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Art Review

Selected Topics in Journalism

Algerian Pioneers reflect Postcolonial Struggle through their Paintings

Algeria among many other countries has undergone eurocentrism or what can be known as the ideology of indirectly considering European culture to be superior than Asian and African societies. During the period of 1950-1960, Algeria suffered one of the most bloodiest wars, Looking on the bright side of this dark era, it merrily gave birth to 7 Algerian artists in which they portrayed their battle for identity through the power of art.

True inspirations are common in the Arab world, where thoroughly researched artists tend to bring the reality of their complex social conflict and cultural identity into intense visuals. That is why Elmarsa Gallery (located in Alserkal Avenue) featured a group exhibition from November, 11th 2022 and is still occurring until February, 25th 2022. Under the name of Algerian Modernism, this exhibition held in Warehouse23, brought back life to 7 artists in which 6 have passed away. Mohammed Khadda (1930-1991), Mahjoub Ben Bella (1946-2020), Abdelkader Guermaz (1919-1996), M'Hamed Issiakhem (1928-1985), Abdallah Benanteur (1931-2017), Baya Mahieddine (1931-1998), and Rachid Koraichi who was born in 1947 and lives today.

Clearly, based off the date of births of these noteworthy artists, we can imagine the taste of bitter they faced during the Algeria War of Independence. A war which occurred from 1954 and lasted until 1962. It is often depicted as a complex conflict between the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), which was striving for independence, against France, Algeria's colonial power. In spite of their particular North African Berber roots and Islamic traditions, the creative and expressive artists opposed parallels to the literary way of expressing orientalist ideologies. Which concluded them to beginning the modern art movement during the 1950's and the 1960's.



Abdelkader Guermaz (the eldest among all 7 Algerian Artists) Composition, 1996, Oil on Canvas

Sharon George, the Gallery administrator, said: “They made sure that they showcased their culture, most importantly, through art by not abiding to the stereotypical mentality that was pushed on to them”. “Our gallery headquarters is in Tunisia since 1994, we then expanded in Dubai in 2015, we specialize in modern North African art and orientalism”, George added. Just like many other Middle Eastern countries, orientalism made it’s way and expanded throughout the entire Arab world, including North Africa during the late 18th century. While examining the exhibition, it was pretty difficult for me to see this clear representation in the artist’s paintings, yet in the contrary I sensed it.

Coming from a North African origin myself, I observed the artist’s work and received their perplex message and by that meaning, I identified the Moorish colors, as well as the traditional Berber symbols these artists used. Most of them in which focused on non-figurative paintings, as they managed to express the Algerian cultural heritage in more of an abstract way.

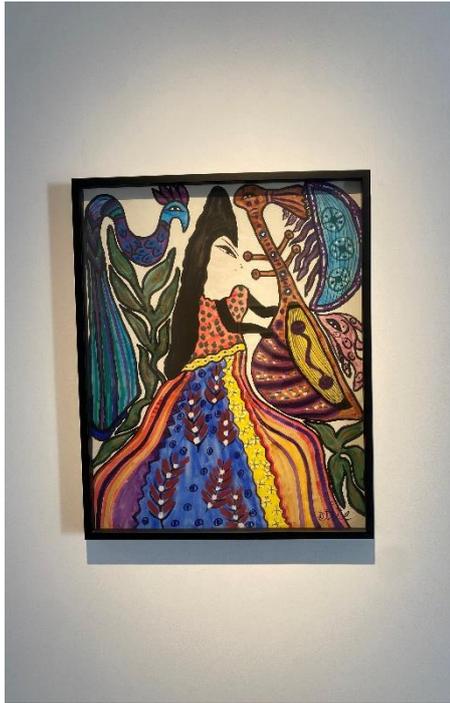
“Abdelkader Guermaz, Mohammed Khadaa, M’Hamed Issiakhem, and Abdallah Bennanteur went to inspire the next four generations of contemporary artists such as Mahjoub Ben Bella and Rachid Koraichi”, George said. The four main initial Algerian artists mentioned aimed to reconstruct Algerian art traditions that reflect the country's aspiration for a diverse Algerian identity impacted by its political status and distinctive culture.

