sublime

PASCAL AMEL

“The defence of human dignity is the ultimate subject matter of art.
And it is only in its defence that any of us will ever find strength.”

BARNETT NEWMAN (1990).

The in-between

If we wanted to randomly pick one contemporary artist among others who by her biography and work symbolises the union between the East and the West, it would be Najia Mehadji.

This Franco-Moroccan or Moroccan-French artist, born in 1950, spent her childhood and teenage years in Paris, with regular trips to Fez where her family comes from. She was a graduate of the Université Paris 8 where she defended her thesis on Paul Cézanne in 1973 and a student of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. She has exhibited in Paris galleries since the 1980s and, in 1985, decided to divide her time between her studio in Paris and her studio in Morocco, near Essaouira, in the Haha region, in a *douar* she converted into a traditional open-air *riad*.

Since then, this in-between existence has become her way of life. Besides participating in many international group exhibitions, as far as her two countries of choice are concerned – “I need them both”, she says –, different periods of her work have been shown at the Bab Rouah gallery in Rabat, in the Attijariwafa Bank’s Actua gallery and at the Société Générale in Casablanca; at the Poitiers and Caen museums, where a solo exhibition was organised for her at the end of the 80s; at the *elles@centrepompidou* exhibition dedicated by the Centre Pompidou in Paris to contemporary female artists from all over the world in 2009; at the Shart gallery and Atelier 21 in Casablanca; at the Montenay gallery, the Albert Benamou gallery and, finally, at Claude Lemand gallery in Paris.

In France, she participated in the artistic turbulence of the mid-1970s, experimenting with contemporary extremes. In visual arts, Simon Hantaï, Judit Reigl, Jean Degottex, Martin Barré and the *Supports/Surfaces* group were questioning painting from the point of view of its elementary components (canvas, frame, surface, plane, etc.); all of these artists were engaged in a deliberate process – the rules of the

game being optional yet radical – by which they were able to bring to the surface something that could never have been brought to the surface without them.

Najia worked for a while with Peter Brook and with The Living Theatre, two avant-garde theatre groups open to cultures that were called “extra-European” at the time. This was followed by lessons with Jerzy Grotowski, who, breaking with Western conventions of theatrical performance (the separation between stage and audience, the predominance of the text, the psychological play of the actors, etc.), took inspiration from ethnological rituals and the traditional theatre of Eastern civilisations to create the possibility of a “sacred theatrical experience” shared by the actors and spectators where the “human universal” is given concrete form. Whether this is in contemporary theatre or painting, the challenge is less about the invention of form for form’s sake than experience, self-exploration, the ordeal of the work, the transformation of the artist and the desired transformation of the viewer. In short, it is about opening up the individual’s field of perception so he or she can achieve a higher level of consciousness. This undertaking, in which the transformation of self and society is the objective, is based on a liberating vision of being.

Also during these years, Najia was particularly interested in the gestures and movements of Japanese Noh theatre and the Sufi rituals of whirling dervishes, which she rendered in charcoal or black ink. She created performances with contemporary music students by drawing on big sheets of paper in which sound-recording micro-contacts had previously been inserted. This was also the period when she frequented the *Femmes/Art* group and contributed to *Sorcières* magazine, which published her first drawings, sort of black and white diagrams that could be described as an “abstraction of the senses”.

Later, she read Bergson, Deleuze, Djalâl ad-Dîn Rûmî, Plato and Ibn Arabi and enjoyed the films of Dreyer, Bergman and

Bresson, filmmakers who made great use of lighting and close-ups, the emotions and the face. She felt an affinity to Lucio Fontana and the artists of Italian *arte povera* who, emerging from the anti-establishment utopia of the late 60s, revived the Nature/Culture dichotomy; and to Robert Ryman and Richard Serra, American minimalists who managed to retain radical thought and sensitivity of hand. She saw the *Anthropométries* of Yves Klein, the sculptures of Anish Kapoor, the videos of Bill Viola and the paintings of Lee Ufan, all artistic techniques uniting concept and perception, the material and the immaterial.

