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New Waves: A tribute to pioneer of Moroccan modernism, Mohamed Melehi

Melehi takes photos of the collective street exhibition with the Casablanca Art School, Marrakech 1969

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Mohamed Melehi's first UK solo show celebrates his life's achievement as both an artist and forerunner of the cultural scene in post-colonial Morocco.

how his appreciation of the arts caused a cultural revolution through his ground-breaking work at the Casablanca Art School.

Opening on Friday at The Mosaic Rooms is *New Waves*, an exhibition dedicated to Moroccan artist Mohamed Melehi. A pioneer of modernism in Morocco and the Global South, Melehi's first UK solo show celebrates his life's achievement as both an artist and forerunner of the cultural scene in post-colonial Morocco.

The exhibition is divided chronologically, tracking Melehi's artistic career that began in Europe and America in the late 1950s before his return to Morocco in the mid-1960s, where he remains today. Here, visitors witness the formation of Melehi's unique "wave" motif and see

Placing his paintings alongside Melehi's graphic design, archival materials, furniture and array of influences from Berber textiles and jewellery to Moroccan architecture, the exhibition revels in the artist's multi-faceted career.

The show is the third and final in a three-part series commissioned by The Mosaic Rooms in celebration of important modernist artists from Egypt, Iran and Morocco. Curator, Morad Montazami, told *The New Arab* that he chose Melehi as the final artist in the trilogy for his significant contribution to the art scene in post-colonial Morocco.

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The first room is dedicated to Melehi's early artistic career in the international art scene where he lived and worked in Italy before moving to the US. The dramatic change in style during this period, from his dark, layered canvases in Rome, to his bold, geometric works in New York, highlights the gradual development of his own pictorial style. One particularly striking work from this period depicts geometric columns of white, black and red which rise vertically up and overlap one another, echoing the skyscrapers of the Manhattan skyline.



Mohamed Melehi, Untitled, (1980). Cellulose paint on wood, 84 x 84. Image courtesy of Loft Gallery



Mohamed Melehi, Untitled (1975). Cellulose paint on panel, 100 x 120cm. Courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, photographed by Capital D



Mohamed Melehi, Composition, (1970). Acrylic on panel, 120 x 100cm. Courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, photographed by Capital D

It is not until Melehi's return to Morocco in the second part of the exhibition, however, that we witness the formation of his unique wave motif.

"Melehi often says that the wave symbolises movement, life, displacement and energy," Montazami explained.

A sense of movement is felt across the walls of the gallery as the wave motif is repeated in Melehi's paintings, sculptures, murals, and graphic designs. *Composition* from 1970 is particularly spectacular. Here, four symmetrical wave patterns extend out from the middle of the canvas against a warm red and blue background, practically vibrating in its sense of energy.

Photographs taken by Melehi himself give clues as to the influence behind the wave motif. Here, the pattern is echoed in Berber jewellery, in the vaults of a mosque, and in Moroccan urban design.

Against a brightly coloured wall on one side of the gallery are exhibition posters, adverts, and art journals that show how the pattern reverberated across the global art scene.

“ **Melehi often says that the wave symbolises movement, life, displacement and energy** ”

"I am trying to include the pattern itself within the inner discourse about transnationalism," Montazami said.

In this second room visitors also witness the monumental contribution that Melehi made to the Casablanca Art School alongside renowned artists Farid Belkahia and Mohammed Chabâa. Breaking away from the continued presence of former colonial powers in the Moroccan art scene, the artists took on a completely new approach to art where they turned away from Western influence, instead fusing Moroccan and Berber crafts with modernist architecture.

The school was revolutionary in its decisive reclaiming of the cultural sphere, post-colonisation. One photograph shows art historian Toni Maraini educating students on the importance of identifying as African, while a second documents the *Exposition-Manifest* that the students put on for all the public to see in Marrakesh's famous Jma el-Fna Square.

"In 1969 for the first time they decided to do an outside exhibition which at the time was a sort of backlash to the colonial salon exhibition still happening in Morocco after independence in 1956," Montazami explained.

Melehi would continue to bring his art into the public sphere, as seen in various archives throughout the gallery which depict scenes such as students preparing for an exhibition on the streets of Casablanca and Melehi painting beautiful murals for the Asilah Arts Festival which he co-founded in 1978.

The final room is perhaps the best, where visitors witness what the gallery dubs Melehi's 'reframing the wave.' Dating from the 1980s onwards, the wave motif reverberates throughout the room; echoed in Melehi's paintings, furniture design, in textiles and architecture. It demonstrates a period in Melehi's career both as artist and teacher at the Casablanca Art School where creative influence was drawn from both the local and international sphere.

This is seen in the presence of a Berber rug in the middle of the gallery which Melehi had chosen to be included in an exhibition he held in Rabat as early as 1965. Its warm colours and detailed patterns resonate with Melehi's later paintings which are hung next to it. *Untitled* from 1980, although highly modern in its bold colours and abstracted forms, clearly shows a continued influence from Berber textiles, as the wave motif, now more animated in shape, strongly echoes the zigzag pattern running along the side of the rug.

It is in this final room that visitors also see how Melehi's practice extended to architecture. Pieces of Melehi's wood panels, still in the wave motif, accompany his paintings and photographs highlight the reliefs, frescoes and furniture that Melehi, Belkahia, and Chabâa designed for various buildings and hotels. Bringing the exhibition to a close, it demonstrates the extent of Melehi's contribution in forming a cultural scene in Morocco and beyond.

All in all, *New Waves* triumphs in celebrating Melehi as one of the most influential modernists in both Morocco and internationally and highlights his pivotal role in reshaping the cultural scene post-independence which continues to influence the art in Morocco today.

New Waves is on show at [The Mosaic Rooms](#), London, until June 22nd. Open Tuesday-Saturday 11am-6pm.

Georgia Beeston is a freelance journalist based in London with a focus on arts and culture from the Middle East.

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LOFT ART GALLERY CASABLANCA



Students at the Casablanca Art School, decoration workshop led by Mohammed Chabâa (1960s). Chabâa Family Archives



A student from the Casablanca Art School preparing the students' exhibition at the Fine Art Gallery, Arab League Park, June 1968. Image courtesy Chabâa Family