

# Moroccan painter mixes a green thumb with his art

Nature a key theme in much of Abderrahim Yamou's work

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Special to The Daily Star

PARIS: Nothing, says Abderrahim Yamou, gave him any reason to believe he might become a painter one day.

Growing up in a working class neighborhood in Casablanca, Morocco, his only contact with illustrations came from magazines he picked up at the flea market near his house. The walls in his home were

has become one of Morocco's leading painters, with a steady stream of annual exhibitions in Morocco and shows in Europe. The Moroccan art market is particularly active in the region, with a strong demand for local painters. Yamou's paintings and sculptures, a blend of ruggedness and sensitivity, are known for his persistent "green" theme – an increasing obsession to represent the interaction between an invented shape and a living plant.

Yamou's studio is in the Parisian suburb of Montreuil, described as a "red" neighborhood invaded by "bobos" (Bourgeois Bohemians). Neighbors anonymously leave their ailing plants in front of Yamou's door. He cares for them and one day they disappear again.

Yamou was among the first wave of artists to settle in Montreuil in the 1980s, playing an integral part in a politico-

artistic movement, which has made this area a burgeoning cultural center. His unlikely path to becoming an artist took courage and introspection yet seen from a broader context, seemed inevitable.

As a child Yamou always drew but only had an art class during his last year of high school. He was a carpenter's apprentice during his school years

because his father thought he might need a craft, as his grades were abysmal. Most of his time was spent wandering – a certain physical and psychological freedom he says allowed him to become an artist.

"I have a unique position among my siblings. Each had a role except me. My eldest brother was the one everyone counted on. My second brother was very gifted intellectually, my sister was the girl and my youngest brother was the baby. So I was given this liberty to roam and to make mistakes that the others couldn't."

Following his baccalaureate Yamou came to France to study biology (and in a certain sense he has chosen the tactile side to biology). He soon switched to sociology. He began to visit museums and take art history classes. His thesis was on contemporary art in Morocco.

"For two years I traveled to Morocco and met all the important artists at the time including (Farid) Belkahlia and (Mohammed) Kacimi. ... I suddenly realized that what interested me was painting, but it was as if I was protecting myself by studying and not plunging into my own work. Coming into close contact with these artists helped me realize my fantasy. I saw that people in flesh and blood were doing this and weren't any more miserable than anyone else!"

In 1986 Yamou gave up his studies to become a painter.

In his first series of abstract paintings he incorporated sand and earth into his work. He mixed the two with acrylic, sawdust and charcoal on canvas or corrugated iron. Yamou says that at the time he was more emotionally linked to Morocco



Left: Yamou sits astride one of his sculptures at his studio in the Parisian suburb of Montreuil. Above: Paysage nocturne 1997 mixed media on canvas (180 x 127cm). Below from left: Volants 2003. Oil on canvas (146 x 114 cm); Terre de nuit. 2004. Oil on canvas (146 x 114 cm); Terre et vert. 2004. Oil on canvas (146 x 114 cm)



bare. Yamou's blind father sold lottery tickets, and his mother "didn't even weave or knit like some mothers."

But, says Yamou with a twinkle in his eye, "the French named the streets in our neighborhood after painters. I was born on Rue Watteau. Nearby there was Delacroix, Raphael, Durer and Da Vinci."

Today Abderrahim Yamou

and the difficult political period the country was experiencing.

"I had a rage within me like everyone who had come into contact with repression and injustice. This fury didn't translate into a political opposition but there was violence and a certain tension in my work."

At around this time Yamou's obsession with plants emerged. Whether the desire for vegetation lies in the fact that his parents were originally from the Sahara Desert and that he had grown up in an urban context surrounded by concrete or simply a fascination with a life cycle, Yamou tried to grow plants

on the earth surface of his canvases. Plants require a horizontal life, incompatible with the vertical nature of painting. This led him to make sculptures as well as paintings.

The unique aspect of Yamou's sculptures has two sources: his interest in the African N'Konde statuettes and a personal technique he developed using plywood. Unlike traditional sculptors who work with a large block of wood, Yamou, initially because of lack of funds, used plywood to build the outer walls of his sculptures, producing shapes that are lightweight and can contain

earth and plants.

The N'Konde statues were an inspiration to him in their inherent philosophy that our world is a continuous process, part of a greater picture. Their statues are a bridge between the world of the living and their ancestors. Yamou's shapes are covered in nails, which over time change with oxidation, thus creating a living object that transforms with photosynthesis, corrosion and decay.

In his paintings, Yamou moved from mixed media to oil. His abstract style evolved to more representational botanical forms: branches, leaves, flowers, and seeds. Most recently he introduced a cosmic element to his work us-

ing seeds and floating vegetation in a mysterious world where generosity but also secrecy are conveyed.

"I'm painting plants in an aerial context to create several layers of depth. I like the idea of breaking up the structure of a painting by introducing an intrusive element."