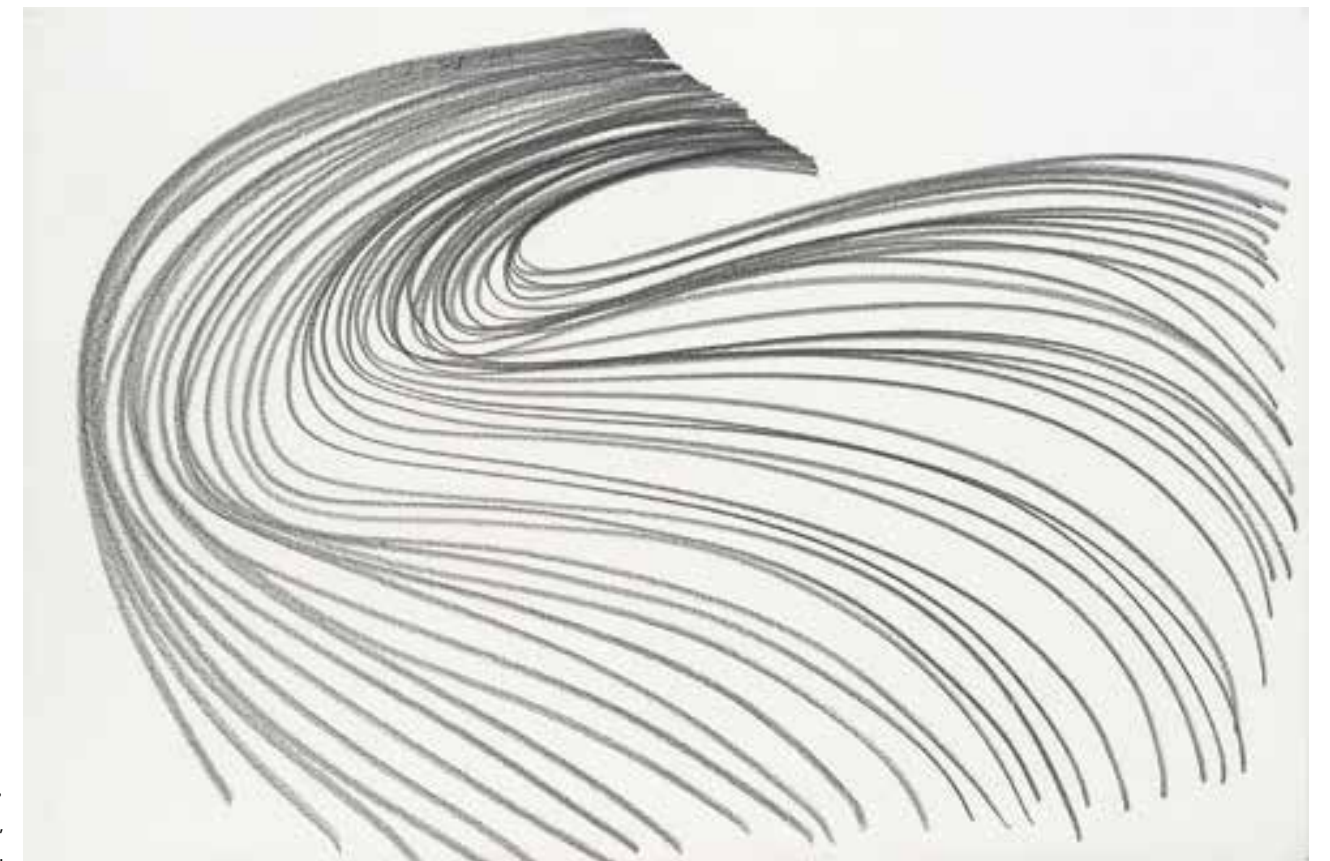
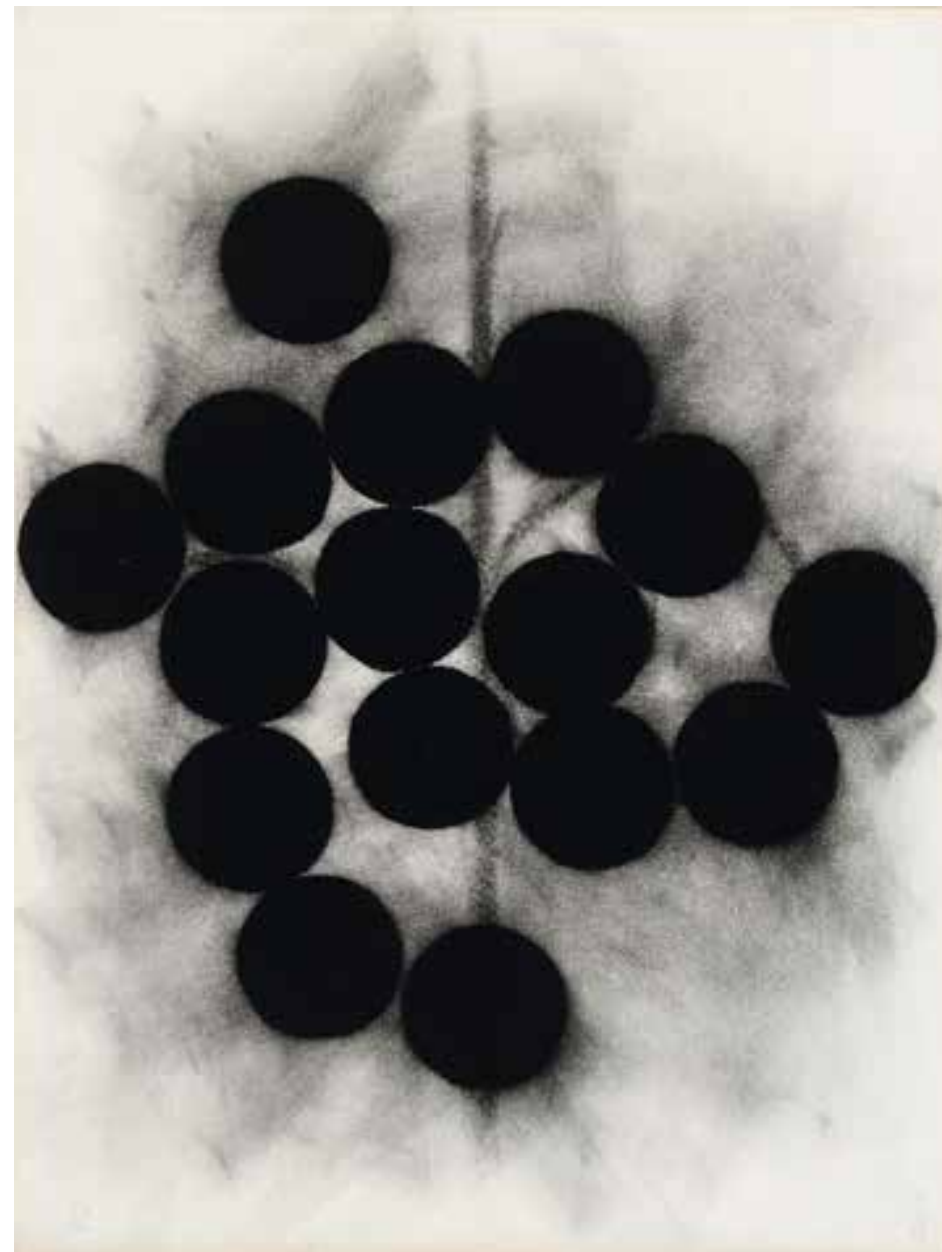
Mehadji favoured luminous works creating a feeling of plenitude, celebrating the union between body and mind, capturing the “timeless power of life”. The painting of the tombs of the kings and queens of Egypt at the time of the pharaohs, the Japanese Zen monks of the 12th century, Chu Ta, the 17th-century Chinese painter who invented freedom of line, Behzad, the master of Persian illuminations, Russian icons, Giotto, El Greco, Malevich, Matisse, the arts of Islam and Arab-Andalusian architecture (which she discovered as a teenager during visits to the Alhambra, to *madrasas* and on walks through the white architecture of the medinas) are some of her references.

