



*Los Moros (suite goyesque : Tauromachie).*  
2007, épreuve numérique pigmentaire, 117 x 110 cm.

## From Flowers of Blackness to “Mystic Dance”

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“In this world  
over hell, viewing  
spring blossoms.”

Haiku by KOYBAYASHI ISSA

Flowers, then: pomegranate flowers, almond flowers, poppies, and especially peonies against an Oriental turquoise background – all staring straight back at us. Blackly, with that shady blackness that only Warhol dared to use for his hibiscuses set against a purple background. Done on paper or synthetic canvas, based on photos or diagrams, using very large brushes, they are densely coiled in stylised, transparent pleats of shadow and light. As though the invisible heart of every flower – its absent centre – had to be simultaneously revealed and masked, in order to “to express something that escapes me,” as Najia Mehadji put it to me. During six years, Mehadji has been painting nothing but flowers. And, as in the entire history of floral painting from Baroque *vanitas* to Matisse, O’Keeffe, Warhol and Cy Twombly, these flowers depict time – the birth and death of time – in a cycle where fleetingness becomes a metaphor for life and beauty. *Mujo* in Japanese: “transience”, a seasonal existence, a cyclical rhythm as fragile as blossoming and wilting.

Mehadji’s black peonies, with their pleats and folds in swirls, ribbons and layered textures, have become the repository of all ornamentation from East to West. So what has happened since her *Arborescences*, with their more gestural, stiffer lines, and even since the *Florals*, where the power and dazzle of reds usually dominated with a sunny light? Although the new flowers, in their silence, still absorb the energies of the cosmos, the shift from intense colours to black, like the recent use of Oriental turquoise (as seen in miniatures and ceramics), marks a watershed in Mehadji’s oeuvre and constitutes an aesthetic event. This colour black – like the one in Chinese painting, Matisse, Soulages and Ad Reinhardt – henceforth haunts the floral folds, pleats, creases and interpleats with its multiple shades and hues. We no longer have the clear line or geometric motif of earlier works from the *Coupoles* to the *Rhombes*, and even up to the *Arborescences*. Here, black bursts into flower along with the tracks and traces

of the brush. The use of black in Mehadji’s oeuvre is not new, of course. Black chalk on paper or black oil stick on canvas already animated the twirling, stylised flowers of *Végétal* (1996). Here, however, the brush-tracks change everything. The flowers have become interiorised, almost contemplative, like some sort of a vision (*ru’ya*). This black against turquoise functions “like a dream, a chimera, a flower of the void” (Dogen). And although black is a colour, as Matisse claimed, it does not consume other colours here, since the turquoise of Turkey, Iran or North Africa still shines through the creases of its surface texture and its quivering intensity.

### Flowers of disaster

In 2005, Mehadji was invited to Madrid to produce some digital works. She decided to use plates of Goya’s engravings of *The Disasters of War* and *La Tauromaquia*. She began by scanning her own watercolours, in negative, and then reworking, also in negative, a given detail – enlarged – from a Goya engraving. Thus emerged these virtual flowers, these mirrorless twins. They are floral twins, one darker than the other, like the often bright shadow of a colour; and also twins of Goya, for here, still worked in negative, the dark horror of Goya’s line is transformed into white, frail, uncertain shadow, to be decrypted in every superimposition. Here we no longer have an image of violence but “the heraldic skeleton of natural forms”, to borrow Aby Warburg’s phrase.<sup>1</sup> By placing herself “under the sign of Goya”, Mehadji has joined other artists, such as Arnulf Rainer, Sigmar Polke and, above all, Robert Morris, who inscribed, copied or x-rayed Goya’s engravings in their paintings, thus twinning modern art with its own roots in the prophetic rupture triggered by the Spanish artist.<sup>2</sup> Through a kind of “allegorical drive” that gave birth to ghostly bodies and fantasies, Goya wove evil into the present. Taking Benjamin’s concept of constellations of time – one for the moment – Goya’s otherworldly





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black has become the prehistory and post-history of our modernity as it wrestled with the violence all around. In *The Disasters of War* “demons henceforth found their true form – the heinous,” as André Malraux argued.<sup>3</sup> Everything – corpses and bodies hanged, shot or raped – culminates in the nothingness, *nada*, of death. Against a coarse aquatint background, Goya’s black lines are thick and heavy, as though coming from beyond the grave.

Mehadji’s work also contains the violence of these ghostly bodies, although here transposed by being in negative and greatly enlarged. *No longer (tampoco)* a scarcely perceptible rape. They *take advantage of it (se aprovechan)* and, even more clearly, of the face-off between toreador and bull as caught in the red crease of blood. Three guns on the right and a sketchy body on the left turn the flower of murder into, *sensu stricto*, the flower of disaster, because the very heart of a flower is occupied by a man who has been shot – *there can be no remedy (No hay remedio)*.

Thanks to virtual techniques that allow lightness, fluidity and infra-thinness, the flowers of violence – more indeterminate, more floating than the others – explore an obvious paradox: Goya in white shadows and creased, superimposed lines, the flowers in an attenuated yet nevertheless real “Pop” idiom. They bring to mind Warhol’s huge “Shadows” series where Pop colours and shadows alternate in infinite variation, not to mention his *Multicolored Marylins* who, black on black, emerge from their Pop features in red, turquoise, yellow and purple.

