



Abdallah AKAR, "Si tu cherches la beauté....",  
oil on Canvas, 1993

*North African  
Contemporary Art*

*at the Detroit Institute of Arts*

A proposal by Christine Arveil

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## *Part II*

# *An Introduction to North African Contemporary Art*

The convincing beauty of North African contemporary art somehow rises out of freedom. *Freedom* sounds like a paradoxical word, almost misplaced, in an area of the world inheriting of such a difficult and complicated history. Nevertheless, this is one of the challenges artists long ago chose to deal with, very gently and acting with great discretion, but with a constant strong movement towards new territories of creation.

The work of North African artists progresses through a subtle practice, extremely reserved in itself and moreover compelled to discretion by the Art market where few names originating from Maghreb can hardly be pointed out. Most of the time neglected by the Occident, or just called in association with the work of occidental artists, and overflowed by the voices of eastern Arabian countries, the artists from Algeria, Tunisia or Morocco are not given a real opportunity to show their work to its full extent. From a general art history point of view, it would be a real loss to go on underestimating the remarkable, fertile and effective link this culture is weaving for many years now in-between Orient and Occident.

Abdelkebir Khatibi has this beautiful sentence:

*"L'Orient et l'Occident cheminent l'un vers l'autre dans un commencement infini.  
L'Art est l'autre nom de ce voyage."*

"Orient and Occident progress towards each other like in an endless beginning. Art is the other name of this journey."

From the same art critic we have this other statement, I would roughly translate again: "Between civilizations there are pictorial boundaries. A painter is the go-between, this visionary from in-between borders who gives us the image, the representation of the actual and yet so delicate chart of a soul, of a civilization. For it he has to stand at the crossing of paths..."

An exhibition at the DIA can bring a new light, open the way to a renewed reading of this page of the art history by competent historians, and draw the attention of curators and collectors of contemporary art as well as create opportunities for artists of various traditions or fields to meet. However numerous the aims may be, the first purpose is gathering and bringing to light for the largest audience and its enjoyment a rare and hardly known stream of the contemporary creation.

## II-1. HISTORICAL REVIEW

What we call North African contemporary Art identified itself as such not very long ago. The first visual arts congress in the Arab World took place in Damas in 1971. For the ten following years, several important meetings were held in Baghdad, Tunis, Rabat, Hammamet, and other locations. It has been an enthusiastic period where group action prevailed, launching axes of creation towards various concerns from figurative to abstract; at that time, the dialogue the artist was keeping or not with his cultural roots was considered of importance. Artists now return to a more intimate and informal practice, meeting probably as often as they ever used to but on a private studio basis. Studios settled in many different parts of the world besides North Africa; Europe remains one of the privileged destinations.

The merging of individualism or at least concern for the individual and personal search conveys a specific meaning in the Muslim community. It leads in fact the artist to a special and often uncomfortable situation: here is the first step of exile, a very important element of this creation and not obvious to define. We will try to give a few guide lines later on.

### *Early Period*

The North African contemporary art rapidly bloomed on the occidental graft implanted during the colonial period. The chronology of its appearance coincides with historical changes. Since the beginning, the assimilation was reciprocal as art in Europe moved towards these new paths opened in discovering more of Arab culture. Besides a few well-known biographies, this returned influence has not yet been thoroughly studied nor integrated to our occidental art history; our present focus will keep in mind such a shared creation.

Easel painting, originally an European concept, was adopted by the south-Mediterranean artists along with two structural bases, importing a tool as well as a conception of art close to a philosophy:

- *painting* as a stretched canvas on a wood structure: here was the material base and the emphasized, almost unique ground for acknowledgment of painted creation.

- *art school* as a necessary curriculum, beginning with drawing lessons in the elementary schools opened by the French administration, continuing to fine arts schools: the first one being opened in Cairo, in 1908.

