

Volutes and Dances, Eros and Mysticism

By Mohamed Rachdi

At the heart of Najia Mehadji's work, we find the body, Eros and mysticism. With this artist, all her graphic or pictorial depictions are rooted primarily in the dynamics of the body in its most living form, driven by an impulse of desire, concretely anchored in the here and now of the sensible world, but ceaselessly straining towards another place, towards the supra-sensible world. It is in effect always through the action of her own body upon material media, be it paper or canvas, that the artist brings forth her spiritual creations.

"In reality, my paintings are big chalk drawings created via a series of physical and mental gestures: they are flowing structures that create a link between the cosmic and the human, the spiritual and the sensible", the artist says of her earlier works using big sticks of oily pastels; works she created by criss-crossing the surface of her canvases and sheets of paper with networks of coloured lines until they produced graphic and chromatic expanses in which outlines of plants bloomed.

In these works, Najia Mehadji maintains a dialogue with the plant world, taking it beyond appearances to the elegance and nobility of the ornamental spirit. Now, with the *Volutes and Dances mystiques* series, the artist is sliding subtly towards an intimate conversation with herself which is, undoubtedly, even more introspective and rooted in the unfathomable depths of being. She moves

on from the depiction of floral motifs that she stylised to the extent of producing working drawings in the form of developments of colours, to an exploration of her inner essence in a constant quest for spirituality. Hence the singular force of these current depictions that are reduced to the sobriety of black and white trajectories that express themselves as a series of extraordinary poetic forces; depictions that only assert the physical space of their deployment and impose their own pictorial presence so they are better able to offer themselves as mnemonic traces of the inscribing actions of a body. A body that experiences to the full the intensity of the creative inspiration and is constantly borne by the pleasure of doing at the same time as the ardent aspiration to transcendence. These new shapes of volutes and other undulations spring forth from the dynamic of the body of the artist dancing, breathing, feeling and thinking; rid of the reference to visual reality, they evolve completely freely in the register of gestural abstraction. An abstraction that can sometimes evoke, without depicting them, a few flower petals, plant outlines or other arborescences. An abstraction, therefore, that only moves away from the motif so it can better substitute the creative and suggestive for the imitative, but also so it can allow the creative energy driven by vital necessity and sustained by the intense desire to feel the union of the sensual and the spiritual, to express itself better, in a way that is even more evident than in the artist's earlier works.

By distancing herself from the icon, Najia Mehadji liberates her action. But this freedom of action in no way means that she has chosen the path of the random, of easy gratuitousness and the cultivation of chance for her art to evolve. In reality, the artist negotiates the force of her depictions through the skilful orientation of accidents and flaws, traces her figures with all the necessary assurance of the gestures of a master calligrapher. Improvisation requires a knowhow that can only be acquired by long hard labour based on rigorous discipline... For all time, great artists have known better than anyone: improvising requires impeccable technical mastery. Musicians as well as dancers, poets as well as painters, actors as well as calligraphers, they all have to have their means of expression at their fingertips before venturing into any improvisation whatsoever. For example, before Matisse embarked on direct drawing in colour using a pair of scissors to cut into the gouaché on paper, before he improvised his elegant figures animating the famous *Chapelle de Vence* using a big brush fixed on the end of a long stick, he had to do many sketches over decades to further his research and refine his techniques in order to perfect his artistic processes..... The same applies for Najia Mehadji who is improvising today, after spending many years working on her techniques and inspiration, perfecting her tools and sharpening her sensations and her visionary intuition.

To better understand the force of the ritualised improvisation the artist engages in her works in general and, in particular, in the recent series of *Volutes* and *Danses mystiques*, you have to consider the ritual of her poetic process. Najia Mehadji takes her paper or her canvas and draws on her whole bodily essence in a state of total concentration, aimed at mustering the energy needed to stimulate her creative spirit. She then dips a large brush into the creamy paint, then twists and turns it on her chosen medium, traces spirals and curls, folds and pleats, twirls and whirls. As if directed by her own inner vision, she ceaselessly turns around a focal point or an invisible axis, as if trying to seize the imperceptible, attempting to find the sensations of a unity that is lost but irresistibly attractive, becoming “one” with some mysterious power...

