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Give us a swirl: How Mohamed Melehi became Morocco's modernist master

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His psychedelic paintings linked the Bauhaus to Islamic art - and brought the radicalism of the late 60s to Morocco. Now, at 82, the world is set to rediscover his vibrant visions



▲ Hard-edge painting ... Untitled, 1975, by Mohamed Melehi. Photograph: Capital D/Barjeel Art Foundation

In 1969, a group of Moroccan artists known as the Casablanca school travelled to Marrakech to stage an exhibition in the streets. The paintings, hung on the city's dusty walls, were a riot of colour and pattern. They owed much to the aesthetic of Bauhaus in Germany or "hard-edge" painting from New York by Frank Stella or Elsworth Kelly; but they also tapped into the long lineage of abstraction in Arabic art. Exposition-Manifeste took place near the city's medina and was intended as a snub to an official "salon" of Moroccan art that was happening at the same time.

"We took a position against the government," recalls Mohamed Melehi, one of the leading artists of the radical new group, now 82. "Our works were in Jemaa el-Fnaa square for a week, exposed to the sun and wind. It was an ideological message about what art could be."



▲ Mohamed Melehi at the street exhibition in Jemaa-el-Fnaa square, Marrakech, in 1969. Photograph: Chabâa family archives

LOFT ART GALLERY CASABLANCA

Like many of his peers, Melehi had spent time abroad. He trained as an artist at the Royal Academy of Arts in Seville, though museums in Rome and New York provided a greater education. In 1962, he received a scholarship to study at Columbia University in New York. His studio there was on the floor below the pop artist Jim Dine. He met Stella and hung out with a fashionable crowd that congregated around the Leo Castelli gallery as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns were getting their first shows.

Until this point, Melehi's work had been austere. A 1960 painting titled Vertical, one of several that will go on show in a new solo exhibition at London's Mosaic Rooms, consists of a thick red line painted in acrylic, slightly curved, stretching from the bottom of the canvas to the top. By the time he left America, however, his work was characterised by a kaleidoscope of colour, as patterns were overlaid on the canvas with a feeling of psychedelic freedom. He started to incorporate wavy parallel lines, a motif he has returned to throughout his career.




▲ Wave motif ... Untitled, 1980, by Mohamed Melehi. Photograph: Courtesy of Loft Gallery

The terms of Melehi's scholarship dictated that international students returned to their home country after their studies. Bound up in cold war diplomacy, his funding was part of a strategy to spread modern American values to the developing world or, as one internal document of the time phrased it, "to unite, to maintain and enlarge the friendly solidarity which united or should unite all civilised beings".

Back home, eight years after independence, Melehi found Morocco in a state of emergency as King Hassan II hung on to power. "The political atmosphere was very tense. People were trying to claim their freedom and their right to live in democracy." He felt art had a role to play in this. It also provided a safe way of protest. "The authorities did not see the link between art and politics."

Melehi, with fellow innovators Farid Belkahia and Mohammed Chabâa, sought to develop a modernism that did not simply parrot the western aesthetics they had seen abroad, but was ingrained and owed as much to the local culture. In America, Melehi had been included in the 1963 exhibition Hard Edge and Geometric Painting and Sculpture at MoMA. "Hard-edge painting made me rediscover the abstraction inherent in Islamic art," he says. "Moroccan art was always hard edge." Taking a teaching post at the art school in Casablanca, where Belkahia was director, Melehi encouraged his students to go on field trips to study Berber crafts and architecture. "My question was, what could we find in Morocco that was an expression of modernism?"

