

Following the path of her life between singularity and universality

Véronique Rieffel

Véronique Rieffel: We're here in your huge, light-filled studio in Ivry. Miles Davis is playing in the background and there's a feeling of calm and serenity. What's your studio in Essaouira like and how do you split your time between here and there?

Najia Mehadji: I've been working in Ivry and Essaouira alternately since 1985. In 2000, I built a basic studio in Essaouira, a long building with big picture windows, surrounded by olive groves and silence, with just herds of goats and donkeys wandering along a track... Nowadays, I spend a period of one to two months in each studio and I love this pattern of life. Obviously, my relationship with time is very different depending on whether I'm in Morocco or France.

V.R.: Do you work on different subjects depending on where you are?

N.M.: I work on series that last several years, so my themes don't vary whether I'm here or in Morocco, even though Essaouira has undoubtedly been the inspiration for some of my themes, one example being Icarus, from when I used to watch the seagulls from the window in my old studio overlooking the ocean, or another example being the motif of the pomegranate. While I don't work fundamentally differently in each place, I'm calmer and more in contemplative mode in Essaouira. Paradoxically, I find a kind of solitude there that contrasts with Moroccan community life. It gives me an ambiguous feeling because I feel I'm a feminist and at the same time I admire these Moroccan rural women who live near my studio. They get up early and make their bread using wheat grown in the fields and Argan oil. It's a different relationship with time that really inspires me; one of life's luxuries you don't get in Paris.

V.R.: Would you describe yourself as a "feminist artist"?

N.M.: Until the 90s, women artists were in a minority in Paris. It was difficult to show your work and there were lots of exhibitions without a single woman, including in Beaubourg. They only represented 5% of the collections of the big French museums. On the other hand, there have always been women artists in Morocco, including Chaïbia, who was supported by André Breton! Then lots of self-taught artists started to paint, particularly Naïf Art. It was interesting compared to what was happening in France, with only a few exceptions like Sonia Delaunay or Germaine Richier. In France, more and more women were graduating from art schools but there were practically none in the big exhibitions. In this context, Françoise Eliet created the femme-art collection in 1977 and, until 1978, we met every week in one of the artist's studios to discuss and show our work. This is where I showed my first charcoal drawings dating from 1975. There was also the Sorcières magazine created by Xavière Gauthier who was my aesthetics professor at Paris 1 and whose book *Surréalisme et sexualité* caused a great stir. Here we met French women writers like Marguerite Duras. I did an issue of the magazine dedicated to movement and the body.

V.R.: Did you sense a change after this?

N.M.: In France, in the 80s, there was more of a regression. It was hard for women and the country wasn't very open to emerging countries then considered third world countries. Or, when things did happen, it wasn't at all avant-garde; abstract painting was systematically denigrated. Figuration libre, why not? But it was traditional compared to all the new stuff that was created in the 70s. After all the work of deconstruction we saw in the performing arts and music or the work of intellectuals like Gilles Deleuze in Vincennes, I was completely at a loss. Even for the theatre or in literature, the 80s were generally a return to conventions. In the 90s, we saw more experimentation again, particularly in contemporary dance, and since the beginning of the 21st century we've been seeing the emergence of new technologies and an unprecedented opening up to the whole planet: for me, these are the decisive elements in terms of the renewal of art and creativity!

V.R.: Is this why, in the 70s, you explored other artistic disciplines, like theatre, for example?

N.M.: Looking back, I tell myself I wasn't involved in any pictorial movement. I wasn't influenced by any fashion and, at the same time, this allowed me to stay myself. It's due to this singularity that, from the beginning, I felt a need to express myself through avant-garde theatre. At the time it was a

discipline that was much more open to other civilisations than fine arts. In contemporary theatre, there was an interest in India; the Living Theatre went to Morocco to meet the gnawas. I felt at ease in the company of these artists who came from abroad and were also interested in Japan. With my dual culture, I felt less of a stranger working with people like Peter Brook or Jerzy Grotowski.

