



Danse mystique.

2013, peinture à la gouache sur papier, 50 x 65 cm.

Letter to Najia Mehadji

ABDELWAHAB MEDDEB

Ambivalence always gets my attention. First of all, there is the ambivalence created by a sequence of reference points, as when regular rhythmic turning fades into a spray that dies away into a fine mist of water: then, the dress of the Mevlevi dervish is swept away into the foam. Thus, with your painting, and in one single canvas, you take us on a journey from Anatolia to the African shores of the Atlantic, from Konya to Essaouira, from the ordered celestial dance – platonic in nature, symbolising the rotation of spheres, the harmony of the Universe, even announcing Newton’s law of gravity – to the chaos of the ocean crashing against the ramparts of Mogador. The white is there again, in the Sufi’s dress, puffing out with the spinning steps of the dancer, and in the foam appearing where the wave crashes and breaks; knowing at the same time that the immaculate white of the dress and the white of the foam light up the moonless night. The light from the dress will obviously last longer than the glimmer of the foam, just as the home fire burns longer than the evanescent fireflies...

It comes to us like a vision, this condensed form you have invented, starting with the dress blown out by the spinning dance and ending with the sea spray into which the wave fades. The messenger of this *revelation* will not be the hoopoe of the Qur’an but the gull of Mogador, which shares the white, sometimes mixed with pearly grey. Whereas other ambivalences built on the association of two instances, or rather by the superimposition of one plane on another, are mentally decyphered. I feel that what you are doing in these series is in tune with the myth of Creation in Islam so frequently referred to by Ibn Arabi. We are told that in the beginning God was floating on a formless cloud (*‘amâ’*); when he decided to create the world, he did this by *fiat* – he said: “Let there be...!” (*kun*) and there was (*fa-yakûn*). And so we passed from the formless to form. Some of your works seem to illustrate this myth: the ellipse, which keeps the spheres floating on the trajectory of their rotation, follows its path in a sort of white cloud marked by an explosion of light: this seems to render visible both the cloud before Creation and the instant of *fiat*. It is as if from chaos cosmic harmony was born, or as if the cosmic harmony engendered by the birth of forms bore the imprint of the chaos from which it comes, hence legitimising the *Chaosmos* that is part of your

lexicon. One of your works bears this title. The same applies for the *Coupole* series. A geometric order (a radiant star, like a starfish, a star-shaped polygon with 16 sides obtained by overlapping two squares) emerges from a white background reminiscent of the formlessness of the Cloud or the flash of *fiat* (“He said ‘Let there be light!’ And there was light”). So this ordered shape of the cupola would be the symbol of cosmic harmony. But this harmony does not eliminate the previous chaos; it proceeds from it; it remains haunted by it; it was abruptly torn away from it following the order of the imperious creator. Certain forms of these cupolas (the ones that form the shape of a polygon by turning one square on another) are reminiscent of one of the cupolas of the Mosque of Cordoba. I know that visiting this mosque had a big impact on you, Najia. The intersecting ribs you see here have nothing to do with the Gothic but herald the Baroque (in the 10th century!). It is not by chance that the shape that creates the most resounding echo is the cupola of the chancel of San Lorenzo church, built by Guarino Guarini in Turin in the mid-17th century. Both these cupolas – the Islamic one in Cordoba and the Catholic one in Turin – honour the aesthetic of the Baroque transformed by the dynamic that gives the illusion of movement to fixed forms. This gives form an added dimension that takes account of the chaos from which harmony was torn. The Baroque soothes the chaos, tames it and represses it in the contingency of the work. This is the aesthetic of ambivalence par excellence at work, uniting opposites – soothing without eliminating.

I got a glimpse of you painting. And in your manner, I also see ambivalence. When we see your canvases, we feel like they are the product of speed; this is what seems to generate these volutes, these arabesques: forms carried on an impetuous flow. You think that they are the product of the fraction of time that responds to the urgency of the *fiat*, the creative principle. Furthermore, it is the same instantaneity that is behind the work of the Japanese calligrapher; he concentrates, and the gesture traces the writing, which all of a sudden explodes. However, you paint with a surprising meditative slowness. It is a reasoned, applied slowness, methodically following a thread that guides you into the inner labyrinth. It is this slowness that produces the

trace that I receive like an explosion. But ultimately the supposed explosion never bursts out, as if the splinters end up being inserted into a geometric network. From one ambivalence comes another, but always mastered.

A further ambivalence materialises through the link between geometrics and the plant kingdom. In the *Gradient* series, circles crossed by regular cones or converging curved and counter-curved lines, I recognise not only geometric figures but also the "order" that emanates from nature, particularly through the mediation of the plant kingdom. This stirs in me the image of a bitter gourd or a marrow. This approach is confirmed by your series on the pomegranate. Such ambivalence brings a revelation: it is not nature that reveals geometry, but pure abstraction referring to the sensible, the phenomenon. It is not just about Cézanne's technique of translating nature into geometric concepts: instead of translation, it is an epiphany that occurs. Furthermore, the initial meaning of the Arabic word for epiphany (*tajalli*) means "revelation". The *tajalli* consists in *revealing* visibility from the invisible, the figurative form from abstraction, immanence from the transcendent. When the subject emphasises the physical aspect of things, it becomes metaphysical. This process is at work in your *Pivoine* series. Entering into the folds and pleats of the flower, unfolding the multiple layers of petals as if to reveal the secret or mystery they conceal; this

is reminiscent of the description of the hawthorn by Proust, where the insistence on the physical produces the epiphany, by expressing what everyone feels about these flowers but has never been said; it is the physiology of the sensation and emotion these flowers produce that creates the epiphany. At the same time, while penetrating the secret of the flower, you leave some parts of it white or monochrome, suspending the geometrical realisation. It is as if you wanted the unexplored part to remain that way.

It is not just revelation that occurs through ambivalence. You also use the unique, continual flow that focuses on one detail to reveal the quality that emanates from the whole, as in the series consisting of a network of yellow lines on the ochre of the untreated linen canvas. I love the movement suggesting a thigh jutting out from the pubis of your *Égyptienne*. Her body arouses Eros in flesh that quivers under the material hugging the skin. Or the triptych, painted in the same material, which portrays Mary Magdalene by what looks like hair; either tidy, combed, coming down the neck; or in the detail fixed on the centre parting; or released like a mane in the wind. Could desire be set alight by hair? If this is so, this clarifies the restrictive tenets of monotheist law that orders it to be covered in order to avoid *fitna* – this seduction/sedition that would be the pure "Mary Magdalene" effect that Christ absolves and does not evade.



Arborescence.

2000, graphite sur papier, 57 x 76 cm.