

## Abderrazak Sahli (1941 – 2009)

### *Wisdom of the crowd*

14 November 2022 – 28 January 2023

Elmarsa Gallery is very pleased to present a selection of unique works by Abderrazak Sahli (1941 – 2009), one of the most prominent Tunisian abstract painters of the 20th century. This exhibition offers to see his paintings on burlap that were executed in the nineties, and that remain little known to the public at large.

Born in 1941, Abderrazak Sahli, who was educated in the Koranic school of Zeitouniyya, explored the “defiguration” and “sonorisation” of words and texts as early as 1965. From then onwards he has worked in media as varied as photography, poetry, prints, paintings, books, boxes, bamboo sticks, sculpture, installations. His early figurative paintings later led to more conceptual exhibitions in Paris; combining old photographs and texts in Latin scripts of sonor poetry; other times his works were presented as part of a performance, with paintings and sculptures. His paintings react to a variety of stimuli, mixing unconscious elements with what is conscious, vigorous, and spontaneous. By alternating between the “full” (coloured) and the “empty” (uncoloured), Sahli seems to have endowed his starry mutant creatures with a kind of cosmic energy. The very expressive strength of the lightness of the forms or the shapes and the expressive strength of the whole is well demonstrated in his installation work « Buissons Ferriques » presented by Elmarsa at Art Projects at the first edition of Art Dubai in 2007, which was made of 100 metal stakes topped with painted patterns, in steel sheet metal of 180 to 270 cm height each.

Artist and poet, Abderrazak Sahli spent the majority of his life travelling between France and Tunisia. He embarked on a career in the visual arts in the 1960s, prompted by his friend and mentor Nejjib Belkhdja, founder of the Tunis School of Art.

Sahli's abstract paintings are inspired by the decorative patterns and design elements of North Africa's architecture. However, they also draw upon the Abstract Expressionist and Russian Suprematist art that he encountered in Paris. The artist strips back his subjects to their bare essentials of shape, colour and form. He described his work thus:

"My painting is principally based on a multitude of objects and forms; it translates diversity. The clutter of objects in my canvases is nothing but a representation of the crowd, the dense crowd that is force and movement."

As presented by Ali Louati in his book "The adventure of modern art in Tunisia," Sahli is a leading figure in the art world thanks to the originality of his work, marked by the spirit and the techniques of the new figuration. A work in which he, in his own touch, intervened by "writing or color in photos" using the photographic paper and acrylic on picture.

Or as Rachida Triki emphasises in her essay “The art of the counterpoint” in her book *Paintings at Hasdrubal*, Ed. Private Collection Hasdrubal, Tunis; the proliferation of picturesque elements, between transparency and superimposition, livens up the flatness of the work and sets up a sensorial reception mode, with his alteration of bright colours and neutral tones, the surface of his paintings are no more than pure sensations. All objects of any kind which stem out of them are mere shows reminding us of the very essence of painting seen as colour lines arranged in ordered patterns. Actually, as if by mockery, it is to the origin of painting that the artist brings us back in a subversive and outrunning way.

Else as Joël Savary sheds further light on the artist's work in an essay published in the exhibition catalogue of Galerie Lamarque in France:

“There is room in wandering for horses that bounce from valley to summit.”  
Mahmoud Darwich [p. 245]



Invitation for Global Art Forum at Art Dubai 2008 illustrating Sahli's « Buissons Ferriques », 2007 installed at Art Projects, Art Dubai 2007.

Artist and poet, Abderrazak Sahli spent the majority of his life travelling between France and Tunisia. He embarked on a career in the visual arts in the 1960s, prompted by his friend and mentor Nejjib Belkhdja, founder of the Tunis School of Art.

Abderrazak Sahli's last solo exhibition at the museum of the Kheïrrédine palace in Tunis in November 2006 brilliantly demonstrated – in a succession of perfectly staged, ample galleries – to what point, over several decades, his artistic trajectory has perpetually renewed and regenerated itself. Wielding both radiant happiness and artistic mastery, the artist has developed a great diversity of forms over the years.

It is precisely this supple virtuosity that must be reconciled with both the innumerable and captivating declines of the stylistic abstraction of the arts of Islam, and the major aesthetic revolution prompted by Kasimir Malevich in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century.

During the seventies and eighties Sahli once again carried in his paintings the mark of the vivaciously critical and analytical taste in France, fifty years after Malevich: color is plain, bare monochrome is almost in sight, constructed points of reference are rare, the counterpoint of fields of lively color is as if an accident in the service of a minimalist universe. This austere demand for the rarefaction of regard also implants itself in the grain and greyness of his photographs of this period, where only the priority of movement subsists: the furtiveness of observation as a rapid antipainting. The artist's engravings attest to the submersion of his work in a limitless refinement where vibrate the infinitely multiplied strokes of the plate.