On such basis, an artist was led to enter a "profession", and to individually assume a definite social position. This job had a tool and a curriculum. As a correlation, the artist would benefit from a freedom of creation, or, more precisely, the freedom of considering his intimate feelings and sensations as the raw material of a craft work in process.

### *Building of an Identity: 1910-1955*

Inside the Muslim community, such a statement was opening a huge gap and could not possibly be taken inside the structures of Arab culture. This was and remains the essential and very deep meaning of the *exile*. More than once this notion of "exile" will have to be focused on and analyzed in its various manifestations. Since the active irruption of occidental culture through colonialism, an alternative way was opened, unfamiliar to the

Koranic school or even to the traditional conception of the place and work of an artist in society: most of the time, an artist, as an individual or taking part in a group (architects, calligraphers and painters, for example, who might remain anonymous), would integrate and devote his work to the purpose of a common demand, well-being or education. In other words, the artist was required to turn his talent to the community more than to himself (poems of love, for instance, which Arabic literature is so beautifully rich, would be read as examples of destiny or description of feelings more than as the personal expression of a poet identified in his own being.).

Very rapidly, the new conception seemed to encounter a claim of the artists for a renewal of the traditional forms of expression: contemporary art was on the move. By the end of the 1940s, poetry, forgetful of the rhythmical tradition explored free verses, novelists broke the usual patterns recognizable through a codified organization of sentences opening and ending the book, as well as by the featuring of characters. Calligraphy began to look for aims others than the perfect mastery of styles, completed along history and now fixed into a classification (seven main styles and many related ones) to be transmitted from master to apprentice. Music and visual arts brought together networks of artists who not only researched in many different fields and media but built effective connections with occidental groups, such as Surrealism (1937-45): Along with Egyptian painters (Kamel, Younane, El-Telemsany), North African artists opened its Arab branch and brought several artists (Breton, Braque, Klee, Kandinsky, Matisse...) to their countries. At the same time, the best students of the new fine arts schools could complete their studies abroad. West and East Europe, Cuba were their first destinations; after 1945, a significant group of North African painters took part in the Ecole de Paris, like Cherkaoui, Benanteur, Abboud. Original conceptions were equally developed in the Arabic world, as with *Unidimensionalism* led by Al-Saïd which brought together into close views Iraqians artists and the Casablanca school.

### *Emergence of Distinct Groups: 1955-1970*

Since 1960-70, the mobility of artists persisted and the number of their destinations increased, and more of them began to visit United States, Canada or South America. This movement probably originated in a couple of exhibitions shown in 1956 (New

York) and 1957 (Gharbaoui and Morocco painters in San Francisco). During the same period of time, the movement also began to reverse and some artists, like Belkahia in Morocco, decided to return to their countries and to settle their studio there. In December 63-January 64, on the initiative of painters -and now professors- like Cherkaoui and Belkahia, an "international meeting of artists" was held in Rabat, bringing there Picasso, Miro, Matisse, Hartung not only on behalf of their fame but as a manifesto for what they considered to be the new location and strength of creation.

This decade and the next one were constantly active and fruitful in bringing up new definitions of the contemporary creation, turning itself to new horizons. The settlement of independence for the North African countries around these times, accompanied a clear statement of what could be the orientations of contemporary art, regarding painting at first; Belkahia was then director of the fine arts school in Casablanca. In Morocco, Chebaa who intended to highlight a renewed linkage in-between past and modern times, Meleh and Belkahia defended a split from traditional painting. Exhibitions and manifestos in 1965 and 69, rejected both naïve folk art and the orientalism carried on with colonialism as well as the academic heritage. A *Reunion of Arab artists* was signed up in Damascus in 1971.

