

*Brushstrokes & Perspectives:
A Journey Through Interconnected Passages of Non-Figurative Art*

6 September – 28 October 2023

Elmarsa Gallery, Dubai



Nasser Assar, *Composition*, 1957, Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm

This exhibition brings together both modern and contemporary artists whose practices were deeply influenced by the corporeality of painting techniques present in Art Informel, Abstract Expressionism, and Kinetic art, fearlessly rejecting representation within the context of their cultures. Some artists on display include **Abdelkader Guermaz** (Algeria, 1919-1996), **Leopoldo Torres-Agüero** (Argentina, 1922-1995), **Hedi Turki** (Tunisia, 1922-2019), **Chafic Abboud** (Lebanon, 1926-2004), **Nasser Assar** (Iran, 1928-2011), **Mohamed Khadda** (Algeria, 1930-1991), **Mahjoub Ben Bella** (Algeria, 1946-2020) and **Asma M'Naouar** (Tunisia, b. 1965).

Non-figurative artwork is often characterized by the modulations in the brush strokes, the layered contrasting compositions and an ever-present polytonality, which manipulates the viewers perspective. Sometimes abrupt and angular, a delicate stroke can quickly become broad, fluid.

The emergence of non-figurative painting spawned from a time of mass migrations after the cataclysmic effects of the Second World War. Concurrently, with the rise of a rapidly growing global economy and formations of nationalist movements in formally colonized states, creatives were

left to ponder the notion of perspective and individualism in the wake of a new world. Coined as 'Art Informel' in Paris and 'Abstract Expressionism' in New York during the 1940s, a wave of experimentation, including movements such as kinetic art in the 1950s-1970s, indicated a clear desire for change within the art world.

These movements were part of a broader wave of experimentation and liberation in the post-war art world. They reflected the changing cultural, social, and technological landscape, highlighting the desire to create art that transcended traditional boundaries. With the advent of progressive international travel, a surge in cross-cultural discourse led to the emergence of interconnected artistic channels. Intertwined passages were formed, allowing the Émigré artist to explore styles rooted in expressive, lyrical and dynamic modes of painting. The focus shifted to the stroke itself, with its multiple forms no longer validated within a collective output, but appreciated for its own complexity. There is importance in acknowledging that the emergence of non-figurative art practices did not happen exclusively within these periods nor within the specified landscapes linearly.

Known primarily as an all-encompassing umbrella term, Art Informel allowed for a *de-centered self* to take precedence in the art-making process. Artists *rejected* the stronghold of classical humanism and its fundamental artistic principles, choosing no longer to abide by figurative precision, which had often been deemed the correct perspective by the bourgeoisie. Nasser Assar, born in Tehran into a professor of oriental philosophy's household, had grown interest in the tachism and lyrical abstraction movements. Inspired by the confluence of east and west, he developed

a unique style, bridging the ethereality of landscape and the gesture of lyrical abstraction into one frame. Chafic Abboud, a painter from a Greek Orthodox community in Lebanon, created expressive abstract canvases with rich, textured surfaces and a highly personal use of colour. An ode to his professional background in the Lebanese tradition of figurative and landscape painting. Abdelkader Guermaz was also amongst artists who were drawn into Art Informel, where space was made for an interplay of dynamic composition and instinctual fluidity. Guermaz was one of the founders of Algerian modern art, having grown up and spent scholarly years in the Algerian coastal city of Oran, before relocating to Paris. Until the end of the Algerian War of 1962, this was where the largest population of Europeans in North Africa resided. Drawn to Avant-garde Parisian art, Guermaz turned to lyrical abstraction, crafting modulated neutral fields, punctuated by touches of colour and subtle grid-like patterns. These are conceived as abstract landscapes.



Chafic Abboud, *Untitled*, Tempera on canvas laid on panel
35 x 35 cm

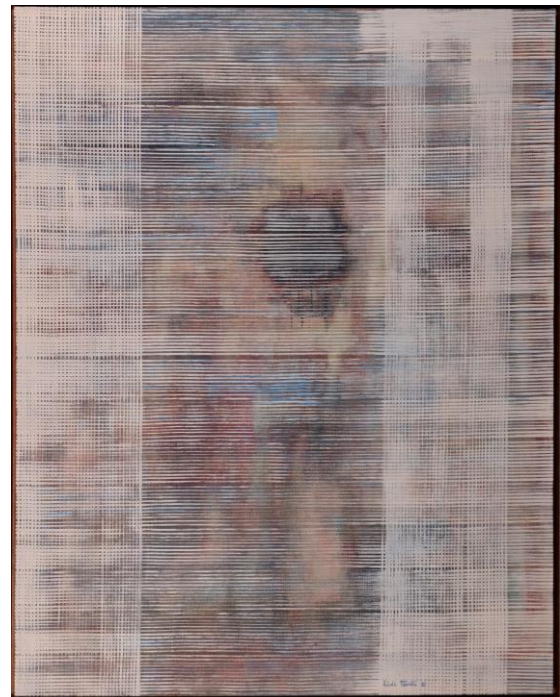


Abdelkader Guermaz, *Sans titre*, 1964, Oil on canvas
55 x 38 cm

On the other side of the Atlantic, Abstract Expressionism made waves amongst many, allowing artists an additional layer of visual language to incorporate into their practices. With an emphasis on bodily movements and a newfound trust in subconscious gesture, several distinct styles emerged, such as gestural abstraction and colour-field painting.

