

Najia Mehadji, drawing as a vital principle
By Philippe Piguet

Looking at Najia Mehadji's drawings over the last twenty years, we can identify three main entities the artist has developed over time: the geometric, the plant world and the body, the generic idea of structure governing the way each one is interpreted. Technically, Mehadji uses media as diverse as sanguine, chalk, gouache, water colours, graphite, even vinyl paint; she uses different paper formats, comfortable with big and small, and varying thicknesses as necessary and, if need be, she does collage. Considered in its entirety, her whole collection of drawings offers itself to the viewer in a formal economy and visual density where line vies with mass, both dedicated to the revelation of an undiscovered space. This is where the drawn figure appears, sometimes through the care of an ordered construction, sometimes through the random fullness of one movement, often occupying the whole iconic field, standing out clearly against the background of the paper, left white or painted black. Najia Mehadji uses a chromatic palette with very few colours, favouring essentially brown, red, black and white, not only due to the technique used - sanguine, for example - but due to the artist's emphatic desire not to let the eyes be distracted and to engage them in an effort of concentration so they can better penetrate the subject.

Something paradoxical is at work in her oeuvre that swings between rigour and freedom and, just as she herself defines it, between entities that oppose each other and complement each other at the same time. "My work", she says, "is situated between drawing and painting, abstraction and representation, colour and light, outside and inside, movement and suspense, sensible and symbolic, action and idea, geometry and organic, form and flow, constraint and freedom, intuition and reflection, perception and memory - the East and the West." In short, it occupies the dynamic of an "in-between" that feeds her thinking and ensures it is constantly regenerated. "If I could paint the flower exactly as I see it, no one would see what I see because I would paint it small like the flower is small. So I said to myself - I'll paint what I see - what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it". These lines written by Georgia O'Keeffe speak confidently of a simple gaze full of wonder, borne by an irresistible desire for space. As for flowers, Najia Mehadji has been drawing and painting them for many years. Small ones and big ones. Pomegranate and almond blossom, peonies and poppies. Anemones, too. She treasures them in her studio, observing some of them slowly withering away; the cycle of life, in a way, and this happy denouement of a transformation.

They are not flowers anymore, they are meteors. They have left the earthly world for the cosmos. They are at once unrecognisable, seductive and worrying. The artist would spend hours looking at them if it were not for the fact that she feels a sort of inner need to want to portray this hint of a profound energy that constantly animates them. The way she then has of focusing on them in a close-up, devoid of any anecdote, reveals much more than their simple appearance. Mehadji invites us to discover the curve of their corolla, then the arrangement of their petals, then the design of their veins. She compels us to look closer and closer as if to notice the structure better and the networks making up this structure - the folds, the openings-, as if she were trying to make us enter the corridors of life itself.

With Najia Mehadji, drawing is synonymous with flows, arborescences, volutes and arabesques (these are the titles of some of her series). It echoes this concept of vitalism, as it was understood by certain thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment and according to which there exists in all living beings a "vital principle", distinct from matter, which brings life and order to this matter. Whether we are talking about figurative or abstract motifs, the singularity of the artist's approach to drawing is that it takes up the ancient debate between the supporters of both camps and repudiates it because it situates the object of its quest well ahead of any particular designation, in a primordial place before any naming, before any form of culture. The method of the series she deliberately uses allows her to avoid any classification, even though each one refers to a specific category. This is because it is not about trying to identify the subject here, but simply letting it sweep through you. Drawing for Mehadji is a form of poetics as defined by Jean Cocteau when he says that "poetry is not evasion but invasion". Not only does this formula help to explain the reference to

Georgia O’Keeffe but it makes the practice of drawing, in this instance, the vector of a creative adventure that brings the viewer to experience the most intimate vital movements.

One of the most emblematic series of Najia Mehadji’s art is undoubtedly the one she created in the last two years, entitled *Danse mystique*, executed using white gouache and vinyl paint. She highlights the difficulty of cutting into what separates drawing and painting, in this ambivalence where the two modes are in perfect osmosis – as with Twombly. Keen to claim her status of painter, Mehadji also stresses the fact that this series highlights the action of a painter, that everything is skilfully measured, between the black background spread across the medium and the white paint she applies flat with a single movement by turning the big brush she uses for this purpose. The artist also emphasises the particular conditions of the work, done in the morning, which requires intense mental preparation, the operating principle of this work being familiar with postures like those of Hokusai, Lee Ufan or the whirling dervishes. The body is at work here in the fulfilment of a quasi ritual.

While Mehadji says that the image must escape her control – so she has to abandon herself to prepare herself -, this does not mean that she is not the master of it. No more so for her than for O’Keeffe, it is not about “making an image of the experience lived but making the image itself an experience”, as Christophe Domino judiciously wrote about the American artist. The resulting image is the image of an unfurling, as if the artiste was trying to envelop space while enveloping herself at the same time. An echo of the rolling sea on the beach in Essaouira, in a perpetual, infinite and immemorial motion. While the way the artist has of plunging our gaze into an all-consuming monumental form creates all sorts of perceptive disruptions of space, its objective is first and foremost to involve the body in the work, invite it to experience a sensory journey to the very heart of the motif; to lose it there, drown it there. In this, Najia Mehadji’s art cannot be detached from this generic notion of organism and an endoscopic way of observing the world. Her art always refers us to this powerful dimension of the intimate. Najia Mehadji’s drawing is about an appropriation of space that is characterised by all her works in their way. We see this in the “Arabesques” series, in which the forms turn in on themselves, revealing in their inner essence black lines that are like writing signs; in the “Enveloppes” series - a mathematical term – where the line in its repetition multiplies the effects of sweeping, folding and bending of space; in the “Sphères” series that refers to the cosmic image of constellations and orbs, in an orchestration of the living between the macro and the micro; in the “Arborescences” series, the dual reading of which plays on an ascending and descending movement in a precipitation of space, between falling and standing up again; and finally, in the “Volutes” series, in which the artist’s hand draws more readily white on black, sometimes on paper painted turquoise, with a continual movement that is sometimes inscribed as a simple Mobius strip, and sometimes abandoned to the complex pleasure of interlacing patterns.

This is drawing in a constant to-and-fro motion, rising up from the depths of the being to burst onto the surface, leaving its mark there and burying itself again; drawing to mark territory, to express its presence in the world; drawing in the flash of a foreshortening, in the epiphany of lightening, like the inscription of the body’s word; drawing that is the furthest away from the first sign of life; drawing as the recording of thinking out loud.