



Vanité.

2007, gouache sur papier,
140 x 110 cm.
Collection musée national
d'Art moderne, Centre
Georges Pompidou, Paris.

News from Infinity

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Imagine divers, rising up from the depths, bursting onto the surface and leaving traces in the glistening foam of the other, underwater, world they have come from. Their bodies, still bathed with the indefinable cohesion of the deep, manifest, by their breathing, movements and upward momentum, a power and harmony born of this deep that stays with them even as they erase the memory of it, by a single gesture, in the air of the outside world. In these movements, in the spurting water momentarily forming light-filled constellations, an intimate experience of the depths occurs and simultaneously dissipates; blind, mute, completely inexpressible other than through this leap to the outside it makes possible and yet is cancelled by. The big breath suddenly produced on the surface comes from the depth of the depths, its somehow streaming energy draws on the unfathomable but also consumes it and transforms the rhythm of the inner essence of the sea into the joy of emerging into the world: pure consumption, this sudden tearing of the surface, where, in one breath, their bodies submerged but their faces turned skywards, the swimmers weave together the inner and the outer like two key facets of the being.

Imagine Najia Mehadji's works like these divers: coming from a place that is out of sight and testifying to the predominance of the inner essence that pushes them to the surface of the world but which, in its infinite depth, constitutes their original condition. What is this inner essence, this unfathomable sea? It is the inner essence of movement, of the body acting and feeling obscurely, by the very effect of its action, that something indefinable, measureless and limitless, constitutes it as a living body. The fact that the artist has had a strong awareness of this primal and invisible force is evidenced in the performances with which she started her life as an artist, in the late 1970s, when she drew in the darkness, with big sticks of charcoal, letting her hand, her arm, her whole body react *blindly* to the sounds she heard. And what sounds? Sometimes the sounds of percussionists, but sometimes also (and above all) *her own sounds*, those produced by the charcoal squeaking on big rolls of paper recorded by an electro-acoustic process (so the sound produced by the movement of the charcoal on the paper was amplified and projected into the dark space).

By doing this, the drawing, in the most literal sense of the word, is self-generated, not as an ideal form, detached from external appearances, leading to a world of essences but, conversely, because it reduced down to the autonomous and dizzying power of individual subjectivity: movement generates a sound that generates a movement that generates a sound, and so on; by the transition of the sound, the action of the body drawing produces nothing but itself, in other words nothing but an infinite expressive energy, perpetual movement brought forth by the movement itself, finding its source in itself. There was nothing formalist in this, no fetishism of the form itself or of what it might represent: moreover, after the performance, the results drawn – or rather imprinted – were scrapped, quickly abandoned relics of a living action, like a snake skin after being shed. Such an approach is strongly phenomenological: completely led by the desire to stick as closely as possible to a process of manifestation of the subjective life, that of the sensible body affected first and foremost by itself – a principle that makes it supremely heterogeneous with this other kingdom that surrounds it, the kingdom of objects and the outer essence. This founding importance of movement, born of the living body's wondrous dive into its own inner essence, upstream of any intentional consciousness, unrelated to the external world, has never been denied by the artist. You would even be tempted to think this is the supreme reason for her love of painting, in the practice of which Najia imposes physically demanding conditions on herself. By the effort they require, they give the body the primary role: like these oil pigment sticks she used in her large paintings of the late 1990s and early 2000s – the *Chaosmos*, *Gradients*, *Arborescences*, etc. –, which she had to crush onto the unprepared canvas to leave traces, but without breaking the fluid momentum and harmony of the interwoven curves; also, like the large, unwieldy brushes she currently uses to trace her *Drapés* or her *Fleur -Flux*, with deep pictorial breaths. And ever recurrent is her passion for a plane other than the visible, for a dimension other than form, for this physical embrace, ahead of any thought and any *vision* of the world; it is in this embrace that there is access to the infinite, in the most literal, affective and concrete sense of the word. From this

undoubtedly stems the artist's deep understanding, her feeling of communion with the circular almost on-the-spot steps of the Ottoman whirling dervishes, which she transposed into her 2002 series of *Danses des derviches*. In the same way, and for the same reasons, music appears as a constant in her daily practice, acting in her like an original principle that dismantles the autonomy of the visible: shut in bright white studios to aid her concentration, while in Paris, she lets herself be transported by the music of Bach or other musicians of the absolute, and, while in Essaouira, by the music of the flocks passing by and the wind in the olives.