During the 1950s, Algerian artists like, Mohammed Khadda, combined calligraphic history with the formal terminology of European modernism. Following Algeria's independence from France in 1962, establishing a separate artistic set of skills became more important. Khadda layers Arabic text and script over dramatic abstract paintings to form textural artworks. I came to a realization that Khadda truly influenced Rachid Koraichi who also focused on calligraphy, however, his stance was more related to Arab poets. Apparently, Khadda was a member of the Sign art movement Aouchem which means tattoo in the Amazighi dialect.

the movement was founded in 1967 after the political impact caused by the Algeria war of independence.



Mohammed Khadda, Composition, Oil on Canvas, this painting represents the Aouchem (Amazigh meaning of tattoo) by using earthy tone colors



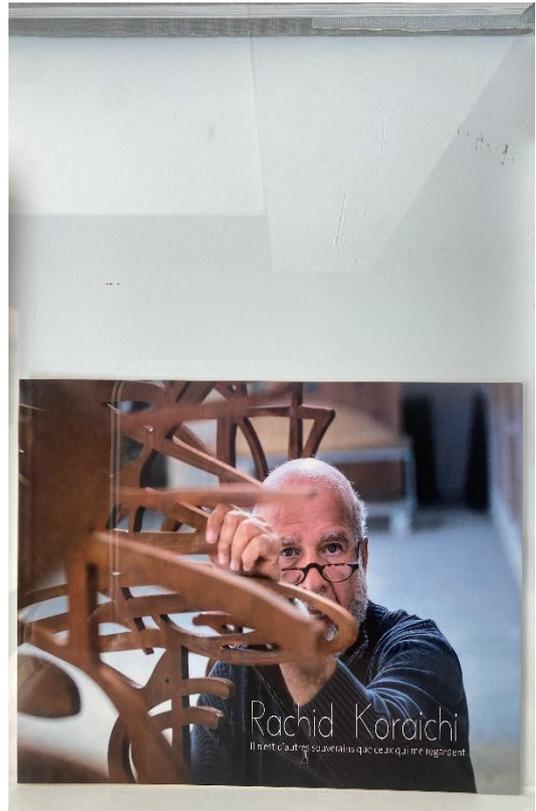
Baya Mahieddine, Jeune Musicienne (Young Female Musician), 1975, Gouache on Paper.

Moving on to the only female Algerian artist amongst these 7, and whose work captivated my eyes with the vivid, dynamic, and vibrant colors she used. Baya Mahieddine, one of Algeria's most well-known artists, best known for the classic painting that influenced Pablo Picasso to paint the Women of Algeria series. Mahieddine deliberately refused any type of categorization, rather she focused on painting her personal stories and encounters in Algeria. "She was orphaned at a very young age" Sharon says. It's fascinating to see how childhood sorrows can turn into an aptitude by using a paintbrush. Baha used Gouache on paper which is similar to watercolor but is more opaque.

By observing her paintings, I noticed that she wanted to combine her personal stories as a young female orphan during the war, yet in an evocative and deeply colored way, as the woman figures are clearly entangled with birds, creatures, flowers, which she combines in repetitive motifs reminiscent of Algerian heritage. Her graphic portrayal of the woman's gender and the society around it enables more in-depth examinations of preconceptions inherent in women's depictions. "There's a lot of women in her work, as she made sure that her Berber origins are showcased through the traditional outfits, the instruments, nature, and very often you'll see children", George said.



