

6th February 2015

Néjib Belkhodja | Postmodernist from Tunisia



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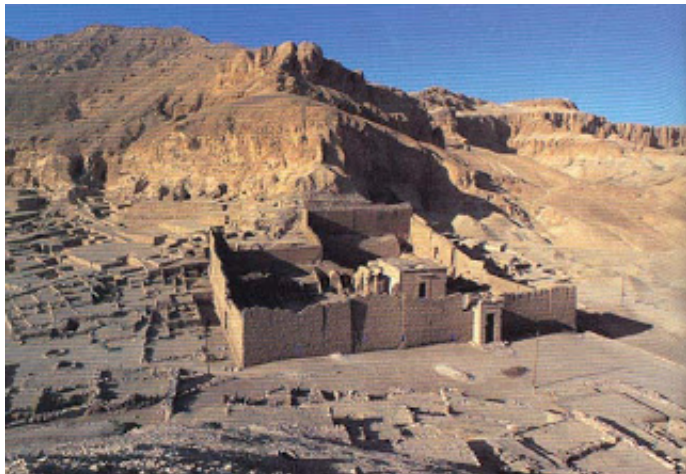
Néjib Belkhodja | 1933 - 2007 [<http://nejibbelkhodja.blogspot.co.uk/2007/08/1933-1956.html>]

Néjib Belkhodja was born in 1933 in the Capital, Tunis. He was the son of a Dutch Opera singer who had performed at the Paris Opera House and a Tunisian aristocrat. The family lived in the Medina in Tunis, which at the time was the heartbeat of all North African cities. The Medina, for those that don't know, is a walled city within a city. It was where the rich and influential used to live.

The Most Famous Median is Deir El Medina and here are some images.



[http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_9NobWiz-2G4/RrpH70TApl/AAAAAAAAABY/m8FGsV1E8Rc/s1600-h/Deir_el_Medina.jpg]



[http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_9NobWiz-2G4/RrpIJETAql/AAAAAAAAABg/dv3EJOY2EO8/s1600-h/Deir_el-Medina.jpg] His father died when he was 3 years old, leaving his blonde-haired Dutch mother with 2 children, Néjib and sister, in the centre of Tunis. His mother had spoken extensively with her husband about bringing their children up as Muslims in Tunisia. They had spoken about what school the children would attend and what careers they might have. Although Néjib mother was from a good family back in Holland she kept to her word and brought her children up in Tunisia. Later she converted to Islam.

Whilst growing up with his sister in the narrow streets of the Medina his life was never dull. He was unlike the other boys in Tunis, in regards to his looks and not having a father he was bullied terribly at school. Najet, his widow, recalls how he would go to school and be beaten, come home and then beaten up again. He was no coward and would, with a stiff upper lip return to school the following day only to be beaten again. He was so fearless the boys eventually learnt to respect him and his amazing resolve. This tough character building experience was to shape his tenacious personality in the future. He was not the only person in the family to be bullied. His mother was referred to by the Tunisian side of the family as simply, "The Stranger" and Nejjib and his sister as, "the Son and Daughter of The Stranger"...his up-bringing was far from easy but his mother was strong and determined and these important characteristics rubbed off on him and aided him throughout his adult life. The genuine feeling of loss for his father was something that repeatedly affected him and returned again and again throughout his life even when he was in his seventies.

He studied at the School of Fine Arts, Les Beaux Arts in Tunis and had his first exhibition at the age of 23. In the 1960's he left for Rome and Paris where he became absorbed in the works of the French artist, Robert Delaunay and the Russian artist, Wassily Kandinsky. In Paris, he took part in the three consecutive biennial exhibitions in 1965, 1967 and 1969. Before leaving for Europe he had been awarded the Tunis Municipal Prize at the Salon International in 1956. This had given him great confidence in venturing out further afield. In 1964 he was again awarded the gold medal in Milan, Italy and again in Egypt in 1968.