A mystery remains: the fact that this living body that feels itself in its radical inner essence also feels the need to break the inner circle and, like the diver, surge to the surface, creating visible forms, while all forms, all objects are originally alien to it, in the dark night of the self. Why, at a given moment, does the inner life of the body, instead of remaining not of this world, in the depths of subjectivity, come to the surface, objectivising itself in visual

configurations, luminously inscribing itself in the fabric of appearances? And more: why does movement *disembody itself* – in forms that are intentionally geometrically standard and in a way de-subjectivised: squares, circles, octagons, geometric stars, rhomboids or even flower petals – so many great universals of all visual cultures, in which the idea of a geometrical structure of being is expressed? Why, in other words, does the dizzy power of the unformed, the blind, the spaceless, the undimensioned, the radically singular, in the spontaneity of embodied movement, rub itself so passionately up against its opposite, the standard perfection of the visible, the harmony of fundamental ornaments, the precise elegance of measureable intervals?

Najia Mehadji's work, rather than claiming to give a dogmatic answer to this question, is driven by the desire to simply dig deeper and deeper into it, or more exactly to resonate the mystery of it. There is no doubt that nothing expresses better this recognition of the mystery of the process of externalisation, the *unearthing* of the image, than her most recent works, gouaches created by a single movement of the hand with a large brush coated with white or black – the *Volutes*, *Touches*, *Arabesques* or the *Danses mystiques*. Here, the viewer is tempted to track the movement by identifying its start point and end point but the start – the point where the brush was laid on the surface of the paper – is often invisible and only the end of its movement is spectacularly asserted like a real explosion. It is as if the image wanted to signify that it is unaware of its own origin – also, in other words, that it is rooted in the non-image, in the invisible. Another recent symptom of this introspective approach is to be found in the artist's digital works where she explores the confrontation between an original pictorial imprint and mechanical processes of reproduction – the *Suites goyesques* in 2007, the *Danses mystiques* in 2011 –, as if, this time, it was a matter of putting to work the friction between embodiment and disembodiment, between the body and the machine, between living motion and dead image.

Beyond any specific work, Najia's attachment to the *decorative* expresses the constant friction between *critical interrogation* of the fact of becoming an image and *sensible experience* of the inner subjective life. Who's afraid of decoration? Everyone who thinks that the visible image is in itself endowed with an ontological legitimacy, that it represents, as an object, the truth of being. But this is what is denied by ornament, the paradoxical substance of decor. Although all decoration makes shapes and, by these shapes, suggests

Danse mystique.

2012, peinture à la gouache sur papier, 50 x 50 cm.



Vanité.

2006, gouache et graphite sur papier, 76 x 57 cm chaque.



a vision of the world, equally, all decoration relativises this vision, and ultimately dissolves it in a perpetual movement of intertwining curves, counter-curves and arabesques over which the eye dances rather than stops. So what becomes lighter and lighter to the point of evanescence is objectivity as such, the claim by appearances to be the legitimate messengers of reality. And what grows, on the other hand, is an infinite free will, enchanted with itself, contaminating the reign of the visible by an inner tonality: that of the human act as such, the pure *praxis* which, in the creative exercise of the motion, discovers its infinite and autonomous glory. Decoration is about nothing other than this: the irrigation and *destabilisation* of the world of objects by the expressive power of the ornamental gesture – so that, under the order it sometimes seems to impose, a bursting and perpetually expanding disorder rises up. In the ascension from the inner essence to the outer brought about by decoration, we see the contamination of the second by the first; lightly, obstinately, joyously, the unsayable surges into the sayable, loses itself and disappears there but is constantly reborn there. This is what creates the power of seduction of any decorative project, its uncanny strangeness: deep down,

despite all attempts to burden it with the order of discourse – religious, political, worldly –, decoration is a messenger of an uncontrollable invisible, it blows where it wants, when it wants, and constantly renews itself so its aberrant and marvellous traces can mysteriously innervate and sap the self-importance of the practical world.

The uncontrollable joy that results, this is what is manifested by Najia Mehadji's big paintings: born sometimes of a violent reaction to the world – revolt in the face of the civil massacres in Bosnia or Palestine, the grief of personal loss –, they dissolve this initial reaction in the acid of an inner, unpredictable necessity. Suddenly, she throws herself obsessively into a given form (or rather into a certain type of technique) – domes, flowers, palms, drapes, etc. – then, no less suddenly, she pulls out and goes elsewhere, marking the end of a series and the start of another one. There can be no calculation directing the path of this decorative life that winds through colours and shapes; like any decorative art, what governs it does not belong to the objective world but to the world of subjective interiority; indefatigable, without reason, it brings up the infinite depth that is in us all as living bodies and disperses it on the surface of things.