V.R.: But, at the same time, weren't you tempted to follow this path into the performing arts?

N.M.: In reality, in contemporary theatre it was not so much the theatre itself I was interested in, but the aspects in which it was a sort of laboratory: work on the voice, the resonating elements of the body, the techniques borrowed from the Orient like yoga, breathing, centring and channelling energy. The work process interested me enormously but I never did any performing, even when I went to Turin with the Living Theatre. It was more an engagement because the company was performing in the street.

V.R.: How was this theatrical experience portrayed in your artistic work?

N.M.: I used to give expression through movement classes in an experimental musical academy in the outskirts, the Conservatoire de Pantin. I created sound on sheets of paper on the floor, with percussionists, we drew with charcoal and this created sort of graphic scores that the musicians performed. I did performances with two musicians in several museums in France including the CAPC museum of contemporary art in Bordeaux. When I started painting, I didn't want to use traditional methods, like what's usually used to coat the canvas, but things that were a bit marginal. I also drew with sticks of wood so I could get to the essence, like in contemporary theatre where actors were sometimes naked with no sets. I drew using the energy of the actors. I coated a sheet of paper with charcoal and I drew the movement of the actors, I captured their energy by erasing the charcoal so white figures stood out against the black background.

V.R.: Did this give you a real taste for the experimental?

N.M.: Absolutely! What stays with me today and helps me paint is all the experimentation I've done in this area. I'm often asked "how do you do this line?" I do it because I've done it all before. For a long time I drew with big bits of charcoal and big oil sticks, I worked with the notion of imprints, then I used a big Korean brush which is normally used to stick up posters. I also think it's because my culture is both western and eastern and I didn't want to follow a path that was all mapped-out or choose between traditional western painting or Arab calligraphy. I wanted to invent my own way with my own tools drawing from different traditions.

V.R.: So you were interested very early on in non-western arts. Can you say what appeals to you most about them?

N.M.: I've always felt an appeal for Zen, for Japanese gardens where drawings are traced in the gravel every day. In general, I'm interested in everything that approaches minimalism, which is also found in Islamic art.... the "almost nothing": a white plaster wall, just incised with small patterns you can only distinguish at a certain time of the day when the light is at a low angle. It's like a drawing that appears and disappears.

V.R.: How did you build your relationship with Islamic arts?

N.M.: I had one of the biggest aesthetic shocks of my life at the mosque in Cordoba. Its red and white arches form a kind of forest of pillars and, at the same time, the arch is reminiscent of the solar sphere for me. These shapes represent the different stages of the setting sun. As far as the Arab world is concerned, since Andalusia is in the west, in the far West, it seems obvious to me that Omeyyade architects worked on this concept. The way the stones are arranged and alternate like rays really had an effect on me and inspired me for my Cordoba and Chaosmos series.

V.R.: Is your attraction for Islamic arts mainly through architecture?

N.M.: I've always had an interest in architecture, particularly that of Le Corbusier. I also love Roman art for its simplicity; I've always preferred it to Gothic. Plus, there are transitions from one civilisation to another with the decorative motif of the chapters, the plant stylisation we find in Egyptian temples, in Oriental Roman art, like in Jerash in Jordania, etc. In Cordoba, there is

something radically new in terms of the light, the proportions, the relationships between the ground and the arches and the perspective...

V.R.: Often artists – I'm thinking about Matisse or Morellet - talk about the Alhambra as the ultimate place for an aesthetic shock as far as Islamic art is concerned. This wasn't the case with you?

N.M.: This is different because it's a site where the architecture of the universe is translated by Islamic art: paradise on earth, gardens, flowers, fountains, etc. I'm very sensitive to this relationship with water that comes right into the rooms by a very elaborate pipe system. The Alhambra is characterised by the fact that it brings elements of nature into the living space: the sky, water, orange trees, lemon trees, with architecture and nature interpenetrating. It's a less austere architecture than in Cordoba, more polished, more appealing to the eye even if this isn't the aspect that interests me the most. To the extremely stylized muqarnas, I prefer what is symbolic in nature like the ceiling of the Salle des ambassadeurs recreating the starry sky which, at the time, was made of wood and turned because the ambassadors needed to see the constellations before making a decision! I really love this idea of an astronomical ceiling used to interpret the future.