Le Ciel Etait Rouge | 1991 [http://nejibbelkhodja.blogspot.co.uk/2007/08/1991_08.html]

I arrived in Tunis at 23.30 on June 12th 2007 and was met by Najet, Néjib's wife and a beautiful young woman called Nadia. The energy around the house was surprisingly superb. So much love for this brilliant man. I was and still am shocked that the western world knows so little about the history and works of this great man. Allow me to introduce you to him via his Masterpiece about the first Iraqi War in 1991, *Le ciel était rouge*, 91. The red sky. Najet told me that whilst Néjib was painting this Masterpiece he had a nightmare. He spent months trying to work out the right colour for the central space. He tried out numerous ideas and the nightmare was that if the central space was any other colour than white then the walls would crumble and fall. So sensitive was Néjib about his art that he would wake in morning and tell Najet he was busy opening doors and later in the evening he told her he was busy closing windows. He really was the door opener and the window closer and in this time of trouble over Iraq no other man could have given the world such a clear and sensitive message. *The Red Sky*.

I read from his collection of books in his front room and was introduced to the Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda who was an inspiration to Nejib throughout his life. This painting will mean so much to you if you see it through the words of Neruda.



[http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_9NobWiz-

2G4/Rrpd0kTAIsI/AAAAAAAAABw/EvAAX6_OcxY/s1600-h/The+Red+Sky.1.jpg

In Spite of Wrath

Corroded helmets, dead horseshoes!

But through the fire and the horseshoe
as from a wellspring illuminated
by murky blood,
along with the metal thrust home in the holocaust
a light fell over the earth:
number, name, line and structure

Pages of water, clear power
of murmuring tongues, sweet drops
worked like clusters,
platinum syllables in the tenderness
of dew-streaked breasts,
and a classic diamond mouth
gave its snowy brilliance to the land

In the distance the statue asserted
its dead marble,
and in the spring
of the world, machinery dawned.

Technique erected its dominion
and time became speed and a flash
on the banner of the merchants.
Moon of geography
that discovered plant and planet
extending geometric beauty
in its unfolding movement.
Asia handed up its virginal scent.
Intelligence, with a frozen thread,
followed behind blood, spinning out the day.
The paper called for the distribution of the naked honey
kept in the darkness.

A pigeon-house
flight was flushed from the painting
in sunset-cloud-red and ultramarine blue.
And the tongues of men were joined
in the first wrath, before song.

Thus; with the sanguinary
titan of stone,
infuriated falcon,

came not blood but wheat.

Light came despite the daggers.

Taken from "Selected Poems" by Pablo Neruda

Also I would like to include the quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.

"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant."

[Demantelment 1992 \[http://nejibbelkhodja.blogspot.co.uk/2007/08/1992.html\]](http://nejibbelkhodja.blogspot.co.uk/2007/08/1992.html)



[http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_9NobWiz-

2G4/RrpWBUTArI/AAAAAAAAABo/3vmYBaCDt5g/s1600-h/Demantelement.1992.jpg

Demantelment | 1992

This is one of series of images that Néjib produced on the theme of Demantlement. The home he lived in with Najet, his wife, is full of books, especially revolutionary poetry. If I may be so bold I thought that this painting would go extremely well with a poet that Néjib Belkhodja had an interest in. The poet is from Tunisia and died at 23, his name is Abu-l-Qasim Al-Shabbi. His book of poetry, Songs of Life, has recently been translated into English and I would like to share with you a poem he wrote about Tunisia. I'm sure that this poem sounds much better in Arabic but this is the English version.

Beautiful Tunisia

I do not weep because night
is a tyrant
nor because destruction reigns
in the countryside.
I weep instead for the heavy calamity
now afflicting us
without relief.
Whenever a leader rises in the country,
vigorous with reform,
yearning to awaken his people,
they garb him in a shirt that curbs his intent.
They stifle his heavenly voice
and murder his music.
Never receptive, they prefer to follow
the ways of tyranny and coercion,
because those are the roads they know.
This is what happens to ones who are sincere!
Death shots are aimed at them easily.
Lo! Calamities have taken hold of us,
they have annihilated our land.

Beautiful Tunisia! I ride the crest of the waves
in my love for you,
My love for you is my covenant -
I have known its bittersweet taste
I'll never yield to the wayward winds
even if I should die,
even if I lose my youth.
I'll never yield, even if they spill

my blood.

The blood of lovers is always game for spilling.

The days, no matter how long,

will show you how true my love is,

will speel out my loyalty in a clear voice.

