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Visual art in North Africa and the modernity's historicist identification

Preliminary remarks

1-The North Africa concept

The North Africa concept as we know, indicates the region which includes Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt to differentiate it from sub-Saharan Africa. The referent is the name Africa, old name of the area of Carthage, area of the Berber (Amazighen)

The concept connected to North Africa is the Maghreb but without Egypt. Its meaning is the distinction with the Middle-East. Its referent is the machraq of the Arab world. Culturally, there is a real exchange in the Maghreb which has a common language: Arabic and a second language of colonial culture, French. The Berber languages are rehabilitated currently and the Berber culture also appears in the artistic productions.

2- Actual regional exchange regarding art in the Maghreb

After independences (end of the Fifties, beginning of the Sixties), the regional relations as regards art were especially between Mediterranean Europe, in particular France and each Maghreb country. For a few decades, the relations of artistic exchange have taken place between the Maghreb countries and also some country of the Middle-East. This is due to art festivals and biennials like those of Cairo and of Beirut and to the initiatives of Associations, artists and art schools.

3- Problems of visual arts in the Maghreb

Visual arts of the Maghreb have the same main trends : after the Sixties, there were a abstractionists movement with patrimonial elements, then as from the Eighties, there were a new figuration and these last years, the practices of installation of video and photographs of art expand.

The problems encountered by the artists and museums at work are often the same ones in the Maghreb countries, because of the colonial history and the institutional structures :

- Difficulties of financing for artist's projects and exhibitions
- No real promotion through the media
- The weakness of the structures for art criticism
- The absence of a real market of art
- Requirements of the international market
- How to have more public space for exhibitions
- Recognition of the creation by a larger audience
- How to reach the networks of the international market

I - Misunderstandings and interpretation of modernity

One of the problems encountered concerning the art of our area is the ignorance of the conditions and the history of the visual artistic practice. They are in particular misunderstandings based on prejudices such as the iconoclasm and interpretation starting from the categories of the European art's history.

Modernity's historicist identification, which arose in a European region, catches all visual arts, formally and in their representation in North Africa. It derives from an hypothesis that provokes a few misapprehensions whose impact can be felt within both the perceptions and the intentions of contemporary artists.

Indeed, modes of periodisation (timings) qualifying the practices as modernist, postmodernist or contemporary function within the representations as full categories from which one can legitimately recognize and judge the works. Yet, these notions themselves, and the notion of modernity in particular, when artistic and above all visual productions are concerned, are debatable. The confusion between the historicist and progressive notion of modernity and its aesthetic conception of emancipation or rupture of mimetic figuration poses a problem. How to judge an artistic work in its currency in relation to a value whose foundation is the interpretation of a movement specific to a given period and region?

In a non-European context, like our context, with regard to what we have agreed to call visual arts, this normativity, which is external to the aesthetic-historical reality, becomes, by an internalization process, a source of misapprehension running from the art critic and the orientations of some artistic approaches to the criteria of the art market.

To throw some light on this aspect, I will consider the mistakes made within current aesthetic perceptions in North Africa and notably in Tunisia.

The misconception results in separating the arts from *collective* experience and from the cultural base from which they emerge.

Modernitarism is going to extend a historicist acceptance in its dimension of progressive model in the cultural domains. The phenomenon of postmodernism, which characterizes contemporary art, is one of the consequences of the crisis of this model which has upheld aesthetic distinction as art's historical moment.

However, despite the decompartmentalisation of genres, forms and their hybridization, the *novelty* and originality of works are still persistent tenacious criteria, like permanent marks of modernity.

In so-called emergent societies as Tunisia, this modernity is still experienced today in its postcolonial form, ideologically and esthetically. Its action at the *level* of aesthetic judgment remains, by this token, decisive in relation to the erroneous way that artistic *movements* and figures are identified. The perception of visual approaches in North Africa is an eloquent example.

II - *Abstraction and modernity*

Identifying non-figurative works as a *relevant* approach to modernity or identifying works like installations as a contemporary artistic form is still the interpretation actually used in our region. For example in Tunisia from the 1960 s onwards, new abstractionist pictorial approaches have appeared. They have been supported by an aesthetico-ideological discourse calling for a demarcation from the figurative and treating it as retrogressive.