### *The Time of Group Shows: 1970-1985*

After this event, major conventions took place during the following years: 1972 saw the festival Al-Wassiti in Baghdad and the colloquium of Hammamet (about the contemporary styles of Arab visual arts), 1974 (Baghdad) and 1976 (Rabat) opened pan-Arabian biennial meetings for visual artists. Then, in 1984, a first exhibition of contemporary art was held in Tunis, which, in spite of some interruptions, was to be continued each summer; for some time the meeting has aimed at bringing back together, at least once a year, Tunisian artists living out of the country. Many more festivals or exhibitions should be listed here (Kuwait, Morocco...) which showed once or on regular basis until now. The enthusiasm for organizing a number of meetings sprang from the many groups identifying themselves into a common perception of creation: Casablanca School (Morocco), Group for contemporary art (Egypt), Innovationists (Iraq) to quote just a few of them. This remarkable activism was probably due to an earnest questioning of the future of Arabic culture: what could be the place

of the artist in the muslim community, what had visual creation to offer into the new step of construction of the Arab world? Such concerns, often close to political issues, and the general enthusiasm, which has to be underlined, urged the artists to gather their strength and collectively organize their demonstrations.

### *The Time of Individual Choices: 1985-present*

For the last ten years, works have progressed towards a more individual achievement; and perhaps because of the sometimes increasing political pressure, collective "happenings" and manifestos appeared less often in the front of the stage. The number of events decreased and creation, just as active as ever, sheltered itself in private studios. The hope for increasing markets in Arab countries being somehow deceptive and the interest of the Occident not growing in proportion to the endeavor of the artistic community, the appearance and circulation of North African art in particular seemed more difficult. As far as social definition of the artists was concerned, Pierre Gaudibert established, for the Morocco artists, that 33% of them in 1989 were self-taught and sometimes close to illiterate, while others attended fine arts schools and often graduated in foreign schools ( 50% France, 20% Belgium, 15% Spain, 15% United States and East Europe). After their studies 10% of them would permanently settle in a foreign country. Only 7% of the artists listed were women. During this period, as if the inscription of a personal and cultural statement (as an act of re appropriation) was a resurgent question, calligraphy was a noticeable ground for many of their researches (Koraichi, Akar, Ben Bella, Massoudy, Khadda, Madaoui).

### *Maturity of a "Bi-Pictorial" Language*

Among a few others, two artists were particularly seen as initiators for contemporary art: one of them, Gharbaoui, was called "the Occidental", having spent most of his tragic life in Europe and dealing with European concepts and collectors, the other one, Cherkaoui, was named "the Oriental"; his painting was built around the idea of the monogram: "identity is the calligraphy of one's roots: art awakes along this durable return". Despite the fact that history certainly left a painful feeling of being torn apart in-between

two cultures, North African artists do not emphasize a split of their personality into the inherited duality: Orient - Occident. Osmosis or assimilation along with reflective choices and rejections would describe the process more precisely. Sijelmassi understands their contemporary painting to be "*bi-pictorial*, like one says *bilingual*"; B. Alaoui prefers the term of *ubiquity* to define the attitude of the painter. This anyway is certainly a key for a right approach to the now mature state of this art.

At the beginning of the century, contemporary art, as it was then embodied, might have seemed to spring out of nothing deeply rooted in the South Mediterranean area, standing like a brand new character on an imported stage, like a figure suddenly carved into sun and shade. On the contrary, the evolution of this art, opening many different paths, that we can now appreciate over a long period of time, shows first an exploration of the newly imported elements (somehow a different *data* base for art), then a process of appropriation, followed by its combination or confrontation to the historical basis, knowledge and specific practices of Arab culture. This is the step we are now at. Artists call on the past of their people as well as they appropriate the most recent "entries" in art. They feel free to take in the same hand traditional tools from their culture or occidental techniques: the wide range of choices available contributes to the richness of the sensation, but also distinguishes all choices as more meaningful.

It has been a long time also since the occidental collectors and art critics could free their eyes of the mythical spices of Orient. There is until now a flourishing art market around tourism, like in any other location, emphasizing ready-made images of a civilization. The struggle against what was called *orientalism*, led by the artists, still takes a fairly important place in the small literature we have about North African art. Although the page has now turned in the commentaries by specialists, it seems to remain latent for a larger audience, such as that of a public exhibition.