V.R.: There's also a very contemporary aspect in the geometric art of the Alhambra...

N.M.: Indeed, although it's a word that belongs to the 20th century, we can talk about a "minimalist" decor, particularly in the Cour des lions where there is an immense white wall at the back with a geometric shape reproduced repetitively. This is subtractive relief: it only exists with the shade thus created. In one of the rooms, there are also some mosaics I find very "Matisse-like", with blue and yellow patterns being repeated that are also suggestive of Claude Viallat. They're incredibly fresh and seem to be done in the last century.

V.R.: Did you know about Islamic arts before?

N.M.: I discovered them at the age of six, in Fès, when I went to visit my grandparents who lived in a Ryad in the medina that was both very beautiful and brokendown. On the patio, there were orange trees and zelliges, and the rooms were arranged around the rectangular courtyard. This was the first time I discovered a "different" architecture. At night, I saw the starry sky, which was a great contrast with my life in Paris where I lived in an apartment. The first relationship I had with Islamic arts was sensual and emotional. Every time I went to my grandparents, it was a very big shock: I perceived very intensely what I didn't have time to get used to.

V.R.: What were your other artistic love affairs?

N.M.: The works of Piero de la Francesca and Giotto. I saw them at the age of twenty. Later, the frescos of the tombs of the kings and queens in Luxor which I found amazing: the plaster, the design, the colour, the fact that it's a mural, that it's completely integrated into the architecture... I find this sometimes in contemporary art, particularly in certain series by Sol Levitt. In my work, I often do big formats because, physically, I need to project myself onto the canvas and because you get the impression that it belongs to the wall, whereas if you juxtapose small formats, it's more narrative.

V.R.: Do you try to summarise these multiple references?

N.M.: I'm an anti-voluntarist, things come when you're not expecting it. For example, when I started working on les Volutes, I was thinking about the clothes found in Christian iconography, like the white cloth around Christ's hips, and also the turban in Arabic culture. When I went to stay with my grandfather, I was affected by this daily ritual when he removed his long turban before going to bed. It was only after, when I saw the Persian miniatures, that I found these turbans magnified by the painters. For a long time, I worked on raw – blank – canvas and I asked myself a lot of questions about the origin of the canvas. For me, the Veil of Veronica is the first painting on canvas, it's an imprint. My first works when I was 20/25 are black imprints on paper and, then, with my first canvases, we see the imprint of the body, hence my interest in Yves Klein too. The idea that the first canvas is a cloth, a sheet, is very important symbolically, because the sheet is where you sleep, where you make love but it's also the shroud; and it endures, despite new technologies and new materials you find everywhere, like plastic etc. I wanted to put this element on canvas.

Recently, I've abandoned raw canvas and used a pre-coated canvas, painted in black, on which I paint volutes and drapes in white.

V.R.: Does Moroccan culture impregnate part of your work?

N.M.: Of course! That's why I wanted there to be traditional Moroccan fabrics for the exhibition I did in 2005, in the Actua art gallery, in Casablanca, particularly the superb ones belonging to the collector Tazi. These included portieres, these five metre long pieces of material put in front of big French windows in the winter, with floral motifs and monochrome embroidery creating geometric shapes. I also wanted to show the tenchifa of the first part of the century embroidered in Tétouan, in which the floral motif is influenced by Iznik art, via the concubines who came from the Balkans in the 18th and 19th century and lived in the north of Morocco. Down through the centuries, this created an art that cannot be found anywhere else. It influenced the paintings and collages of Matisse who had some of them in his collection. We see clearly that art is what remains of a very complex history of forms.

V.R.: Ultimately, you're interested in universal forms, the ones that have travelled down through the history of art?