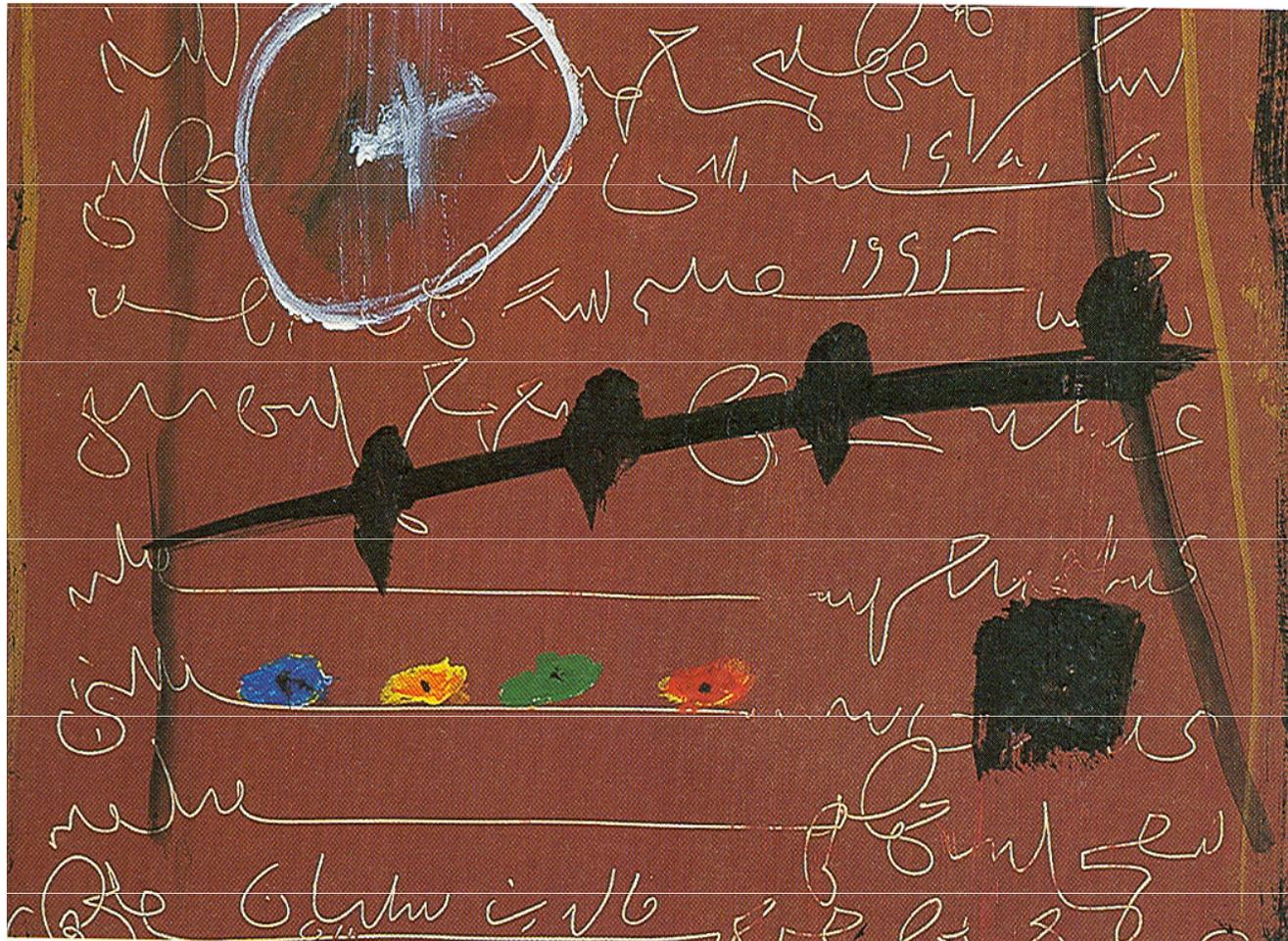
64. Yahia Turki, *Henné*, huile sur toile, 78x109 cm, signé et daté, en bas à gauche en arabe, "Yahia 1926", en bas à droite en français, collection privée.

Yahia Turki, « *Henné* », oil on canvas, 78/109 cm, 1926.

The grievances were, of course, about representation as continuity of orientalist colonial legacies but, above all, about figuration as an old-fashioned form of pictoriality.