## II-2. HINTS FOR AN ANALYSIS

Arab contemporary art, at first impression, might not surprise a visitor already used to some current western contemporary creation. Most of the materials, even if certainly not all of them, would be recognizable; marks of our century art history would identify themselves, in terms of abstract, conceptual, hyper realistic art, "arte povera" or others major streams of actual research. The dialogue seems eventually easy to enter.

### *A Continuous Space*

But the articulate language of the work lies in a different perception of how these materials were handled to shape the image, how they ever became distinct from their original environment or source; it is to be guessed that they never entirely separate. In this extent North African contemporary art is really unique and highly suggestive. Printed reproduction does not always respond to it as it often lessens the frequent roughness of surfaces. A painting, a sculpture or moreover an installation (installations being a minority of the work brought to light: Koraichi, Oulab), is never taken apart from the surrounding world. The outline, the contour is a permeable surface of contact; all things are related in a world, full up to the end of it, where even emptiness, better called nothingness, has got shape and outline; the "contour"(outline) is a relational notion. We can clarify this concept by giving a couple of examples. Fundamentally, Arab civilization describes a world in constant and perfect continuity: there is no valuable notion of emptiness, for example, such as one can experience in Chinese culture. According to the historical criterion of beauty, a wall was judge on its decoration more than on its shape. The oriental eye is used to move along, without any break or boundary, brushing over things from some centered points to a virtual infinite. Ancient calligraphy would describe in many ways this freedom towards any boundary: designs would never be completed at the end of the wall nor at the edge of the page and the motives would repeat themselves endlessly (Akar's compositions work on such a powerful concept; in a different way, Benanteur's figures or Triki's crowds overlap the

edges of canvases ). Dynamic moves and transfers go from a surface to another, investing alternately the nominated art work or any bit of its hazardous surroundings

### *Edges*

In such a context, what in the canvas could have interested the South Mediterranean artists? The *canvas* concept is indeed a composite, if this term from the new technologies is evocative enough, whose elements might have been understood differently by artists having an Oriental or an Occidental cultural background. It has been nevertheless the ground for their dialogue. Two main parameters have accompanied for centuries the success of the idea of canvas painting in Europe: the *framing* and the *opacity*. Jean Paulhan reports that yet at the time of his maturity, Braque pretended not to be able to create one of his paintings (when cubism seems to be the act of painting in space) without a frame: he used to keep in his studio a variety of frames bought at the flea market and put one against the still life or model in order to sketch it; he would get rid of the frame only at a rather advance step of the work. Since the beginning, canvas painting has been a *framed canvas*. Bringing together the two understandings of the idea of "limit", we will not be astonished to see that during the last ten years, North African painters have been so often unfolding canvases, making visible the loose or torn off edges of the fabric (canvas clearly resumes its linen characteristics, according to the process of continuity we mentioned above) or giving loose ends to the paint before it reaches the edge of the structure (Kacimi) another option was to assemble several canvases of various sizes or shapes and to allow the image to run along (Malek Salah or Bellamine).

### *Transparency*

Speaking of opacity, we referred to the philosophy brought along with the technique of prepared canvases with gesso at the beginning of the century in the Maghreb. It was probably influenced by Plato's theory of ideas: the painter would be mainly facing a mirror, or at the most a screen, behind which would lay for ever the "real" world. Occidental art history shows tracks of this concept up to the many attempts, since the turn of the century

especially, for striping or damaging- going through- the canvas: all fierce attempts to reach or reveal an underlying essential meaning. This is at least one of the numerous aspects of conceptual art or minimalism. the opacity of the canvas ,besides its technical necessity, was the perfect vehicle of a civilization. When one carefully look at a canvas, a paper or some painted leather coming out of the hands of a North African painter or plastician, it appears often as translucent, always allowing air and light to go through it (in his *Salomé's veils*, Koraichi worked in complete transparency). Canvases are often loose in texture, or old, thin and reused, all layers of glued-in palimpsests remained visible (Cherkaoui). The contemporary poet Adonis describes the Muslim philosophy "as if the part of a body (*rôle de la corporalité*) was to carry the invisible across the visible and the transparency, across opacity", The passage is eased between reality and representation: it is a source of creation.