N.M.: Yes. For example, my first paintings of the Icare series refer to Greece which is also one of the pillars on which Islamic arts rested. My series of works of polyhedrons called Timée refers to Plato who was very important for Arab philosophers: the main texts of Greek philosophy were translated and circulated in Andalusia, then in France. We also find this influence in art. Spontaneous art does not exist, everything is created and recreated, and sometimes there are crystallisations. The Alhambra we were talking about is one of them. Artists from Bagdad came to work on it but, at the same time, it's something specific that was built from different cultural references. In addition, my Coupoles series makes specific reference to Islam but always with the desire to find forms obtained from Islamic art, like the octagon, but also found in Roman baths or in Roman art. I think a form is universal when it's strong. Different populations invent something specific but sometimes it crosses over or exceeds the borders: for example, you find the blue of Chinese ceramics in Fès. I love these interferences by civilisation: for me, that's reality. The fact that civilisations want to appropriate one thing for political reasons is another story but what interests me, as an artist, is what circulates.

V.R.: Do you recognise yourself according to the concept of "dual culture"?

N.M.: Very early on, I assimilated my dual origin: my mother's culture and my father's. Unlike many contemporary artists who work on the concept of identity, I don't experience mine as a split. I've always felt I'm in both, even in-between. Being a foreigner in a country is not a problem for me: in Morocco or France, what counts for me in my life is freedom; the notion of territory doesn't interest me particularly. I actually feel like Icarus: without frontiers! However, I need to make this synthesis in my artistic work. In all my works, there's an axis: the arborescence, the circle with the centre, etc. I've built myself a back bone from diverse cultures.

V.R.: In your exhibition catalogues, there are lots of textual references. Your studio is full of books. What place do literature and philosophy occupy in your creative process?

N.M.: They help me a lot to understand my artistic work. For example, through his "affect image" concept, Deleuze is the only person to have made me understand why I created forms that were like close-ups. Doing large formats or enlarging details with digital technology is about trying to get into the image. I also gained a lot from Merleau-Ponty at one time, particularly his approach to phenomenology. When you're a painter, this relationship with the "truth of sensation", which sometimes comes from very early childhood, is fundamental: you have images deeply rooted in yourself which can emerge at any time. I also love the Pre-Socrates Greeks because there are many of them: philosophers, scientists, poets, doctors and seers... Sufi thinkers like Rumi are also very important for me. He wrote extremely sensual poems in which you don't know if it's about God, a woman or a young man, and I love this ambivalence between carnal love and sublimated love. My work is both physical and mental, so I recognize myself in this lack of a division between body and mind.

V.R.: What is your view of spirituality?

N.M.: My mother is a Catholic, my father a Muslim. I believe in the spirit and the soul, but my "religion" is art. I'm interested in concrete manifestations of the sublime and the sacred, not in dogma that always generates rules and restrictions. There are some rituals I find very beautiful like Holy Week in Andalusia, or the trance of the gnawas in Essaouira. Something very physical happens in these representations of the sacred.

V.R.: Do you feel that the spiritual still has a place in art today?

N.M.: For several years, exhibition curators, with a few rare exceptions, seem to prefer showing spectacular works, in their eyes subversive, even systematically provocative. The two should be combined. Because with Islam, we only see the religion that forbids: the veiled woman, no drinking of alcohol, etc. Always the same sociological clichés! Clearly, spirituality and the sacred are one of the possible dimensions of art.

V.R.: What do you think about the current craze for Contemporary Arab art that has significantly grown since the "Arab revolutions"?

N.M.: In the 90s, you had to stand out as a woman to emerge on the art scene. Nowadays, this is a bit like what's happening for Chinese, Indian and Arab artists. It's a good thing that artists, lacking in visibility for so long, can be seen in the context of this new enthusiasm. These artists offer something new to 21st century art. Having said that, I go my own way, which is a singular way, in between two cultures and identities. By definition, fashion is what passes, and art what remains.