Passing through the doors of perception

“To capture the *flow*, you have to get to the essence,” says Najia. She has her own way; it’s like a form of asceticism. She works every day, whether in Paris or Lamssasa, near Essaouira. She creates. She paints. She draws. She carefully chooses her tools, which are both more rudimentary and more tactile than the tools of traditional Western painting. She uses balsa sticks, big sticks of charcoal, Korean brushes, her hands, ink, gesso, oil bars for colour, ochre linen canvas as a reserve, black and white for the intensity of her contrasts, just one or two monochrome colours for each work, sunny, luminous colours like red, yellow and orange. She fastens her blank canvas or drawing paper straight onto the wall to better feel the resistance of the support, the opposing force of the body and its recoil. She opts mostly for optimal centred forms, like circles, squares and octagons; allows the thinking hand to act, tracing a dynamic network of lines or touches that spread out to form vibrating structures oscillating between the two dimensional and three dimensional. The rhythmic line that delineates the form is what defines its coloured extension. As if depth was bursting to the surface. She is equally on the side of acting and non-acting, of action and contemplation, of the truth of sensation and the celebration of the sacred as if they were two opposing but complementary sides of the same seal. As if the fertility of speed and the sensation of the enduring were one and the same temporality; the Dark and the Light, the same spatiality. The body, the arm, the hand, the tool, the imprint, the inner and outer eye, the idea and the form are one and the same thing – the same “revelation”. There can’t be any repenting. Najia discards, tears up, keeps what has promise in terms of what she considers to “work”, art being, for her, the means of a real metamorphosis of being, not just an aesthetic or symbolic challenge. She

Constellation.

1994, craie sur papier,
76 x 57 cm.
Collection particulière.



Enveloppe.
1998, graphite sur papier,
80 x 120 cm.

mostly creates in series where each work has its own autonomy – its own intrinsic value. *Icares. Tem. Ma. Coupoles. Chaosmos. Végétal. Gradient. Floral. Arborescence. Volutes. Spring Dance. Drapés.*

Her art is a meditation on the vulnerability of the being faced with what is vertiginous and intimate in nature. The work – which is the receptacle of this – becomes a sanctuary. It is neither governed by the realm of the religious nor does it depend on it or illustrate it, but the work itself has a spiritual function. During a recent studio visit, the artist told me: “For me, like in the art of Chu Ta, paring back and simplicity are not devoid of subjectivity. On the contrary! In his work, whether it’s a rock or birds coming into land, it’s all about pathos: joy, sadness, life and death... A simple flower can suggest philosophical or metaphysical thoughts... It’s like Cézanne’s Montagne Sainte-Victoire or his simplest watercolours: each touch is essential – necessary – the landscape is looking at us, the mountain is alive, like a painter’s self-portrait... It is a metaphorical way of capturing what is more intense and more enduring than any individual life, without grandiloquence. How do you paint the wind in the branches? Fleeting beauty? This is the whole

challenge of Zen art, which in the real dynamic of an ink line or a wash manages to portray the sensation of the wind and bring about a time out of time. How do you paint the state of mind of the monk walking in the countryside or gazing upon it? By the composition of the empty and the full, of subjective lines and touches with the brush which, through the depiction of the trees and folds of the monk’s clothes, manage to create a metaphor of the euphoria or nostalgia, the plenitude or emptiness the monk is feeling.”

An “engaged” art

Najia thinks that each artist can react in his or her way to the tragedy of history and current events. In 1993-94, distressed by the destruction of Sarajevo – symbol of the coexistence of three monotheisms –, “ethnic cleansing” and war crimes committed against Bosnians in the former Yugoslavia, she created the *Coupole* series demonstrating her interest in cross-cultural forms in architecture (notably the octagon), by making explicit reference to the cosmology of the arts of Islam. Later, in 2005, to exorcise the violence of the wars in the Middle East, she created some digital works

integrating enlarged details of Goya's engravings (including *The Disasters of War*) within drawings of fluorescent flowers – like a tension between Eros and Thanatos.