### *Linked Lexicons*

Again two examples show that the graphic image, eventually still as an imagination before art work, can lay, printed, in reality. These will be the solar retinal impressions in the desert, called "place of the natural experience of colors, solar eye" and the art of tattooing, which an art historian said to be "lieu de circulation du désir", a desire meant to awake creation. This women' art, now disappearing has been a major source of artists' phantasms; its souvenir strongly remains. Arabic intellectuals agreed on a description of their contemporary art as being *inter-semiotic*. The term borrowed from linguistics explains in a very accurate way the use of signs and the understanding of a free circulation of meanings among spaces. Arab world is a civilization of signs In this world of written or evoked signs tattooed bodies were a lexicon of meaningful and identified lines. Sijelmassi says: "the tattooed body is a symbolic topography, a gown of signs." Here were also kept fundamental colors: black, henna, permanent or non permanent, what is to be kept in mind ( days of work before a ceremony would be diluted in water at once). Remains,, tracks of signs, moveable inscriptions would be nowadays part of the artists' imagination. While seemingly few women (like Baya Mahieddine, Chebaa and Meriem Bouderbala) take part in contemporary creation still, it is noticeable that they articulated for long a kind of a first language for art. This would be worth to investigate, moreover as women also transmitted for generation the geometrical and narrative language of tapestry and carpet or kilim designs.

### *Art and Craft*

These areas of the folk art observing coded compositions work in perfect continuity with the contemporary creation. M. Metalsi in one of his analysis speaks of "a perfect fluency between art and craft". What was described above regarding the circulation of the eye in a painting or this inter-semiotic quality of the plastic expression find here an application in practical terms. The social status of many "art workers" remains unclear without any apparent discomfort. On the contrary, contemporary artists chose to work in close relation with craftsmanship in many ways. Just to associate a few images to that idea, we can remind how Belkahia prepares the leather he is painting on, emphasizing on his work at the tannery as in his studio; after having taken part three years ago with several others artists in a project of designing and directing the waving of mats and kilims in remote villages carrying the tradition of tapestry, Koraichi is, since last spring, settled his workshop in a pottery fabric to achieve the modeling of a series of jars; in another way, until now the major works by Ben Bella were his huge calligraphic paintings featuring a succession of fine letters along roads (he covered once kilometers of the Paris-Roubaix road famous for cycling races) or on buildings walls. His recent exhibition in Paris last October was entitled: *works on canvas, paper and paving stones*. None of these "happenings" or "works in situ" were limited to an artist's performance. When Khimoune casts a place on the pavement or a sewer grille to introduce the mold in his work, there rises a will of social or political statement which situates the artist into the stream of history elbow to elbow to the anonymous crowd.

### *Figuration and Abstraction*

Understanding how specific modes of representations would be developed by the artists, soon some unavoidable questions about their esthetic choices would be asked. We are basically used to think in terms of figurative and non-figurative art. Interesting perspectives were opened in this field by Arab art specialists as Meddeb, Bonfour or Khatibi; their interpretations often differed, bringing then forth into the matter more light and insight. Many misreading of the art works have to be carefully avoid for an European trained eye as

far as figuration is concerned in Oriental civilization. A colorful painting with very little drawing in it, for example, can be quoted as figurative by its author, when an Occidental visitor would see an abstract composition; or only part of calligraphy would be considered as non-figurative. As we enter the subject, it has to be clearly remembered that the Koran does not prohibit figuration: some discussions about it nowadays find their arguments among the very numerous later *Hadits* ("facts and words of the prophet" written by doctors since 9th century); this would not affect personal choices of artists but has been, as we know for writers, a real issue for religious authorities.