He is currently researching botanical texts written in Arabic, which he'll use as themes for future works.

Do his North African roots affect his painting?

"I'm a hybrid now like so many people of my generation. I'm not an Arab like my parents. I grew up speaking French and have now lived longer in France than in Morocco; my

wife's American! I think my painting has taken on this (cosmopolitan) aspect. I'm trying to push my identity toward something original."

And when it comes to flora and fauna:

"There are so many shapes to explore in this plant universe. The possibilities are infinite! Much of my inspiration comes from the interaction between a form and plant—a shape, which I can control, and a plant, which I can't. I like to see if we can go down the path together for a way."

Abderrahim Yamou will be showing next at the Gallerie LWS in Paris from Sept. 9-23. For more information, go to [www.yamou.com](http://www.yamou.com)



## Egypt steps up calls for return of Nefertiti bust

BERLIN: Egypt staked a fresh claim Sunday to the priceless ancient bust of Queen Nefertiti, which has spent the last century in Berlin after its discovery by a German archaeologist.

The director of the Egyptian National Museum in Cairo, Wafaa Seddiq, told a German newspaper that the elegant limestone figure was removed from the country illegally and that it should at least be loaned back to its home country.

"We know that we will not be able to bring Nefertiti back forever but an exhibit for a few months would be possible," Seddiq told the Bild am Sonntag.

"It is even our right to have it for such an exhibition because the bust was smuggled to Germany back then."

Cairo and Berlin have frequently crossed swords over the beautiful Nefertiti, which was unearthed by German archaeologist Ludwig Borchardt and removed from the country under a 1913 agreement that allowed him take 50 percent of what had been excavated.

However Seddiq said that under that treaty, important objects d'art were required to remain in Egypt. She accused Borchardt of playing down the historical significance of the bust so he could spirit it back to Berlin.

Seddiq, who was appointed to her post in February, said that she would now take up the issue with the director of the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, Dietrich Wildung.

Wildung came under fire last year from Egyptian Culture Minister Faruq Hosni when he allowed artists to temporarily fuse the 3,300-year-old bust to a bronze statue of a scantily clad woman.

Hosni angrily condemned the incident – in which the 50-centimeter-tall figure was briefly joined with the life-size torso cloaked in a close-fitting transparent robe – and demanded the return of the artifact.

One of history's great beauties, Nefertiti was the wife of pharaoh Akhenaton, remembered in history for having switched his kingdom to monotheism with the worship of one sun god, Aton. – AFP

## HOROSCOPE

### Aries (Mar. 21 – April 19)

You enjoy working hard and being organized, and you exercise skill and discipline in anything that affects your career and reputation. You could find yourself engaged in nonconformist causes today, always ready to promote what is innovative.

### Taurus (April 20 – May 20)

Someone could challenge you on a very sensitive issue today. This could result in an argument or, at the least, a very intense discussion. You may touch upon very emotional parts of yourself and find yourself analyzing situations.

### Gemini (May 21 – June 21)

A renewed and positive attitude in the workplace seems to be enjoyed by all today. Things are happening, and your career or path depends upon your own ambition and drive, which are strong now. There could be some discussions over business affairs but, if needed, a compromise can be had.

### Cancer (June 22 – July 22)

As a good detective or research person, you will find yourself having a passion for answers today. Questioning and searching finds you in pursuit of some piece of useful information. If you ask too many questions, however, you may not appreciate the emotional energy of someone who you meet today.

### Leo (July 23 – Aug. 22)

You have a relentless drive to get to the heart of things today, whatever is under the surface or behind the scenes. Your relentless pursuit of anything hidden or secret makes you a great researcher or investigator. Emotionally, you are also hot stuff, handling subject matters that others would never touch.

### Virgo (Aug. 23 – Sept. 22)

The word here is accomplishment. If there is a job, you can do it. You enjoy discipline, and limitations are seen as opportunities rather than handicaps. Home and family matters can play a big part in your life now. Relatives take on greater importance than ever before.

### Libra (Sept. 23 – Oct. 22)

Circumstances can throw you into positions today where you must use your mind and deal with communications, service or enclosed hidden interests. You are able to cut through the red tape and get at what is beneath and behind.

### Scorpio (Oct. 23 – Nov. 21)

It will be hard for you to do wrong, for all the cycles are working in your favor at this time. This is also a time when you may decide to marry or take on a new role in the community. You will be in demand.

### Sagittarius (Nov. 22 – Dec. 21)

You have more than just the gift of the gab. Your words and ideas can transport and enchant listeners, carrying them beyond the world as they know it into the world as they wish it could be. Your imagination and sense of what connects all of life are felt in your speech.

### Capricorn (Dec. 22 – Jan. 19)

You are able to act quickly and get things done faster than most. You may find people coming to you for those odd jobs that nobody wants and that needs completing and out of the way quickly. You may like to be depended on in this way, but it could cause some difficult moments in getting your own work accomplished.