This dynamic of the artist painting is not without reference to the dynamic of a dervish engaged in a mystical dance. Like a top activated by some cosmic energy, this dervish spins around, guided by a blazing inner fire, the fire of an ardent desire to be united with the Loved One. Najia Mehadji's poetic experience most certainly holds something of the experience of a whirling dervish and his ritual momentum, intended to achieve regeneration and spiritual elevation by activating the mnemonic process, in other words by remembering (*adhikr*), not only by the mind, recitation or the singing of psalms, but by a subtle interlacing of the sensible body, the soul and the mind, all intimately linked to one another until they are but one and the same living and desiring reality, an awakening force, striving to the extreme in its intense aspiration for perfect union with the Supreme Being.

The whirling dervish is a Sufi who is treading a path (*tariqa*) that he has to refine to reach a total state of being and purify his person so he can achieve union with the Divine. So his whole activity, combining music, song and dance, is like digging in the same spot to bring forth the vital spring, ceaselessly polishing his own heart so it can reflect the luminous Beauty of the Face of the Loved One. Hence the attentive listening (*samaa*) to enchanting music, twirling dancing, movements in concentric circles until a state of trance and the singing of psalms concentrated on a single divine name... Najia Mehadji's creative attitude is not far removed from this approach and this is visible in the relationship the artist cultivates in her works between content and form. In effect, the drawn form practically never extends beyond the content. All is circumscribed within the format. The artist seems to make sure she confines herself within the limits of the space of her medium. Her actions are concentrated, internalised. The movements always turn back on themselves and, in a mixture of assurance and adventure, they design more centrifugal trajectories that fold, unfold and fold again until the work becomes a tight knot or, to be more precise, a radiating structure of knots, as if to concentrate its energy so it is better redistributed in the spatiality of the work and transformed in its expanse.

Thus, through a subtle, sometimes tactile relationship, with the subjectile, a poetic dance that is performed almost in an “altered state of consciousness”, Najia Mehadji transfigures the space of her works into a space where erotico-mystical energy circulates, and does so with an unflinching loyalty to the principle that has already for a long time governed her creative process and consists of combining line and colour in one and the same active trajectory, to twist space between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional and modulate light and shade until they generate vibrating tensions able to transport us in their movements.

So we can understand why her works are offered to us as places where contemplative arabesques and flexible, elegant and gracious volutes are unfurled, leading us by their fluidity to dizzying dimensions capable of opening us up to eternity. We also understand why, in a world that leaves less and less room for being in its blind, crazy quest for having, in a world where the individual is forced to adopt the frenetic pace that sooner or later ends up depriving him of any anchorage and any possibility of vital regeneration, the rhythm of poetry proves salutary, in that it can offer us the experience of a whole other temporality by connecting us with eternity. Says Najia Mehadji: “People

are increasingly seeing that art is precious for living. During difficult times, a novel, an exhibition, a film or a piece of music gives us what nothing else can give: the feeling of a “duration” that exceeds us and focuses us”.

In her earlier works, the interest that Najia Mehadji showed in the plant world as a medium for contemplative meditation clearly expressed her attachment to the dynamic that connects the earthly and the celestial, the world below and the world above, the visible and the invisible, the temporal and the timeless. In her current creative activity, the artist is deepening this attraction she feels for cosmic energy and the mystical dimension. Through the poetic experience she constantly feels, combining burying within herself and spiritual elevation, the artist creates visual spaces for living, like spatial modulations where mystical intensity is revealed. An intensity that is capable, if we really know how to contemplate Najia Mehadji’s works, of touching our senses and giving us pleasure, winning us over with the sensual fluidity and transporting us to the ecstatic sphere of the testing of the body which, like the mystical experience, remains unsayable.