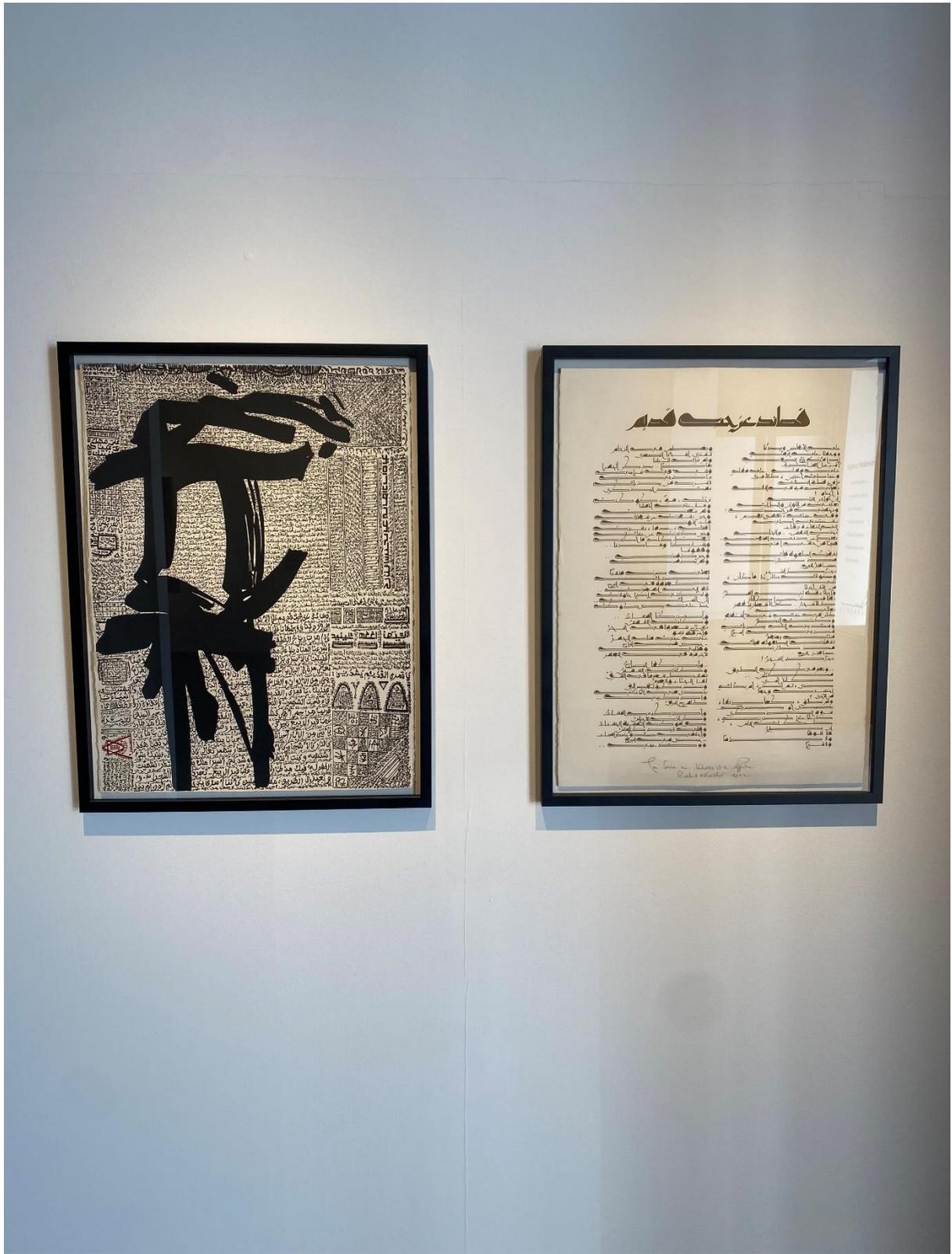
Rachid Koraichi, The Prayers Sculpture



Monogram of Rachid Koraichi, placed in a glass box in the entrance of the gallery

Unlike the abstract painters, Rachid Koraichi expressed his work by creating sculptures. “The Prayers”, was technically the focal point of the gallery. Placed in the center, it gave a soothing vibe and a spiritual atmosphere. “It’s represented to show the relationship between light and shadow, it’s also part of 21 corten steel sculptures. During Koraichi’s solo show in 2015 in Dubai, all the 21 sculptures were laid out”, George said. Rachid Koraichi was brought up in a Sufi family where the belief in God is more spiritual and mystical.

“You know something about these sculptures is fascinating, the more age, the more valuable they become. Just like fine wine” George added.



Rachid Koraichi, Hassan Massoudy, and Mahmoud Darwish Diptych art Collaboration

There was a sense of abstractionism, as the letters were not readable. While observing “The Prayers”, it seemed to me as if Koraichi was influenced by the Chinese script. “There is an influence of Chinese script, but it’s definitely an intertwine between both Arabic and

Chinese”, George confirmed. Koraichi didn’t limit himself to creating sculptures, he went onto collaborating with the famous Iraqi painter and calligrapher, Hassan Massoudy. “They both did a diptych piece and included the famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, which brings together three Arab artists with different backgrounds into one iconic piece of art”, George said.