Just to give some guide lines, it seems that figuration is often linked with a social or cultural experience ; Marwan's figures and portraits are in such a track. Figuration now, like in Kacimi's paintings would deal with symbolical and close to abstract images where the material plays a part as important as the metaphors. For a good ten years, Bellamine has been searching through his canvases the remains of an arch: as time goes by, the whole surface is closer and closer to white-gray, but unexpectedly the centered arch becomes more visible and powerful. The spectator is now invited to walk under a deep archway, yet completely abstract and somehow hidden into a thick concrete paint. Standing further from concerns about figuration would be artists like Belkahia, Al-Saïd, El Kamel, Salah, Akar or Ben Bella, Koraichi: this list being far from close. Still, entering a conversation with them, the observer would listen to some very precise explanation often regarding the situation of the work in its environment.

### *A Conclusion*

Khatibi again names paintings "the lithe steps of memory": most of these artists would refer constantly to memory in such a way. In an article on Bellamine, A. Bonfour gives us very accurate suggestions for looking at North African visual art. From the question: "is identity a relevant question in painting?", he points out five main components of the work: the exile, the authenticity, the refuse of anecdote, the deconstruction of the ground (canvas, paper, wood) and the wall (*muralité* ). Such concepts are powerful to define a large part of the concerns of the South Mediterranean artists.

Alain Macaire once said: "il construit de l'espace avec du temps" (*he builds space with time*). Here is a beautiful path to enter.

