

## THE FLOWERING OF ABDERRAHIM YAMOU

The Moroccan artist known for his earthworks-inspired abstracts overturns a lot of assumptions – about painting and sculpture, nature and artifice and that peculiar quality of ‘Moroccanness’. *Ana Finel Honigman* draws us a portrait of the artist as his own man.

‘THE INTERESTING THING about Yamou’s work is that most people who see it assume that he is Japanese,’ Bernard Chauchet explains over a shared lunch with the artist and his friend. The café, situated a few blocks from Chauchet’s ThirteenLangtonStreetGallery in London’s leafy, charming and residential Kensington and Chelsea borough, is a favourite of the gallerist for its ‘typically English’ menu, serving classic fry-ups with plenty of golden chips. The area’s quaint, crisp, orderly and old-fashioned British charm makes for a compelling contrast to our discussion of the ethnic and aesthetic origins of Abderrahim Yamou’s beautifully sensual and serene abstract floral and nature scenes.

Chauchet elaborates on the cultural confusion Yamou’s work engenders. In his words: ‘The style of his paintings strike many people as very Zen-like. They are attracted to these qualities, and are often surprised to learn that he is Moroccan.’ The analogy to Zen might come easily for Western viewers drawn by the surface appeal of Yamou’s colourful and poetic canvases. But the lyrical grace and contagious calm of his recent paintings, like the spiritual tranquillity offered by Zen teachings, is the product of struggle, maturation and careful technical mastery. Yamou’s paintings might appear ethereal, but they are entirely rooted in earthly realities.

BORN OUTSIDE CASABLANCA in 1959 to parents who were originally from the Moroccan Sahara, Yamou was the fourth of five children. During his

childhood, he often accompanied his blind father to sell lottery tickets in the city. Because of the family’s poverty as well as his father’s affliction, his childhood home was bereft of decoration. The only image on the wall was a family photograph taken before Yamou’s birth. ‘I never thought about becoming a painter,’ he says. ‘The idea never crossed my mind. There were no artists or amateurs where I was raised. Yet I always wanted to draw. I believe that part of the reason I started to paint was to do [with the fact] that my father could not see.’

‘THE ZEN-LIKE QUALITY OF YAMOU’S PAINTINGS LEADS MANY VIEWERS TO ASSUME THE MOROCCAN ARTIST IS, IN FACT, JAPANESE.’

With no direct encouragement of his artistic ambitions, yet engaged in constant and active experimentation, Yamou travelled to France to study biology. He later abandoned that field for sociology, and decided to focus his thesis on contemporary Moroccan art. His artistic autodidacticism led him to seek inspiration in Paris’s museums, in the art magazines he found as a young man in Casablanca’s flea markets and in the natural world. Ironically, Yamou’s background in biology has informed the content, design and sensibility of his work more than traditional training might have done.

Yamou’s work is also rooted in French Impressionism, and in the earthworks of California conceptualists such





Clockwise from left: *Votive* (2003); *Eve* (2003); *Horloge Biologique* (1999).



as Allan Kaprow, who used rocks, orange peels and other material gathered from nature in performances that drew attention to basic natural processes.

BY THE NINETIES, Yamou was mixing raw earth, sand and metal with glue and applying the paste to canvases. It hardened like cement, and the protrusions provided texture on which he could draw and affix pigment. Rust, scratches, scars and fissures marked the surface of his images. These works coincided with Yamou's interest in Nkonde memorial sculptures from Congo. These tribal sculptures, which often incorporate nails and other rough metal features, fed the juxtaposition in his work between organic growth and decay.

'YAMOU SAYS HIS MOST SIGNIFICANT SOURCE OF INSPIRATION IS THE VEGETAL WORLD.'

ThirteenLangtonStreetGallery's website categorises this period in Yamou's work as contrasting 'growth and decay, photosynthesis and oxydation, life and death'. In the same text, Yamou identifies these works as 'angry'. And in a 1991 *ArtForum* review of his solo show at Paris's Galerie Régine Deschênes, critic Miriam Rosen confirms their emotional tone: 'These are very silent paintings, silent in a way that has nothing to do with calm ... As such, they don't describe, they don't narrate, they don't orchestrate their earthy colors and textures; they just appear there before us, as markers of time and of a certain seething rage.'

Rosen went on to praise Yamou for the aggressive distinctiveness of his work, which succeeded in thrusting it into an arena beyond the quaint, conventional imagery that has generally represented Moroccan art within the international art scene. 'For there is a





Clockwise from opposite, left: *Anatolie* (2008); *Hybrid* (2006); *Testament of the Tree* (2008).

“look” to modern Moroccan art,’ Rosen wrote, ‘a look that has less to do with modernity than with Moroccanness. The repertoire of sun-drenched colors, organic shapes, repeated motifs (including calligraphy) that abound in the traditional arts.’ Yamou acknowledges that his own ethnic and cultural identity shapes his work, but says those aspects are less significant to him than the inspiration he derives from the vegetal world.

IN HIS PAINTINGS, the artist had used various natural materials such as sand and soil, but found that paint and canvas could only illustrate various aspects of nature. This realisation led him to his series of recent sculptures, which he crafts out of wood, metal nails and organic forms. The direct influence of the Nkonde is felt in these; to Western eyes, the female forms Yamou creates, covered in budding plants, evoke Gaia, the ancient Greek Earth goddess. Though the sculptures lack the voluptuous beauty of his paintings, they enable Yamou to demonstrate and not merely depict natural growth.

‘Through photosynthesis and growth, plants are in a constant state of transformation,’ Yamou explains. ‘This process represents life. But, even as the plants grow, the nails in the sculpture are oxidising and deteriorating. Just as water and light are indispensable to plants’ growth, so they are also the elements that cause metal’s deterioration. In this sense, the sculpture itself contains both life and death. And these two phenomena, juxtaposed in a single sculpture, allow for an exploration of this contrast.’

Just as his sculptures contain and embrace life and death, Yamou’s paintings offer moving, formally harmonious and often breathtaking visions of nature in its all its complex splendour: this artist is a man for all seasons. \_END