This is the age of darkness, but I've seen

morning rising behind it.

No matter what time has done to my people's

glory, life will spread your glorious

mantle once again.

Author: Abu-L-Qasim Al-Shabbi | Songs of Life | 1909-1934

Translated by Lena Jayyusi and Naomi Shihab Nye



[<http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-yZycgPUCUP0/VNRrlhnx5QI/AAAAAAAAABsw/0G8zPRKjR80/s1600/Ken.jpg>]

Ken by Nejjib Belkhodja



[http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-FJoLoNz8FqM/VNR1fMmikWI/AAAAAAAAABtA/NaR-I27vO9A/s1600/village-ken_81.jpg]

The Village of Ken in Tunisia

Here is to Friendship my friends. Would you build me a Village if I drew it? These are the two men I admire the most. Nejib Belkhodja and Slah Smaoui, the architect. They built a Village in Tunisia, it's called Ken. Ken is Arabic and means Once Upon a Time.

Take a look at what these two great men have created: [Village of Ken](http://www.villageken.com.tn/) [<http://www.villageken.com.tn/>]

They wanted to build a Village for artists from all over the world. A beacon for the creative. To give artists the space in which to grow. The Village is free for the artist but he/she must donate an artwork for the Village before they leave. This is a real Village of Dreams built by Dreamers.

Please note that Nejib drew the plans for Ken through his artwork and his friend Slah believed in him so much he went ahead and built the idea. Using only the natural materials from Tunisia and over 20 years Slah has built a Village of Dreams..The interior echos the work of Belkhodja and you can see the D in his work clearly. The steps echo those within the artwork and cannot not be found in traditional Tunisian architecture. This is unique, revolutionary and a celebration of friendship, trust and newness. This is a place that all of us can go to. It restores our faith in humanity.

Love, friendship, art and architecture flow through this Village like water.

This week Slah will be pottering around his Village building his Botanical Garden with all the tropical plants that are found in North Africa. Utopia existing. It's in Tunisia and it's called Ken, Once Upon a Time. I salute you and thank you and I am forever grateful to you both for giving us all some hope.

The Village of Ken | Once Upon A Time

The Village is open to all types of art, from fashion, weaving, pottery, poetry and furniture. The Village even has it's own theatre for the playwrights. In all it creates, produces and manufactures it is trying at all times to find a shape, a style that is typical to the Independent Nation of Tunisia. The poet and the writer with their voices and the artist with his pen. The fashion designer is also called upon and is vital to the new shaping of the Nation.

Liberty of a proud Nation can be built through Creativity. Division can be United under a Movement of Creativity. What Nejib and Slah were trying to create and develop was a unique style for the country. To be like the Founding Fathers of any new Nation and create a Movement of Art. Using Art/Music/Design and Poetry as the driving force that defined the New Nation.

The Botanical Gardens at the Village of Ken | Once Upon A Time.

Nejib and Slah between them have both had a healthy fascination with wildlife. The aspect of botany comes into Nejib's work and the botanical garden and the olive groves are just an extension of Slah impressive architecture masterpiece. The climate in Tunisia lends itself wonderfully to nurture both Mediterranean and tropical plants. Slah is eager to build a collection of varied and exciting herbs, colourful flowers and cacti to compliment the orange, lemon and olive groves. The olive trees are just over four years old, not quite ready for pressing but the smell in the garden is delicious. The large makeshift greenhouses are filling up nicely and the colours are dazzling. Within the coming months and years the garden will begin to flourish and I am sure become a beacon for excellence the world over. Butterflies are sure to flock in their thousands. This Village is beginning to have a life all of it's own and after 20 years of commitment and hardwork the Village is beginning to reap the rewards of the seeds sown. The phrase, "You reap what you sow", could not be more appropriate for these two men and their wives, who for over 20 years, have built a world within a world and called it Modern Tunisia. Between them they have reintroduced the Independent Nation of Tunisia to geometry, mathematics, architecture, abstract art, music, calligraphy, modern furniture making, pottery, weaving, poetry, plays and horticulture giving Modern Tunisia a genuine sense of direction and an identity like no other African Independent Nation. We can all learn so much from the enormous sacrifices, struggles and efforts these great men and their wives have shown their beloved Independent Nation of Tunisia. We statue you all from all four corners of the globe. Thank you all for giving the world back a sense of humanity.

Village of Ken

Here is the magical village build by two Great men from Tunisia. The artist Nejib Belkhodja and the architect Slah Smaoui. Nejib died earlier this year but his legacy will last forever. He started an artistic movement in North Africa and his work focus' on the African Medina. Together these two men built a village for the African Abstract Movement to take place. This Village is a must know for those interested in Contemporary Africa. Nejib was a genius and used art as a driving force to create an identity for his Independent African Nation. He introduced Abstract Art to Africa and the Continent and those interested in the Continent should know his name.

The Village is called Ken, which means Once Upon A Time.

If those interested in Art and Africa go and stay in the Village of Ken | Once Upon A Time it will restore your faith in humanity.

Here is the Address:

Slah and Noura Smaoui

Village "KEN"

Route de Sousse, Km 82 - BP No 5

4010 Sidi-Khifa (Bouficha)

Tunisia

Tel: +216 3 252 110

Fax: +216 3 252 112

Web: www.villageken.com.tn [<http://www.villageken.com.tn/>]

[Néjib Belkhodja Dies in May 2007 \[http://nejibbelkhodja.blogspot.co.uk/2007/08/nejib-belkhodja-dies-in-may-2007.html\]](http://nejibbelkhodja.blogspot.co.uk/2007/08/nejib-belkhodja-dies-in-may-2007.html)



[\[http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_9NobWiz-2G4/RrpCM0TAIol/AAAAAAAAABQ/E7IZHZarT38/s1600-h/Medina.2003.jpg\]](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_9NobWiz-2G4/RrpCM0TAIol/AAAAAAAAABQ/E7IZHZarT38/s1600-h/Medina.2003.jpg)

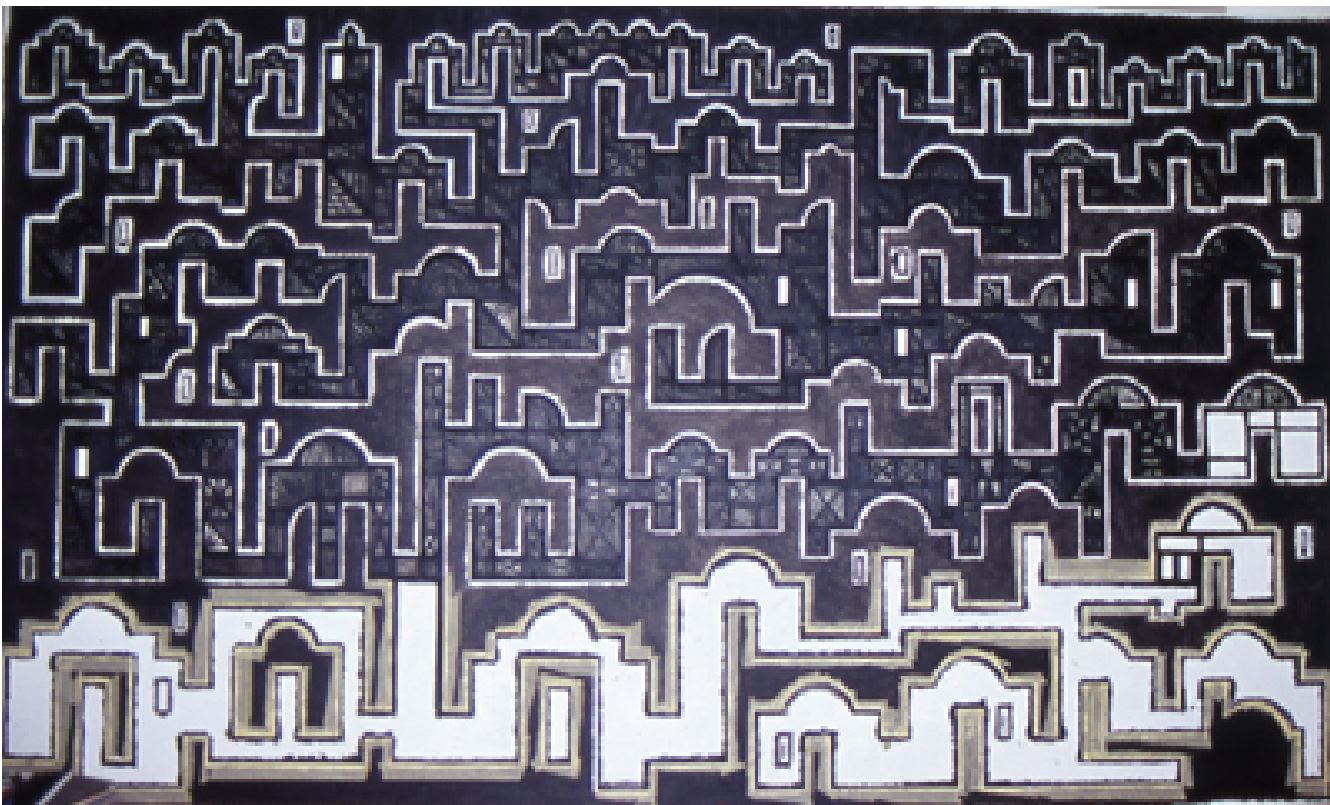
This is merely a whisper being sent out to the world about the genius of the late, great Néjib Belkhodja. He lived amongst us for seventy-four years and consumed life and lived like so few. He had integrity, something that is lacking in the world today. He set such high standards for himself and others around him. He was the man to teach the world about the power of art and the way in which we should conduct ourselves in our lives. It is difficult to put into words the importance of this man. He lived an outspoken existence with courage and conviction. The word Prophet is a word that best describes the giant that is, Néjib Belkhodja. During his lifetime he was a Nation builder and a world guide. He was often ignored and marginalised yet still he bore the troubles of his Independent Nation on his shoulders. His work is so important, to see it and understand it will change the way you see yourself and all that is around you. Throughout his life the Leaders were fully aware of the power of Belkhodja; a man who would not be broken by the State or who could not be used as a political toy. He suffered enormously throughout his life, humiliated and disregarded by the Nation. On the 16th June 2007 in the Medina in Tunis I heard such pitiful tributes to a man of such stature who, at the end was honoured by hypocrites. He died virtually penniless and his work is jailed in Banks and Five Star Hotels around his native country of Tunisia. You won't see the work of Belkhodja in any Museum around the world. No. His work is too powerful to be released by his jailers. He sheds light on all the World Leaders. He opens our minds to what is the function and meaning of Art. His work develops Nations and his contribution to the world is beyond compare. His departure from this world has come at just the right time; when the world needs him most. Here is a man, who belongs to us all and in his lifetime has shown us the meaning of generosity. His work introduces us to poets and architecture, to calligraphers and musicians. The subtly within the work is breathtaking and he puts into place the order in which art should be seen,

heard and spoken.

Born in 1933 his mother was Dutch and his father Tunisian. He grew up in the Medina in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, North Africa. For those that don't know what the Medina is, it is the heartbeat of the city, where all the aristocracy resides. It is a walled city within a city, with narrow streets as arteries and huge colourful studded doors, which break up the continuity of the whitewashed wall. The Medina has it's own language, it own specific architecture. The Medina is the untouchable heart of North Africa. The reason Belkhodja chooses to focus his work on the importance of the Medina is that it is the heart of life. It is beyond the control of modern dictatorship. So his work is about the spiritual heartland of the World. The significance of the Medina in Belkhodja's work is constant. For nearly forty years he focused his whole artistic life around the idea of the Medina and his work reads like a biblical message to us all. His work is invincible and belongs to us all, to cage it would be a travesty of justice. I would like the World to stop for just 2 minutes to Honour the Life of Néjib Belkhodja | 1933 – 2007.

Here is a tribute to his beautiful wife, Najet Belkhodja. Without her love and support we would never of had the Nejib that we see today. We want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

The African Medina | Final Work by Nejib Belkhodja
[<http://nejibbelkhodja.blogspot.co.uk/2007/08/african-medina-final-work-by-nejib.html>]



[http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_9NobWiz-2G4/RxepyRdSPqI/AAAAAAAAADM/f-K7PeP6tjI/s1600-h/Nejib.jpg]