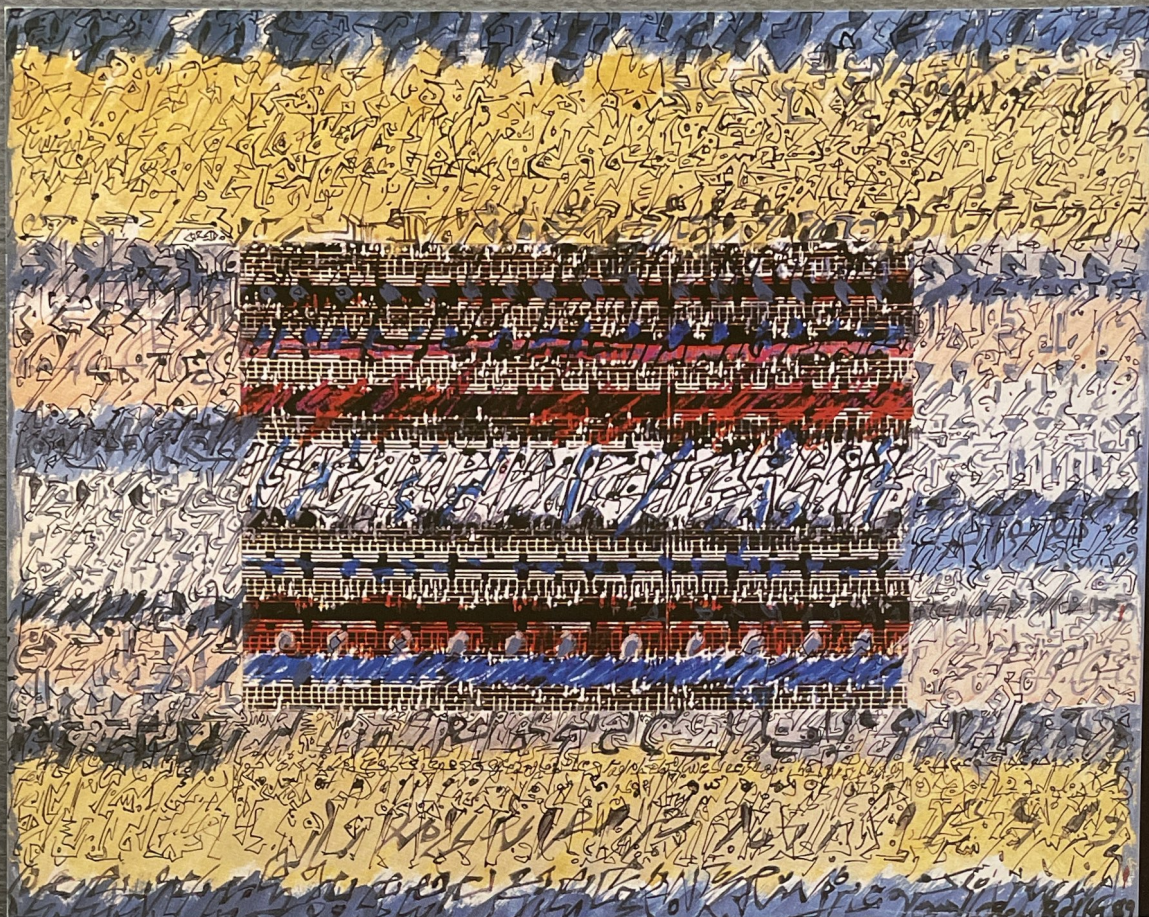


7 PORTES DU CIEL • INSTALLATION 1993 • SCULPTURES EN ACIER

Rachid KORAICHI



Sans Titre, 1987  
(Sen título), 1987  
Acrílico/lenzo  
116 x 50 cms.



BEN  
BELLA



ECRITURES SUR PAVES



Transe, 1986  
(Transe)  
Tinte vexetal/pel  
133 x 208 cms.







Traversée, 1990

(Travesía)

Técnica mixta/lenzo

294 x 464 cms.



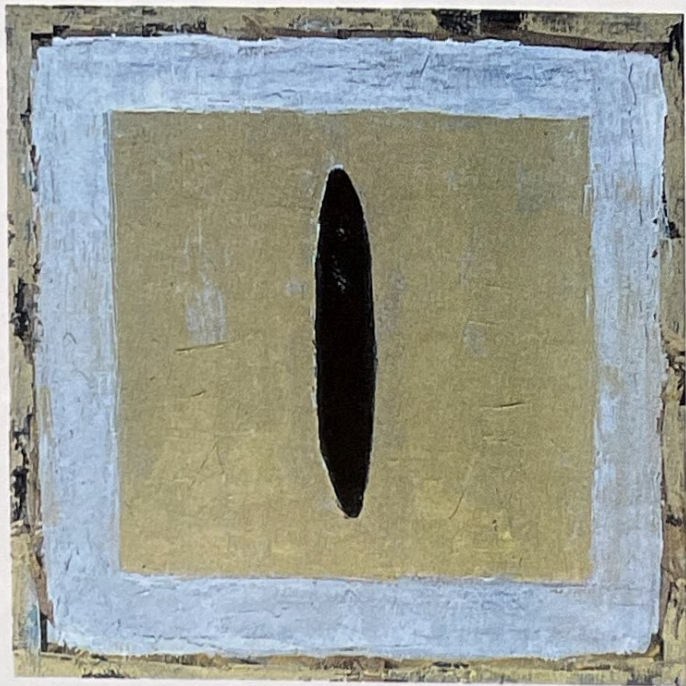


Série « Speculum Mundi », *Télévision VI*, 1995

Peinture sous verre, béton

17 x 29 x 3,2 cm

*Bouderbala, Maïem*



Malek SALAH  
"L'esprit de la forme primordiale."  
1995 , 40x40cm each , mixed technique  
on wood. (in catalogue: "les effets du  
voyage " éd- Amsaoui.)