### Aquarius (Jan. 20 – Feb. 18)

You may find yourself very appreciative of your career and practical skills now. You might enjoy solving puzzles and problems, or doing things like finding solutions. There is a renewed appreciation for your work that may be apparent to your superiors – in fact, to everybody.

### Pisces (Feb. 19 – Mar. 20)

Do not force things today. Focus may be most important, and a little note-taking can bring the plans for the day back into focus. Be patient and let the chaos of others have time to dissolve. It is time to dive into work now, as you seem to shine when it comes to practical matters.

ARAB HISTORY AND IDENTITY BY TAMIM AL-BARGHOUTI

## Listen closely as Cairo speaks

Last week a friend of mine, who had never been to an Arab country outside the Gulf, came to visit Cairo. As I was showing him around, I allowed myself to imagine how an outsider might see the city, contrasts and paradoxes became clearer. Instead of introducing my friend to Cairo, I ended up trying to introduce myself to the city. The city saved me much of the effort. Cairo, as always, was trying to speak.

The city's flags flew on street lights all the way from the airport to down-

### || The city's citadel is a place of extreme contradictions

town Cairo. The flags held the city's symbol; the Mosque of Mohammed Ali surrounded by the walls of Saladin's Mountain Citadel; nothing could have been more representative.

Just like Cairo, the citadel is a place of extreme contradictions. Being the citadel of Saladin, the man who liberated the Arab East from the Crusaders, it is a symbol of freedom. But it was also Cairo's main prison for eight centuries. The citadel hosted the palaces of Cairo's rulers for the same eight centuries, yet today, the "Citadel Quarter" is one of the poorest and

most devastated quarters of Cairo. If one stood over the citadel's walls, one would see the huge Islamic cemetery of Cairo, one that hosts thousands of Egyptians, not dead, but living there out of poverty.

It is said that the reason Muslims chose to bury their dead there goes back to the very first years of the Arab conquest. Amr Ibn al-As, founded the first Arab capital in Egypt, he called it Al-Fustat, which simply meant "the Camp" where he garrisoned his soldiers. The city was built in the location of today's Cairo, just at the head of the Nile Delta triangle, so as to control the river's flow to the fertile fields in the north. Amr also chose to build the city on the eastern banks of the Nile in order not to have a water barrier between his forces in Egypt and the central command in Arabia. The place is flat, except for a little hill, completely barren, without a single tree on it, now called Al-Muqattam. The head of the local Copts asked Amr to sell him the hill. Amr asked the local leader why he wanted to buy such an infertile piece of land. "Because God promised to adorn this hill with trees from Paradise!" explained the old Copt: "When God intended to talk to Moses, he told all the mountains of the Earth that he will be talking to one of his prophets on one of them, every mountain rose its head in pride wishing that

God would chose it, except the mountain of Jerusalem, it lowered its shoulders in modesty and respect for God's glory. As a reward, God asked every mountain on Earth to donate some of its green to the modest mountain of the Holy Land. Al-Muqattam was so generous that it donated all of its green to Jerusalem. For that, God promised to crown Al-Muqattam with the trees of paradise."

By all means it was a nice try, but the conqueror knew that the trees of paradise can only be a secondary mo-

### || The trees of paradise could only be a secondary motive

tive for buying the strategically located hill that overlooked his new camp city, especially that the hill lied to the east blocking the way of any reinforcements coming from Arabia.

"Well, honorable sir" said Amr, "if this mountain is promised to host the trees of paradise, paradise and its trees are promised to host the believers, God must have meant it to be so!" and the place became the new city's cemetery!

Today the cemetery hosts the dead and the living alike, still waiting for the trees from paradise. The place is full of desperate attempts to make the

promise come true with mortal hands; the Mamlouks built gorgeous schools and mosques in and around their tombs, the walls of which are decorated with gorgeous tree-like figures. Mamlouks, who made their living off the labor of their poor subjects, still wanted to save their souls by the same manner. They ordered schools and mosques to be built around their tombs so that students, sheikhs and simple worshippers would pray for their souls, because they believed that with every prayer arising to heaven from those schools one or more of their sins would be forgiven.

I took my friend to the Citadel; the place was full of blond tourists. My friend and I were almost the only Arabs in the place. One cannot help but think about the Crusades when walking around the walls of the Citadel. The old city of Cairo, right at the feet of the hill was devastated, struggling in the rubble, between life and death, unfulfilled promises and unfulfilled sins. The Citadel, built to protect the city, is full of Americans and Europeans giving tips for the locals. The locals are trying to make a living off selling cheap artifacts. My friend and I, were as alien as native. Cairo, as always, was trying to speak.

Tamim al-Barghouti is a Palestinian poet. He wrote this article for THE DAILY STAR