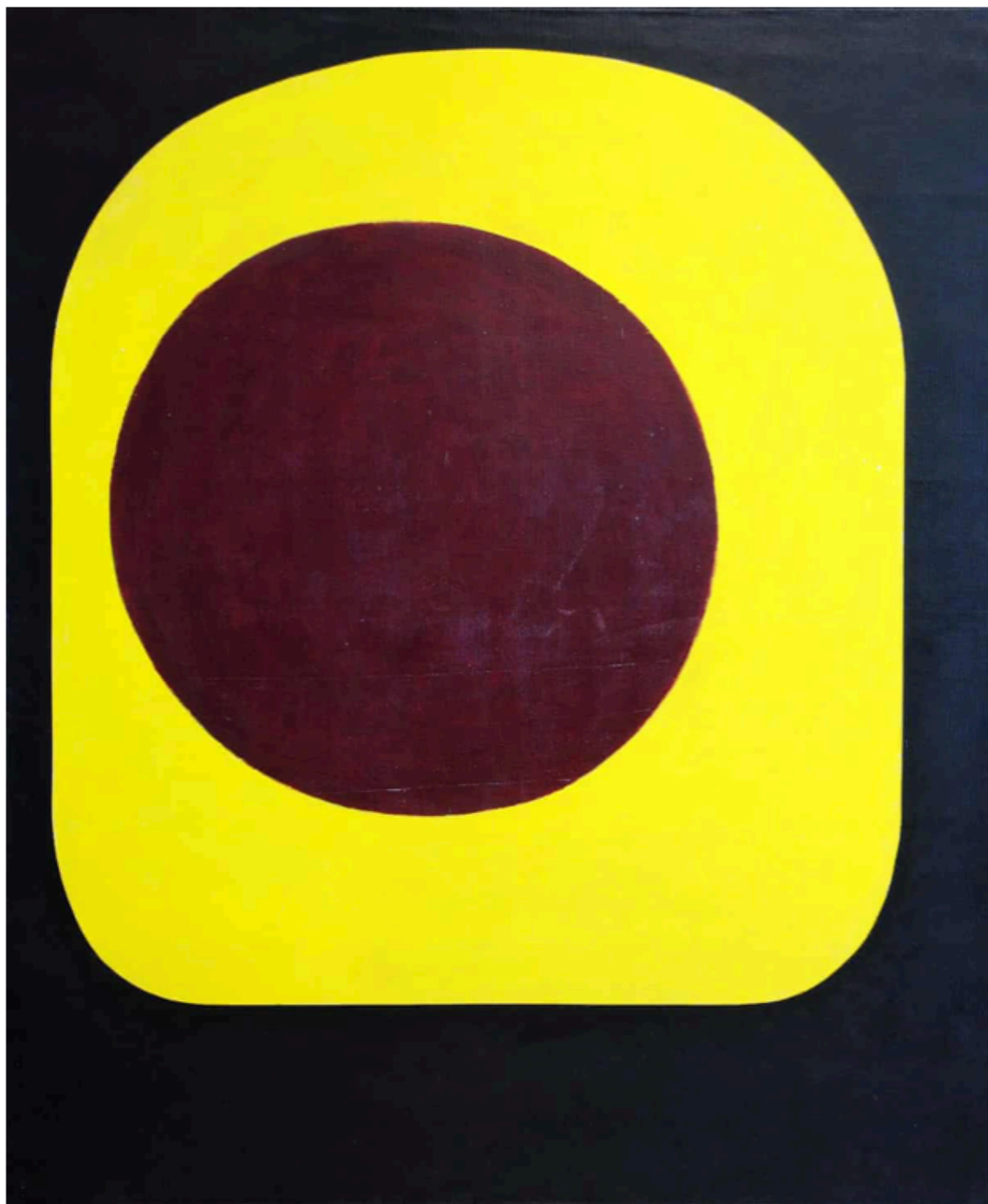


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▲ Moroccan modernism ... Solar Nostalgia, 1962, by Mohamed Melehi. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

Belkahia turned to the craft traditions of the medina, using natural dyes painted on to calf skin. Chabâa undertook several mural commissions, often incorporating Arabic calligraphy. In the 1970s, Melehi became transfixed by the political significance of using car paint instead of his usual acrylic: “I wanted to use materials that weren’t removed from the working classes.” Strikes and riots were spreading across the country to protest against the brutal autocracy of Hassan. “I started to use cellulose paint in solidarity.”

The artist came to the attention of communist poet and activist [Abdellatif Laâbi](#) who, in 1966, founded [Souffles](#), a radical journal which became a beacon of leftist action. Melehi was the designer. His first cover was emblazoned with a black sun, the masthead written in a futuristic sans serif typeface. A 1969 issue championed Palestinian resistance and issue 19 featured Malcolm X on the cover. By 1972, the quarterly magazine was banned, however, and Laâbi was imprisoned and tortured.

Melehi continued to work outdoors, seeking an audience away from the rarefied confines of the museum. He started to paint on wood and undertook several collaborations with architects seeking to create “postcolonial architecture”. His paintings have long entertained a small group of scholars, yet, more importantly, with his joyful palette and confident patterns, the artist sought as wide an audience as possible. It is the sensuousness of his work, and the easy manner in which it straddles modernity and tradition, that still proves radical.

- **New Waves: Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School** is at the [Mosaic Rooms, London](#), until 22 June.