Project MUSE - Farid Belkahia: Eroticism in Malhoun

FARID BELKAHIA Eroticism in Malhoun Rajae Benchemsi Introduction by Salah Hassan Farid Belkahia's creative achievements and active personal interventions have transformed the modern art movement in Morocco since the early 1960s. He is among the pioneers who developed a new visual vocabulary of iconography, symbolism and technique. He grew up at a time when the struggle for national independence was at its peak and the intellectual ferment, which accompanied it, was enormous. Belkahia, born in 1934 in Marrakech, studied at the Ecole des Beaux-arts in Paris from 1955 to 1959, at the Theatre Institute in Prague until 1962 and later, in 1965, at the Academy Brera in Milan, Italy. Between 1962 and 1974 he became the director of the Ecole de Beaux-arts in Casablanca, where he continues to work and live. Upon his return to Morocco from Prague in 1962, Belkahia and other artists like Mohammed Melehi, Gharbaoui, and Cherkaoui rebelled against the structural anachronisms and provincial character of the art scene. Responding to the local situation , this group of artists promoted a new movement at the Ecole des Beaux-arts (the School of Fine Art) under the directorship of Belkahia. This movement saw itself as the artistic conscience of the i m time. It criticized the politics of dependency on foreign cultural missions, at that time the patrons of Moroccan modern art. Together with his colleagues, Belkahia organized independent exhibitions and initiated a debate on the theory and practice of art education in Morocco. At the Ecole de Beaux-arts in Casablanca, Belkahia worked very hard to liberalize the syllabus and the teaching system in the school, sparing his students the rigidity of the methods he had experienced in France. It is to his credit that Belkahia initiated serious research, which drew attention to the potent modernity of traditional and popular art. He set up workshops at the School on the history and practice of Moroccan traditional crafts, such as weaving, carpet

and rug-making, gold or silver jewelry, and pottery. Belkahia experimented with red and yellow copper, which he regards as sacred material. He started with copper leaf, which he folds or hammers and mounts on wood. Molded copper, as opposed to sculpted F a r i d B e l k a h i a , Main, 1980, H e n n e sur p e a u , 152 x 124.5 c m . 8 0 • Nka Journal of C o n t e m p o r a r y African Art metal, allowed him to break from the traditional square and rectangle , creating dynamic forms charged with unlimited energy. Belkahia's endeavors were motivated by his keen interest in memory, which plays a central role in his creative process. He claims, "It is only through our past that we can accede to modernity . I know of no ahistorical modernity." It was in this spirit that he organized the first street exhibition, setting out works in a public place, as he did in Marrakech in 1969 in the Fana'a Mosque Square as an experiment intended to transcend art as an elitist practice isolated from mundane social activities. The popular success of the experiment made the Moroccan authorities suspicious of its intent and reluctant to allow more such displays. Belkahia went further; he questioned the dominant artistic forms, their origins and aesthetic sources. In that spirit, Belkahia stopped painting with oil on canvas or paper and started to experiment with traditional Moroccan materials like copper, lambskin, henna, saffron and other local and natural dyes, which have become central to his creative expression and identity as an artist. Since 1975 Belkahia has been drawn to skin because of the range of possibilities it allows him and the challenges it poses for him as an artist. He argues that it is close symbolically to the body and the sacred. Used raw, washed, treated, and dried in a shade, lamb skin can only be dyed with a natural pigment like henna, which gives a range of colors from the reds and browns to the dark browns—all of which he regards as close to the earth and its colors. Belkahia's techniques evoke traditional ones, such as...