It is a question of artists concerned about redefining their relationship to painting and about positioning them-selves in a coherent way within a practice that they consider as still bearing the fundamental attributes of an old-fashioned mimetic colonial art. The criticisms were of course motivated by the concern of redefining a practice inherited from colonization, notably with its gaze, exogenous. The argument, however, was based on the accusation that a mode of representation that remains figurative is, in formal terms, backward. This reproach stems from a double misunderstanding: on the one hand.

It is part of the European ideology of modernity itself with its both progressivist and aesthetic conception which gave a derogatory appreciation of figuration; on the other hand, it rests on the idea that formalism and abstractionism are a mode of emancipation paradoxically legitimized by a predominantly non-figurative patrimonial past. That is why the debate crystallized at the time around the specificity of "painting as a Tunisian" in a language that is both different and with a patrimonial reference, when reference was aesthetically European.



Khaled Ben Slimane, "Composition", Oil on paper.

The problem, worth being specified, is that these events have not been provoked by demands from a public who, in fact, have been scarce, even totally indifferent to pictorial action. Nor were the events provoked by a potential iconoclasm which would have rendered painting aesthetically inoperable. Western figurative painting's introduction and development as well as its prize in charge by Tunisian artists have not met with any resistance or generated any hos-tile reactions referring to a categorical iconoclasm.

The new abstractionistic trends account more for the difficulty of finding common bases for a re-engagement of the cultural space. Abstractionist artists' enterprise has, since the 1960, been caught in an aporia inherent to its specificity and historicity. If the West particularly European art itself invented the abstractionistic approach after a long figurative period, the misapprehension in question doesn't concern as much the approach as the discourse on Tunisian contemporary painting and stays on the very ambiguity of the referents.

On the one hand, as Najib Belkohdja the leader of abstractionism in Tunisia said : the artists refer to Mondrian, Delauney and Klee's abstractionism as a pure aesthetic form; on the other hand, they draw on the plasticity of the calligraphic sign and on modules of traditional decorations in order to “paint as a Tunisian”.



Abstraction 1961, 32x24 cm, Huile sur toile. C. A.

Najib Belkhodja,
Abstraction, Oil on canvas,
22/24 cm, 1961.

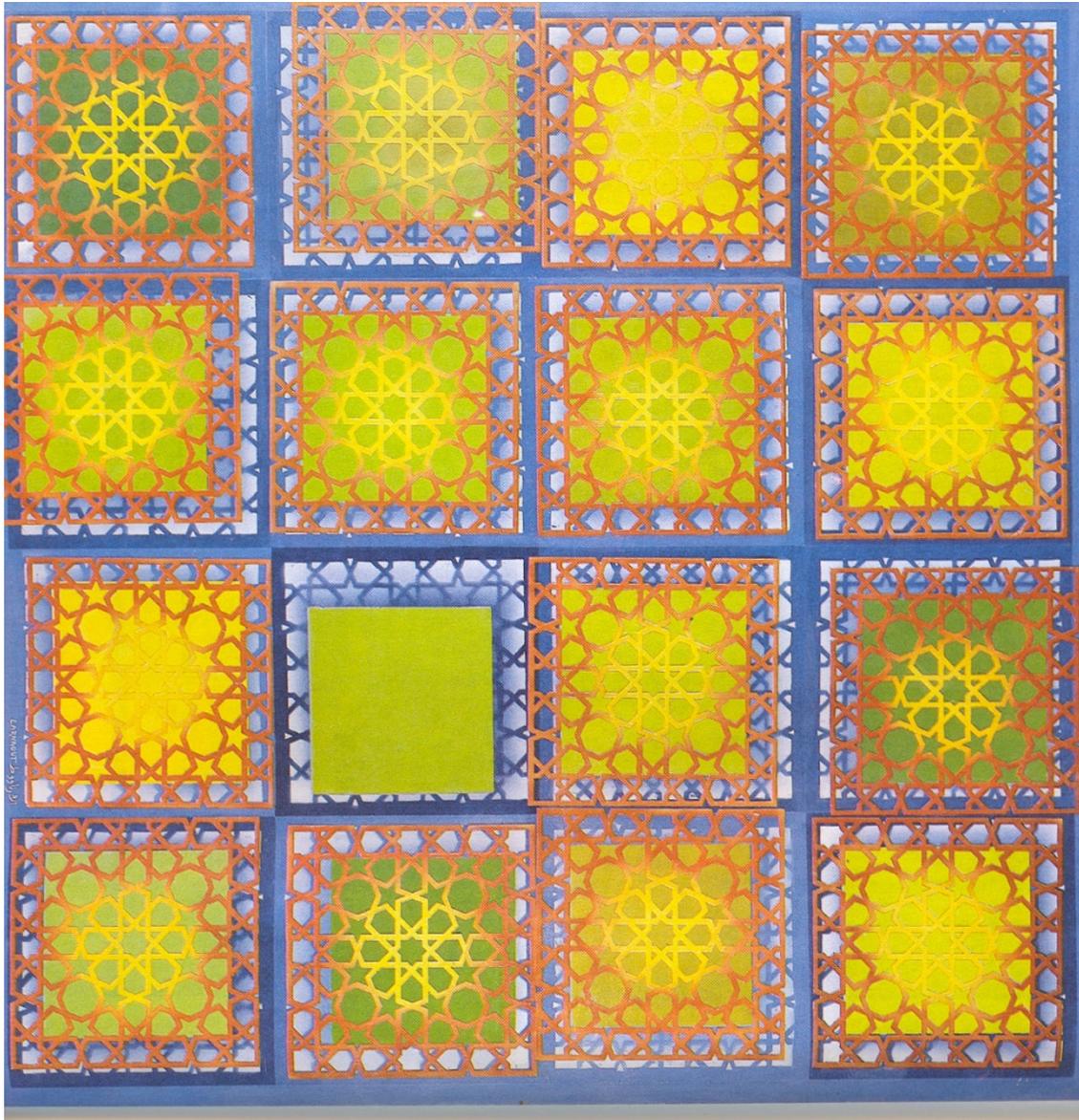


Najib Belkhouja, "*Nocturne*", Oil on canvas, 117/91 cm, 1980.

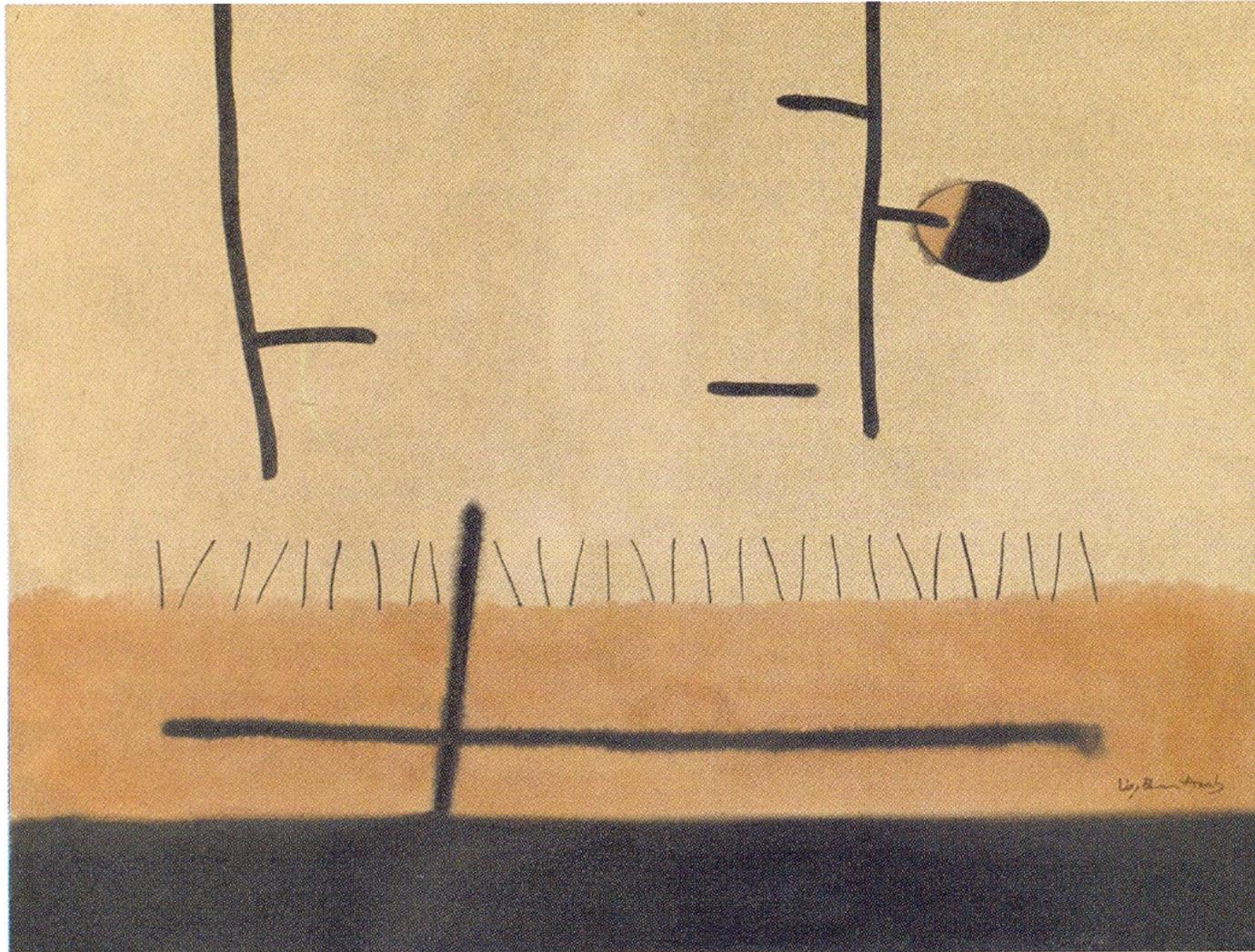
A consequence of this certainty of the abstraction's modernity as emancipation gave authority to this trend during several decades. It is however important here to distinguish the artists' declared intention backed by critical discourse from the content of the artistic work itself. Their work still retains all its creative strength as a result, one might say, of its references' aporia. However problematic they may be, the confusions between abstraction and modernity, between identity and patrimonial symbols art/Western art also constitute a motive for the creation of new visual forms within the overflow of extra-pictorial meanings traditionally granted to patrimonial forms. This explains the diversity and originality of local abstractionistic approaches.



Nja Mahdaoui, engraving, 1994.



Lotfi Larnaout,
Oil on canvas, 109/109 cm,
Watering, 1978.



Ridha Ben Arab, Technique mixte sur papier, 74/56 cm, 2004.



Amna Zghal, Shingles, ink , 25,5"40" cm, 2004.

III - Contemporaneousness and globalization

Today, the advent of the still tentative practice of installations is going through the same misapprehensions and questionings inherent in the postcolonial and postmodern situation of artists in our region. In Europe, the use of installations in public spaces is often an act of protest and unveiling, which breaks from the autonomy of the aesthetically important work. In our region, such a practice is still doomed to the same type of exhibition as pictorial works, probably because it is not endowed with a public space of the same nature, that is, capable of granting them a place and a meaning.

That is why contemporary art is even more ill at ease with performative public installations than with those which stage the artist's personal and intimate story. It is not by chance that some artists visual young women adopt, by video-art and photo-installation, this intimist and biographical approach to which a well-informed public is starting to adhere, despite the marginality of reception and exhibition venues.



Faten Chouba, Installation, Menses, 2002.



Amel Bouslama, *“From Courbet to Masson and to my doll”*, installation, 2005.



Dalal Tangour,
Multimedia Installation,
“the oblogcheck”, 2006.



Meriem Bouderbala, Photo-installation, 2006.

Many young artists desert painting for installation or video art to be in touch in new European art market. We can say that the misunderstanding generated by the avant-garde and aesthetic axiological dimension within the idea of modernity constitute a phenomenon brought about by the postcolonial situation of visual arts in our societies. However, the misunderstanding, which they can cause about the interpretation of the approaches or even about the stated intentions of some artists, only occasionally, alters the nature of the work. Apart from the mimesis of certain works which annihilate themselves with time, confronting cultural contradictions and cross-cultural meetings also constitute a ferment for remarkable creativity. The misapprehension is the sign of discomfort which, in the long run, calls for an awareness of its location in the field of creation. It will enable to rethink concept of Modernity.

IV - Multiple modernities

By the development of the communication, the globalization allowed the recognition of world cultural diversity. It put an end to a unique thought and the domination of only one way of modernity. In spite of the tendency to the standardization of the contemporary art's practices, we cannot speak any more about only a unique modernity. This one is not only a rupture with the patrimonies and the local cultures. It is not necessarily an importation of values come from economically developed countries. It can be conceived as an innovation stemming from the local culture strengthened by the contacts with other cultures and other creations.

That gives place to the idea of cultural mutation which preserves the tradition's elements to direct them towards new forms. Modernity can be lived in a different way according to cultures. However, there are several modernities which are not related to only one period and which in common have a certain number of values: the adaptation to modern sciences and new technologies, the respect of human rights, the freedom of creation.