### Flowers in blackness

In discussing Mehadji’s work on blackness, we might mention flowers of mourning and, in particular, blossoms of fleeting Baudelairean melancholy. Ever since Baroque *vanitas* paintings, flowers have consistently evoked melancholy, conveying a new system of symbolic, precarious time, one haunted by death. Stiff bouquets already invaded by some insect, human allegories of soap bubble and mirror: floral temporality is ambivalent in a saturnine way. In Baroque floral allegories, the blossoming of beauty announces its own death and the vanity of all things, in a unique encounter between appearance and nothingness. But in Mehadji’s work, the startling contrast between a reinvented “Pop” and a superimposed, almost virtualised, war, which constitutes the originality and, to be explicit, the beauty, of these works, leads me down another path. Indeed, the “detour via Goya” has modified her oeuvre.

The flowers of blackness – or “in blackness” – are heirs to a redemption of evil via beauty. That is why this blackness ultimately makes me think more of Manet or Matisse than of allegorical melancholy. They depict a positive, Nietzschean fleetingness that explores the veil and shadowy folds of beauty, in search of a post-auratic art. *Kokoro*, another highly polysemic Japanese word, suggests heart, mind, impression, thought and, even, guts. This is precisely the secret of the invisible heart that animates Mehadji’s floral passion, because she uses black the way the Japanese and Chinese use ink: in layers of colour, indicating different planes and more or less distinct, frail qualities of light, to the point where “colours are layers of shadow”, as Junichiro Tanizaki wrote. In the silence of white or the startling presence of turquoise, the flowers become moments of transparency in which solid and void coincide. To borrow a Buddhist expression, “colour is the void, the void is colour.” Between light and shadow, visible and invisible, in the “interstices” and “between-worlds” dear to Paul Klee, these flowers become a veritable cosmogenesis.

1. Aby Warburg and W. F. Mainland “A lecture on Serpent Ritual”, *Journal of the Warburg Institut* vol.2, no 4 (April 1939), p.279.
2. Catherine Grenier, “Sous le signe de Goya”, *La revanche des émotions* (Paris: Seuil, 2008) p.43 ff.
3. André Malraux, Saturne, *Essai sur Goya* (Paris: NRF, 1950) p.92.
4. See Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Philosophie de l’ornement. D’Orient en Occident* (Paris: Galilée, 2008).

### *Le Poète (suite goyesque : Tauromachie).*

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### On floral folds and twists

Suddenly, in a given black flower, the centre is a wave that folds into a twist. In another, the wave doubles into a ribbon-like bow. We get the clear impression that these peonies of blackness are already flowers of the fold. This fold slowly emancipates itself, inflecting itself in an infinite, Deleuze-style folding operation, a formless fold that metamorphoses into an inflexual ideal in which the floral texture becomes a veritable vortex of light that wraps everything in its cloak. And then I realise that the “time spent in the blackness” and the discovery of turquoise are probably just the “shadow line” of an oeuvre where flowers are yanked from chaos in order to rejoin our world, henceforth inhabited by all the Goyas. Thus these black flowers – hybridised, unstable, and grasped in their momentary presence – rejoin the virtual flowers of disaster in a shared tension. Manet, who was particularly fond of Goya and peonies, thought “a painter can express everything with fruit and flowers or even clouds alone.” That’s exactly it – the language of flowers is infinite, and has always occupied



the intersection of two age-old histories: the history of ornamentation and decorative philosophy, from the Egyptian or Indian lotus flower to the silken embroidery on the gowns of Moroccan brides; and the history of painting, when haunted by a stylistic ornamentalism that forces us to enlarge the minuscule, as Georgia O’Keeffe would have it. With the end of Modernism, we have even witnessed the return of floral, organic elements in painting, which has produced every kind of abstraction. Singly, in series, in photos and silkscreens, flowers have come to inhabit an entire post-Warhol era. And they have found a new language both in virtual imagery that Miguel Chevalier calls “supernatures” and in the floral artifices that instil even in architecture a linear universe more curved and spiralling than straight. Indeed, it is this exchange between microcosm and macrocosm on the plane of cosmic immanence that is at the centre of every floral passion, including one that claims to be both sacred art and ornamental motif, as is the case with Islamic art and its ornamental stylisation of interlacing flowers, calligraphy and arabesques.<sup>4</sup>

Whether they are flowers of the disaster of war with bleached, light lines, or flowers of blackness with their turquoise glow, Mehadji’s flowers fold and twist like life with its sorrows and beauties, its areas of darkness and light, its conspicuous displays and the secrets at its heart. It is perhaps “this secret” of the heart that Najia Mehadji touches on with these *Mystic Dances*, inspired by the whirling dervishes and the famous Sufi poet Rumi. Here the four movements of dance find new breath, resume the circular movement and whirling of the stars and the cosmos which are characteristic of the *sanâ*, the spiritual oratorio that is a prelude to the final ecstatic exhaustion of the *fanâ*. In these immense paintings, it is all about the breath, the water and the fire of the heart, in a poetry of motion, where each figure culminates in a Hokusai-style wave, full of marbled texture and dark quiverings: four movements and four variations on the cosmos with their infinite organic rhythm, pitching upwards, downwards and sideways. Between lines, tight folds and surfaces, the volutes are metamorphosed into a cosmic and musical motion. Because, while “no one can contemplate the moon or become the sea”, as Rumi wrote in a Mystic Ode, it is however this act of becoming the sea, becoming the dance, with these bodily particles evoked for me by Najia Mehadji’s paintings, that blossoms in the floral immensity and mystical core of a *Spring Dance*. Drawing on the multiple meanings of the Arab word, *Ain*, it is as if the void became a spring and the spring, an essence. Such is this cosmic art that opens onto the worlds of dream.