She is engaged but doesn't despair of humankind. Conscious that art – the order of the *symbolic* – cannot fight on equal terms with the extreme violence of barbarism, she refuses to reduce the work to a message, however just and alarmist it is. For her, the role of the artist is not always to add noise to noise, still less to create entertainment or pointless spectacle, but to resist disenchantment and dehumanisation by creating works in which, although questioned, the plenitude of being finally prevails over chaos. For her, it is about exorcising evil and pernicious forces by following the flow of the life-giving energy that lights up many works revealing the dazzling beauty of the invisible. She often mentions Monet who offered his Water Lilies series to France in November 1918, at the end of the First World War, so they could be "a monument to peace and restore a bit of life to a devastated time that needs it so much".

The new climate

By the force of cultural globalisation, we have been witnessing an unprecedented event since the beginning of the 21st century: in the same way as for literature, cinema and music, the widening of our vision to encompass the whole planet is the major *aesthetic revolution* for the contemporary art of this decade.

Following on from China, Korea, India, Iran, Turkey, Mexico and Brazil, it is now the turn of works by Arab artists – including migrants – to emerge onto the international stage. Reacting – quite rightly – to the 9/11 disaster which, over the years, has reduced the media portrayal of the "Muslim" to clichés of terrorism and the burqa, some clear-thinking political personalities and numerous men and women from civil society, who aspire to greater justice and freedom, have entered the cultural field in order to *change the image* of the Arab world. The exponential opening of public and private galleries, museums and foundations dedicated to modern and contemporary art in the Gulf, the Middle East and the Maghreb; the creation of magazines and websites specialising in art; the synergy of big exhibitions, biennales or international fairs allowing greater circulation of artists and better visibility of their works are major factors. From a host of Arab cities, like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Beirut, Damascus, Amman, Ramallah, Cairo, Tunis, Algiers and Casablanca, to global cities, particularly Paris, London, Berlin and New York, where several of them regularly live or stay, painters, sculptors, photographers, video-makers and installers of the Arab world – or natives of the Arab world – are borne by an exceptional dynamic.

Contemporary art has become transnational, cross-cultural; the impact of geographical and historical areas juxtaposing or interpenetrating is an increasingly decisive factor in creation.

"Unlike the orientalisms of the imaginary, where the Other was a Western construct made of clichés, stereotypes and colonial exoticism, the East is now in the West, and vice versa. Hence the birth of *in-between aesthetics*, signs of a new work of the imagination that is increasingly interbred," writes Christine Buci-Glucksmann in the book for the "Traits d'union – Paris et l'art contemporain arabe" exhibition of which I was the curator. After its success at Villa Emerige, Paris, in autumn 2011, this exhibition – in which Najia Mehadji participates – was mounted in Sanaa, Rabat...

Art of the 21st century

Najia goes her own way.

She is part of a group of the most interesting Arab artists or artists with roots in the Arab world, who use the international grammar of contemporary art but with a specific vocabulary. Asserting her feminine side to the extent of using floral as a theme (pejoratively associated with the most feminine connotations), she paints "voluptuous flowers" that dilate and vibrate; invents a feminine calligraphy where the continual line of one gesture creates folds and coils in an inner/outer movement that is both sensual and sublime.

She succeeds in capturing what is primary, nascent, a time before time, so as to overcome the duality that forms the hard core of being and substitute it with "uniduality"; right there where there is the maximum intensity; where oppositions can come together; where everything is tension and reconciliation. She creates contemporary icons that bring together drawing and painting, content and form, structure and flow, the sensible subjectivity of being and the elementary architecture of the cosmos, the direct and the deferred and the aesthetics of the East and the West.

It's contraction and dilation.

Her paintings and drawings are both reflective and spontaneous, at the heart of the elementary – *haptical* – and yet refined – *visual*.

Her works form a dividing line between the testing of limits and the limitlessness of the invisible.

Her evident and radiating images, a hymn to life where everything is "face" – flows, fertility, blossoming, beauty, the fleeting grace of the real, the precarious grace of being...

A cosmic humanism.



Icare.

1986, peinture à la colle et papier sur toile, 195 x 225 cm.
Collection musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen.