

# Creation, Research, Commitment

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It was in Rome that I met Mohammed Chebaa in 1961. At the time, that was how he wrote his name. I admit having some difficulty reprogramming the spelling and pronunciation in Mohammed Chabâa ... But here it is, it's done! So, I got to know Mohammed Chabâa, in Rome, where he was studying, at the Academy of Fine Arts and had found two young artists and friends from Morocco: Mohamed Ataâllah and Mohammed Melehi with whom I was linked from friendship.



## Roman period

In the 1950s to 1960s, the Roman art scene was animated by a great effervescence of trends, groups and meetings between artists from different backgrounds. As the Italian artists of the "Forma Group" wrote in their post-war Manifesto to break with the "mediocre and provincial situation inherited from the fascist national fence ", it was necessary to reconnect with the international avant-garde. But let's give the floor to Chabâa "A new period began for me with my departure for Italy (...) My stay in this country allowed me to come into contact with international painting and to witness the development of the most remarkable movements of this period: socialist Neo-realism (Guttuso), spatial painting (Fontana, Turcato), gestural and sign painting (Kline, De Kooning). It was the latter that impressed me the most (...). The gestural painting, characterized by the exclusive use of black and white, corresponded (...) to the attitudes of protest expressed in my previous works (...). My contacts with the intellectuals and avant-garde artists of Rome made me more sensitive to the various problems posed by the history of art in

general, especially those of its function in society "[2]. Numerous exhibitions – those of the painters of the "Forma Group" or on Mexican Muralism or, as Chabâa recalled, of Guttuso, Franz Klein, De Kooning, as well as the discovery of Picasso and that of Kandinsky, animated many discussions, as much artistic. ideological. The debate between social realism and abstraction was in full swing. On the other hand, the interest shown quite early in Italy for the Bauhaus had been important in the fields of Design, Applied Arts and the integration of the arts into the architectural space. The students and young Italian and foreign artists who studied like Chabâa, at the Academy, orbit this galaxy in full swing. When he found Melehi in Rome, Chabâa had started to frequent Topazia Alliata's "Galleria Trastevere", then an avant-garde crossroads, where Melehi had exhibited. When Chabâa was at one point looking for accommodation, she offered him hospitality in the studio which she made available to artists. It was there, on the 4th floor of Piazza San Callisto 9, that Chabâa had enough space to take canvas and brushes. Influenced, as he recounted, by gestural painting, he first explored the effects of black and white spread on the burlap. These colors "corresponded (...) – he had to write – to my conscience as a rebellious man" [3]. It was an austere and almost primary research that he quickly abandoned as soon as "the color began to return". With color, forms and signs emerged leading him back to this "problematic of space, imagination, plastic values" that he considered constitutive of his work from the start. But – as he later clarified – it was from his Roman experience that "the lyricism and spontaneity of my previous works were subjected to rigorous control" [3]. This is how Chabâa's work progressed, seeking the right plastic expression with self-criticism and fierceness. As he himself wrote again, he had hitherto pursued a "double path": "a certain figuration that I believed necessary for a position taken vis-à-vis socio-human problems (...), but which involved the risk of making me fall into an anecdotal painting (...). This is why, at the same time, I carried out more lyrical research "[4]. Starting from this "double path", Chabâa would develop a

very personal pictorial alchemy. He will succeed after his return to Morocco. In the meantime, in Italy, he had participated in group exhibitions at the "Centro Italo-Arabo" in Rome and among a selection presented by the "Galleria Trastevere", at the "Biennale Internazionale di San Marino".

## **Morocco, 1960s: regrouping, creating, engaging**

I had seen Chabâa again in Morocco during a summer trip to Tangier, where I also found Ataâllah and Melehi. They were all three from what some still called in Morocco "North Zone", and got along very well. Gathered around a glass of tea on the terrace of the Kasbah, we talked about art and our common memories. By sifting through the artistic situation in Morocco, my friends proposed to create a group called "Algebra". There was even talk of a Manifesto about which I had taken notes, trying to synthesize their words. Then everyone resumed their journey and the project remained unfinished. Meanwhile, after having met Farid Belkahia, Melehi had started to teach at the School of Fine Arts in Casablanca. It was 1964. Belkahia, recently director of this institution, needed to surround himself with a new team. He suggested that I join the School as a teacher. I was 23 years old, I had just graduated in art history. Big decision to settle in Morocco! But the time was of fraternal, inter-Mediterranean and futuristic enthusiasm. Melehi immediately introduced Chabâa – who, having returned definitively to Morocco, was working in Rabat – to Belkahia. They got along well and the three of them decided to organize an exhibition on their own, the group's first independent exhibition. We must remember the situation at the time in Morocco – lack of art galleries and adequate spaces, catch-all exhibitions organized by the Ministry or by a national association (the Anba), born recently and quickly contested – for grasp the novelty. The exhibition took place in Rabat in January 1966 in the hall of the Mohammed V National Theater. I had written the presentation text. "A new aesthetic at the National Theater" was the headline "La Vigie Marocaine". The works that Chabâa

exhibited possessed a beautiful force. In no time, he had mastered shapes, features and colors. By stylizing figurative elements against a background of abstract signs and patterns, he had found a solution to the paradigm of "double progress". The exhibition marked the meeting of the three painters with the poets of the emerging review Souffles with whom they formed a great friendship and would collaborate. The first issue of the review was illustrated by their drawings. That of Chabâa returned to the symbolic value of black and white, "colors of revolt": stylized white features (face? Eyes?) Emerged disturbingly, as if crushed by a dark surface. In the same year 1966, Chabâa joined the teaching staff of the School of Fine Arts in Casablanca. He remained there until 1969. Three years of intense work and collaboration in the spirit of renewal which animated this establishment. Importantly, in the decoration workshop of which he took charge, he introduced Arabic calligraphy. The School, which was also to train students in the field of applied arts and advertising, urgently needed it. The analysis and graphic knowledge of Arabic writing also gave free rein, in Chabâa's approach, to exercises in the free interpretation of signs. Very suggestive exercises for a few talented young artists from his studio, such as Abdallah Hariri and Ali Noury, among others! In a note from the School, one could read: "The work of the decoration workshop directed by Mohammed Chebaa focuses on Arabic calligraphy, experimentation with geometric shapes and the study of architectural forms ". The question of integrating the arts into the architectural space had, from the beginning, interested the artists of the School. The short text written collectively in 1968, on the occasion of the exhibition of the works of all the workshops, at the dome of the Parc de la Ligue Arabe will only confirm this. The work at the School took place at two levels: the internal one and the external one. Lessons, discussions, meetings between teachers and with the students took place there on a daily basis while, at the same time, we were discussing independent activity projects, to be organized outside the establishment. Speak out about the national cultural situation, "start afresh" (Chabâa), create an

alternative to the official artistic policy, bridge the gap with other artists (Gharbaoui, Cherkaoui, painters from Tetouan, and soon those of Rabat, but not only) [5], were the main objectives of what the press would call "the Casa Group". The number 7-8 of the review "Souffles" (1967) was to testify to this effervescence of words and reflections. Soon joined at the School by Ataâllah, Hamidi, then Hafid, the "Casa Group" organized "Plastic Presence" exhibitions in several open spaces and public places. The one that took place in Jamaâ El Fna Square was born as a controversial demonstration, against "Le Salon du Printemps" in Marrakech. The artists of the School also signed a very powerful "Note on the situation of the plastic arts in Morocco", a real "Manifesto" denouncing deficiencies and incompetence – written collectively and solemnly read in the name of the signatories by Chabâa, during the national meeting of artists organized in Casablanca by the Ministry in February 1969. Thus, between exhibitions, meetings, declarations and positions taken — carried out at the cost of great efforts and surrounded by bitter controversies — in a few years, many things were going to change and the artistic situation enter a whole new phase. This period of ruptures and innovations, in which Chabâa actively participated, had marked his work. Let us consider one aspect of this question for a moment.

## **Popular arts, modernity and rejuvenation**

When Chabâa had joined his fellow artists in Casablanca, the School had recently published the first issue of a small publication called Maghreb Art (1965). The project was born from the great interest shown by us in Popular Arts. It must be remembered that until then the term, and the concept, were still hostages, in a way of terms like "Indigenous arts", "Crafts", "Decorative arts", "Folklore" and that, apart from the existence of 'important ethnographic work (corpus of carpets and costumes, museum collections etc.), there was a cleavage between the discourse on "modern" art in Morocco and the heritage of traditional folk arts and crafts. A void in the analysis of plastic, imaginary, symbolic, technical,

iconographic modalities had to be filled. Or, better to reformulate, and recompose into an overall vision. For my fellow artists, it was about investing from a completely different "perspective" certain achievements of this heritage, sometimes so "modern" indeed. Similar approach to those that in those same years, in Algeria, Mohamed Khadda called "resourcing". Interested in the material collected in Morocco by the Dutch researcher Bert Flint, Belkahia then invited the latter to join the School. Flint's stay there was brief, but fruitful. Some of us traveled with him along the Atlas to conduct field research (notes, photographs), and this documentation was food for thought and study.

All this was to interest Chabâa in the highest degree. This "taking charge" of the past answered some of his questions about the role of art and the artist in society and the possibilities of developing a fundamental "Moroccan" in the present, in terms that are as much "modern. »As universal. In this regard, he will explain in "Souffles" his points of view and considerations. Having in turn visited, during a series of trips organized by the School, some zaouias painted from the High Atlas (those which will be discussed in 1969 in n ° 3 of Maghreb Art), Chabâa had admired their pregnant beauty. It will pay tribute to this high tradition in a series of fine works, including "Study on tradition (South)" produced in 1971 (Chabâa exhibition-retrospective catalog, Galerie Nadar, 1974). Following this process of "resourcing", his "problematic" figuration-abstraction had to access a more mature visual conception. Thus, without abandoning figurative elements, he will organize with a firm hand geometric shapes with very effective chromatic variations and with this touch of "imagination" that he will develop so well over the following decades. Indeed, as we will see, pure geometry could not be enough for him and in a series of pictorial evolutions, he will recover this basic "lyricism" which had always fascinated him. But, in the phase in question, the fact of perceiving geometric shapes no longer as an "alienation" but as a field of visual inspiration, was important for him. We will see it in another part of his production: the large-scale frescoes and bas-reliefs produced for

architectural spaces. From 1968/69, he will indeed work on an important series of orders, where he will give the measure of what he had in the meantime developed.

The meeting around 1967 with the architects Patrice De Mazières and Abdeslam Faraoui was for him decisive in this regard. Let us give the floor to Patrice De Mazières and to the brief passage of a document kept in his archives: "In 1967, we learned through the intermediary of architects [Dethieret Hamburger] working at CERF, of the existence of the École des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca (...) It is the revelation of a research parallel to ours in the visual arts, renewing with a deep and vigorously contemporary tradition, and the beginning of a friendship and a collaboration which (...) will be enriching for us all ". From this meeting, several members of the team of teachers who were then working at the School will carry out integration works for the Cabinet Faraoui / De Mazières. As part of these collaborations, Chabâa was going to project large wall panels in terracotta and zelliges, as well as in wood, notably for the Hôtel de Boumalne du Dadès, cedar wood trellises for the Hôtel de El Kelaâ des Mgouna, a carved stone mural and a cedar wood panel for the Headquarters of the Banque Populaire, in Rabat. Interested in an organic conception of applied art, as well as in molded and sculpted forms, he had designed, among other things, lighting and signs. For all of this work, he had designed geometric elements assembled and composed in different variations, using natural materials and chromatic effects inspired by zelliges. The whole had strength and elegance.

## **From the 70s, to postmodernity ...**

When Chabâa left his teaching post in 1969 to devote himself more to his personal work, a phase had to come to an end for him, and another to begin. Moreover, in a short time, Melehi, then Ataâllah and Belkahia will leave the School, themselves also turned towards other horizons and projects. While still collaborating together on a few projects, including an

exhibition in two high schools in Casablanca [6], a cycle was for them (as for me) completed. The next generation at the School was assured. Young artists had been trained and these departures were made in the natural logic of individual choices. Less natural was the crisis which rocked the cohesion of painter friends, all three loyal collaborators of Souffles and yet at one point painfully contrasted around a choice concerning, precisely, the new line of this review.

Many times in the history of the artistic avant-garde of the twentieth century, party executives, ideologues and artists from all fields had to debate the role of politics and the primacy of one or the other in the artistic process. These were important questions, crucial, point easy to determine and, moreover, sometimes finding vitality in their reciprocal requests. In the case in question, each decided according to his conscience; some thought they were more useful to their society by engaging from within the cultural dynamics and their own creative domain. There were two visions that were equally assumed and to be respected. Of the painters, only Chabâa remained in charge of the graphic design of the review, which, from n ° 16-17 (1969), changed format and visual aspect. Even if the climate had meanwhile become very serious and heavy, or to put it in the Italian "lead" way, no one among those who had left the collective: artists, poets, writers ... could not imagine the harsh repression which was going to fall on Abdellatif Laâbi and the review. Chabâa, he too will be arrested ("detained for several months, without trial" I wrote in 1972, in a note in "Intégral"). It was a dark and dramatic moment for all. But since the bonds of friendship and collaboration between the artists had been strong and sincere, as soon as he was released, Chabâa came to join his comrades to collaborate with them, and other artists, and to pursue this groundwork still requiring commitment, cultural battles and creativity. Here he is, then actively collaborating in the birth of an independent group, Amap (Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts), which participates in pioneering projects, activities and exhibitions in the Maghreb, and which signs the Manifesto / declaration that he had



written with the group, and which was published during the participation in the Baghdad Biennial of 14 Moroccan artists. Here he is in the review "Integral" (n° 8, 9, 10, 12-13) and participating in the project of murals in the streets of the nascent Moussem of Assilah, in which he produced a very beautiful mural. Here he also joins the support given to the project led by Dr A. Ziou-Ziou, at the psychiatric hospital of Berrechid, in 1981, while participating in other activities and exhibitions. In the meantime, in 1974, he had inaugurated two personal retrospective exhibitions in two galleries, which had just opened one after the other, "[Atelier" by Pauline De Mazières and "Nadar" by Le la Faraoui.

Thus, he was among the protagonists of this other phase of art in Morocco, that of the 70s. A crucial phase and in certain aspects paradoxical. Indeed, even though, on the one hand, the political situation still weighed very heavily, on the other, we witnessed the development of great cultural dynamism and a new generation of women and men contributing in all fields to assert this independent creative spirit which the country needed in order, precisely, to continue the cultural work started and not to give up. New galleries, as we have seen, had opened ("L'Atelier", "Nadar", "Structure BS" by Karim Bennani and Hassan Slaoui, but not only), magazines and publishing houses were born. , other very interesting artists came forward with a variety of ideas, research and productions. One could take as an example of the work of Chabâa of the 70s, the large triptych made for the OCP, painting on canvas where lines and colors interlock – between curved shapes and geometric spaces – in a beautiful and skilful play of plastic balances. Very quickly, however, his work would turn to a new "path". So, during the 80s will appear, as he will specify it many years after himself, "an airy and volatile painting (...) which marks my break with ideology as the cement of creation ..." . [7] Painting "gently breaking" (Laâbi), crossed by a flight of signs, a cascade of colors, an inventive play of shapes, and a breath of lightness definitively breaking the geometric order. Chabâa then seems to return to the lesson of Kandinsky, decanted and interpreted in all beauty and originality. Evoking

this decisive turning point in his painting, he added [7] "I did not know then that I was sealing my post-modernism" Al there was undoubtedly a touch of irony in this statement, but also disenchantment. Moving forward in time, and at the dawn of the 21st century, when the political situation had overcome the course of the "leaden" years, the artistic one sometimes evolved in the forgetfulness of the commitments, ideal passions and advances of the 60s and 70. Faced with the primacy of mercantilism in climbing and deregulated art, the rise of many artists – stars – more driven by the desire to be part of the "beautiful world" of "peoples" than to keep a healthy distance and critical autonomy, and faced with a certain postmodern confusion on the relationship between culture and society, Chabâa must have felt a modern disconcerted by postmodernity ... This is perhaps why, at a given moment, had he returned to black and white, colors for him "of revolt"? In any case, after other work experiences, including that in Tetouan, and after having resumed modeling pure sculpted forms, he was going to devote himself to a final, unexpected and powerful pictorial elaboration. So, all the elements of his work seemed to come back in a visual synthesis with great strokes of gestures and chromatic effects: informal signs, graphic elements, lyrical lines, logic of colors (the firmness of blacks, blues, reds versus more nuanced hues) , all captured by a great dynamic momentum. A gestural painting expressed with a strong emotional charge and, however, as it was peculiar to him, rigorously controlled. Throughout the years, Mohammed Chabâa had proceeded tenaciously, step by step, without exhibitionism or ill-considered choices, but by seeking and reflecting, eager to renew himself and able to question everything. This is how he conquered his full autonomy of expression, that of a modern / post-modern – in truth, a freely singular artist – having contributed and participated with his work and his cultural commitment, to the historical journey of the art in Morocco.

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