According to the various artistic supports he chooses, Sahli exercises his range with an elegant ease. He counters the artistic imprisonment of restrictive supports, invoking the extravagance of playful, Baroque compositions, where games of line and color manifest themselves musically. As Eugenio d'Ors, the great historian of forms, observes, "...all Baroque calligraphy tends toward music." [p. 106]

How could we not savor the vertigo of the colored variations – always renewed, always shimmering – of the recent large paintings on canvas, where unbelievable artificial aurorae borealis surge? Birds of paradise with mutant silhouettes surround the interlacing motifs. Traditional artistic supports spill over – without being abandoned – gaining in the process an amazing arrange of paper decoupage, ceramics, free canvases, sakhane, trousers and metal cut-outs. Here, Sahli's virtuosic appetite mixes with a plenitude of play and visual pleasure.

How can we not also make a connection between such visual richness and lyrical and concrete poetry, like that of Mahmoud Darwich, or even the direct poetry of William Carlos Williams?

I love the white locust tree  
the sweet white locust  
How much?  
How much?  
How much does it cost  
to love the locust tree  
in bloom  
[p. 271]

"All objects of any kind which stem out of them [his paintings] are mere shows reminding us of the very essence of painting seen as colour lines arranged in ordered patterns." Rachida Triki

"There is room in wandering for horses that bounce from valley to summit."  
Mahmoud Darwich [p. 245]

"It is precisely this supple virtuosity that must be reconciled with both the innumerable and captivating declines of the stylistic abstraction of the arts of Islam, and the major aesthetic revolution prompted by Kasimir Malevich in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century." Joël Savary



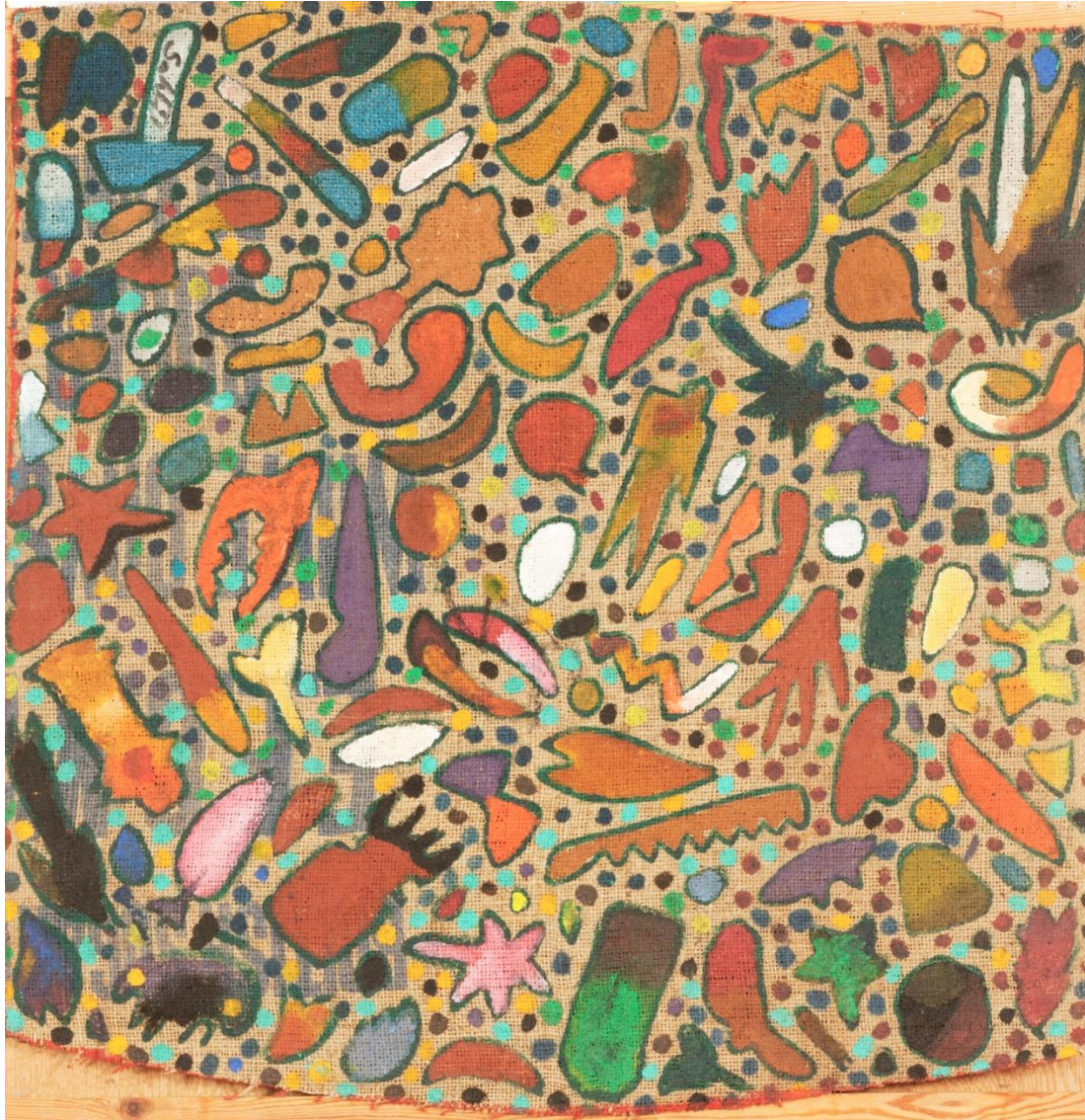
*Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 127 x 108 cm*





*Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 75 x 75 cm*





*Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 75 x 75 cm*

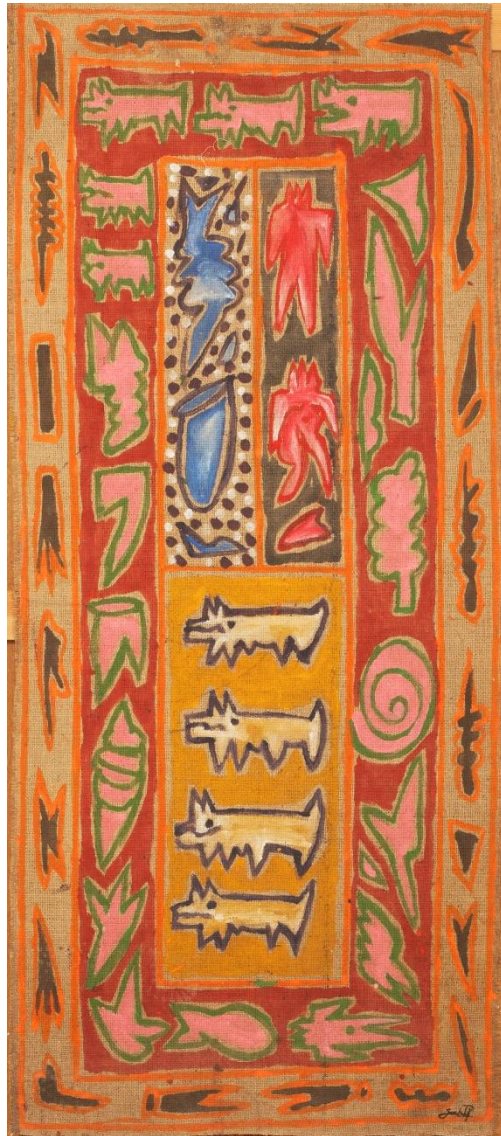


Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 105 x 58 cm





*Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 262 x 59 cm*



*Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 143 x 62 cm*





*Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 142 x 142 cm*





*Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 69 x 69 cm*





Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 242 x 157 cm





Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 206 x 140 cm





*Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 142 x 142 cm*





*Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 158 x 140 cm*





*Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 76 x 75 cm*

### **About Abderrazak Sahli (Tunisia, 1941 – 2009)**

Born in 1941 in Hammamet, Tunisia, Abderrazak Sahli graduated from the École des Beaux-Arts in Tunis in 1969. The following year, he traveled to Paris, where he obtained a diploma in plastic arts from the Université Paris VIII – Vincennes in 1974 and then graduated in graphic arts from the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts Paris in 1987. Back in Tunisia, he taught at the École des Beaux-Arts in Tunis and Nabeul. Sahli was educated in the Koranic school of Zeitouniyya, where he explored the disfiguration and "phonetics" of words and texts as early as 1965. Throughout his life Sahli was inspired by abstraction and deconstructed his compositions similar to an American Pop artist. His work is characterized by a combination of some of the most important art movements of the last century, American Pop Art, Abstract Expressionism and Russian Supremacism. From his experiences in the French capital city, Abderrazak Sahli opened up to several fields of creation, such as photography, installations, sculptures, which made him a contemporary artist. However, he remained attached to his cultural environment from his homeland. In his oeuvre, Sahli combined multiple elements from Islamic architecture, objects used in the African or Berber communities, and even Phoenician calligraphy. The sakhane is a recurrent support-object made of jute, which reminded him of his childhood and on which he employed painted abstract motifs. By incorporating local artistic traditions to contemporary techniques, his art pieces gained in dynamism, joy, and colors; they reveal dancing forms which impersonates animal as well as imaginary beings. Abderrazak Sahli passed away in 2009.

### **About Elmarsa Gallery**

Founded in 1994, Elmarsa Gallery has galleries in Tunis and Dubai, and an expanding European presence in Paris. Specializing in both modern and contemporary art, the gallery represents and supports the career of some of the most influential and recognized artists of the 20th and the 21st century from North Africa and the Middle-East, with a wide-ranging exhibition programme at its two gallery spaces. Active in both the primary and secondary markets, Elmarsa also represents its artists at major international art fairs focusing on African and Middle-East art in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Paris, London, Marrakech, Miami and New York.

### **Exhibition Information**

Opening Hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 11 am – 7 pm

Location: Unit 23, Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz 1, Dubai, UAE

Contact +971-4-3415806, info@galerielmarsa.com

Website [www.galerielmarsa.com](http://www.galerielmarsa.com)

2 place du Saf Saf  
2070 La Marsa, Tunisia  
T: 216-71-740572

Unit 23, Alserkal Avenue  
Al Quoz 1, Dubai, UAE  
T: 971-4-3415806

[www.galerielmarsa.com](http://www.galerielmarsa.com)