

In Conversation With: Othman Lazraq On The Museum Of African Contemporary Art



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President of MACAAL's new museum for contemporary art shares his thoughts on nurturing the next generation of artists from across the African continent, turning Marrakech into an international destination for African art and how art is ultimately a platform for freedom



Othman Lazraq, President of MACAAL



Hicham Benohoud. Untitled from La salle de classe series. 1994-2002. Silver photography on Baryta paper. 50x60cm. Courtesy of the artist

Harper's Bazaar Art: What is the vision of MACAAL?

Othman Lazraq: MACAAL is dedicated to the promotion of [African art](#) through its exhibition and education programmes, which cultivate the interest of a wide audience base, including families and students. The [museum](#) nurtures an understanding of contemporary art from Africa through collecting and exhibiting established and [emerging artists](#), highlighting the creative energy and cultural diversity found across the continent.

[MACAAL](#)'s aim is to turn [Marrakech](#) into an international hub for African art. Our mission is to join forces with other advocates of contemporary African art (institutions, galleries, and curators) in order to create a platform to support and promote art from our continent. I want to work hand-in-hand with other institutions to unify our voices, and build a strong and engaged base. Besides being a universal language, art is a platform for freedom where there are no boundaries. Creating a large network in [Africa](#) can help the next generation of artists, critics and curators from the continent to develop and make their initiatives durable. For now, my team and I are identifying the different players who can help us achieve this vision.

HBA: You open with two exhibitions: *Africa Is No Island* and a semi-permanent exhibition comprising the Fondation Alliances' general collection. What made you decide to open with a photography exhibition?

OL: I've always loved [photography](#), and this has particularly flourished since my first encounter with my friend Leila Alaoui, the [Moroccan](#) photographer who died in 2016 from injuries during the terrorist attack in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

My love of photography has led to me co-found the LCC Program (La Chambre Claire) with Meriem Berrada, the Head of Cultural Projects at Fondation Alliances. Launched in 2013, La Chambre Claire is a bi-annual award that seeks to promote emerging contemporary photography in Africa.

There are some really amazing photographers working on the [African](#) continent and in the diaspora. The medium has an amazing way of capturing the various African cultures and personal stories of the artists themselves. For me, photography is the art of my generation, and that's why it was so important for me to open with a [photography](#) show at MACAAL.

HBA: How did you select the artworks on display in *Africa Is No Island*?

The exhibition's curators, Jeanne Mercier, Baptiste de Ville d'Avray (Co-Founders of Afrique in Visu) and Madeleine de Colnet (Associate Curator), have selected [artists](#) who have previously shown on their platform as well as those from within MACAAL's collection.

Each work was selected based on three themes that highlight the complexity and diversity of Africa. As suggested in the exhibition's title, *Africa Is No Island*, the varying identities and nationalities displayed, place [Moroccan](#) art within the wider context of the African continent, and highlight the diverse cultural exchange between countries.

HBA: North Africa and Sub-Saharan African are often seen as vastly different regions on a cultural and historical level. How will MACAAL aim to represent the entirety of the African continent through art at the museum?

OL: MACAAL showcases art from Morocco and its neighbouring countries across a range of media. The museum will focus on artists who engage in a dialogue with the continent, not only Moroccan artists. Having said that, as a Moroccan museum and a Moroccan collector myself, we are of course especially interested in showing and promoting the work of artists from my country.

HBA: How will the contemporary art interact/be displayed/positioned alongside works from you and your father, Alami Lazraq's, collection?

OL: MACAAL's [exhibition](#) programme is a great tool to show how the individual pieces are linked and work together as a collection. For example, Essentiel Paysage, our first exhibition at the end of November 2016, brought together a selection of modern and [contemporary](#) African artists, some of whom relay through their art the interdependence of humans, animals and plants. Others provide a critical perspective on the utilisation of natural resources in Africa and denounce their harmful effects. The works came from the Lazraq collection and through international loans. MACAAL collaborated closely with the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 22) on the inaugural exhibition. The upcoming exhibition, *Africa Is No Island*, which opens in February 2018, unites [photographic works](#) from our collection.

The curators of *Africa Is No Island*, Jeanne Mercier, Baptiste de Ville d'Avray (Co-Founders of Afrique in Visu) and Madeleine de Colnet (Associate Curator), have selected artists who have previously shown with their own platform as well as those from within MACAAL's collection.



Joana Choumali. Mme Djeneba. Haabré, la dernière génération. 2013-2014. 90x60cm. Print on Baryta paper. Courtesy of the artist

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HBA: Explain your museum programming. How many exhibitions are you aiming for each year and with what kind of rotation?

OL: Each year, we will have two exhibitions to accompany our permanent collection. The temporary [exhibitions](#) will often include new commissions and curatorial projects in which [artists](#) engage with the context of the museum in a dynamic way. For example, we are running a sound installation alongside the Africa Is No Island exhibition.

HBA: How, for example, do you plan to exhibit emerging African artists with some of the great names from the modern art scene?

OL: We feel it is important to draw connections between the past and present. MACAAL's second exhibition in March 2017, E-Mois, explored the history and development of the museum's collection, as well as how the artworks co-exist with each other. For example, we placed the work of a Moroccan artist called Ahmed Chiha, who is at the start of his career, right in front of pieces by the well-established Tanzanian artist [George Lilanga](#).