Huile sur toile, 1969  
Coll. Serghini







KACIMI, "Atlassides", 1990, mixed technique, 230x286cm  
(in Catalogue: "Peintres du Maroc", éd IMA)

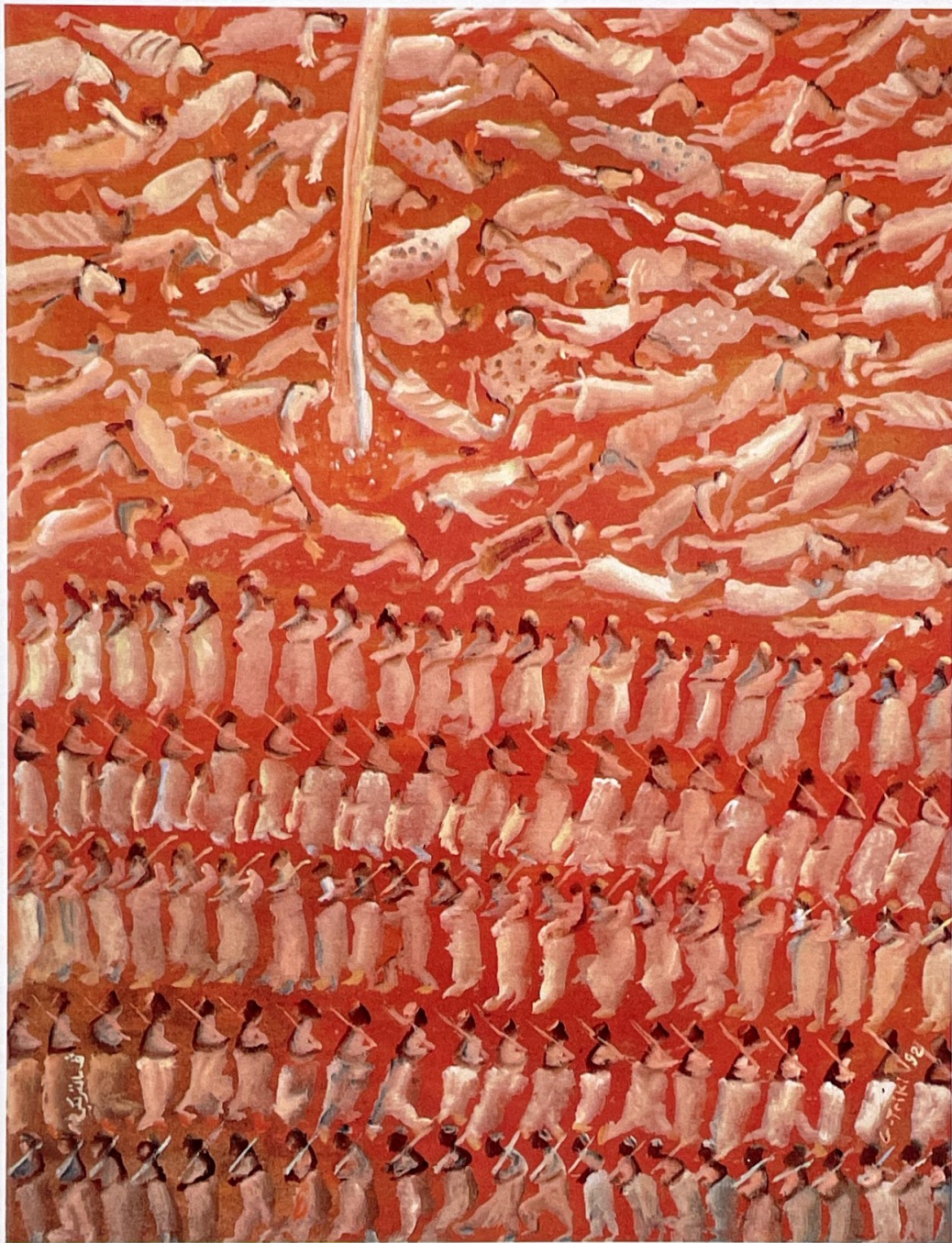


Rafik EL-KAMEL , "Transfiguration",  
1995, Acrylic on canvas , 190x142 cm (in Catalogue  
"Regards sur l'art contemporain tunisien", IMA)



LES RÊVES DE LA PRINCESSE, 1962  
Huile/toile  
200x50 cm  
Collection N. Cherkaoui





**Composition n° 9, 1991**  
(Composición n° 9)  
Gouache/papel  
64,5 x 49,5 cms.