Amongst artists inspired by abstract expressionism was Hedi Turki, an influential Tunisian painter and sculptor who was considered a pioneer of abstract art in Tunisia. Learning the fundamentals of painting himself, Turki utilized the passages that art pedagogy provided. Studying Art in

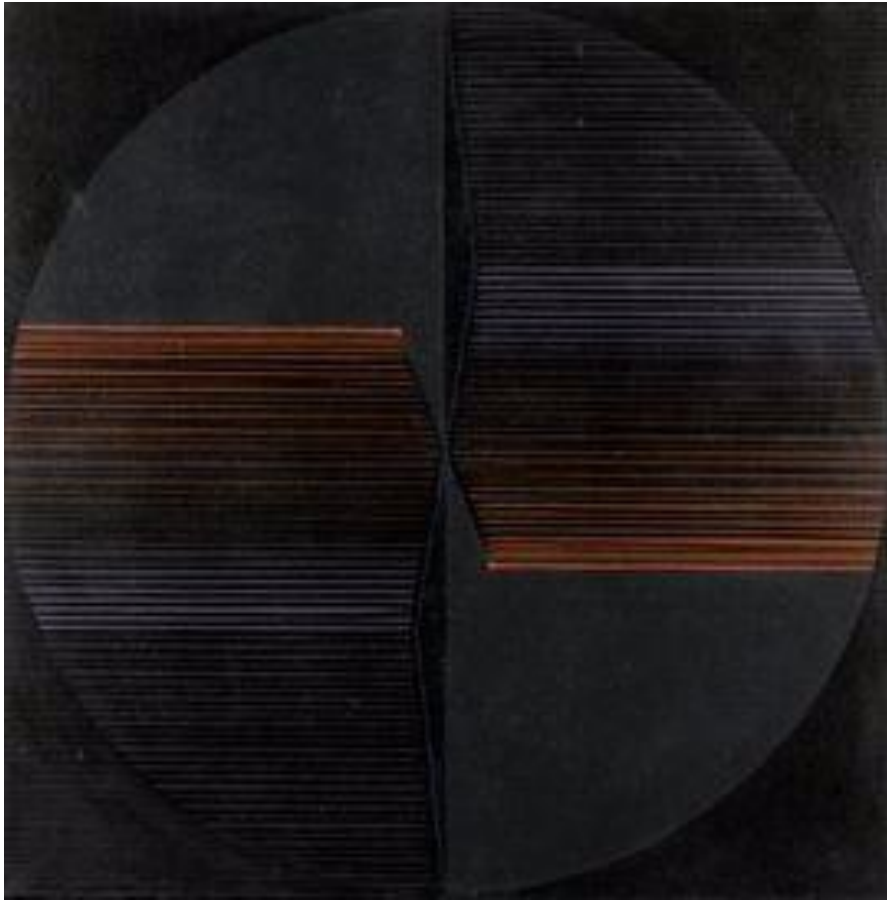
Paris and Rome, Turki found abstract art in America. From figurative to abstract, his creative realm was inundated by the spiritual Tunisia. Deeper experimentation into an expansion of mathematics and modern technology in painting led to movements such as Kinetic Art, with the likes of Argentinian artist Leopoldo Torres-Agüeros visceral style and perspective manipulation. In the contemporary realm, the abstraction of form and reinterpretation of perspective is ever present in the work of Asma M'naouar and Mahjoub Ben Bella, where time has allowed for the maturity of modern painting practices, with a newfound intimacy awarded to gesture and stroke.



Hedi Turki, *Clarté Matinale*, 1983, Oil on canvas
146 x 114 cm



Asma M'Naouar, *Mare Nostrum I*, Oil on canvas, 2019, 120 x 140 cm



Leopoldo Torres – Agüero, *Negra Rosa*, 1981, Acrylic on canvas, 150 x 150 cm



Mohammad Khadda, *Composition*, Oil on canvas, 110 x 85 cm

About the artists

Abdelkader Guermaz (Algeria, 1919 – 1996) grew up in Oran where he studied at the Beaux-Arts from 1938 to 1940. Until 1955, Guermaz worked in the figurative style like the 'Peintres de la Réalité Poétique', a French art movement. His early works are typically landscapes and still-lives. After 1955, he started painting abstract works, and was drawn to the avant-garde artists in Paris where he moved in 1961. He became associated with the School of Paris, befriending French artists such as Bissière, Manessier, Bazaine. Subtlety and minimalism characterize Guermaz's artistic approach, giving form to his spiritual meditations and inspiring French art critic Pierre Rey to call him the painter of silence and light. In the 1970's, Guermaz began incorporating modulated neutral fields, punctuated by touches of colour and subtle grid-like patterns, conceived as abstract landscapes. Attaining critical success in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the artist was largely forgotten upon the 1981 closure of the gallery Entremonde that represented him. His work, features in international museum collections and has been rediscovered in posthumous shows and texts. Abdelkader Guermaz is considered as one of the founders of modern art in Algeria.

Leopoldo Torres-Agüero (Argentina, 1922 – 1995) was an Argentinian painter who was raised in La Rioja, Argentina. Relocating to Buenos Aires in 1941, he later moved to Paris becoming a disciple of famed Brazilian painter Cândido Portinari. Agüero embraced art at an early age, beginning exhibitions and painting at the age of 20 years old. Influenced by Picasso, he introduced a reinterpreted form of Cubism, infusing magical realism reminiscent of Italy's artistic scene into South America. His artistic journey took him across continents, exploring Japan and becoming deeply impacted by Shintoism. In the 1950s in France, he took on the role of mentoring, supervising young artists at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. Notably, he championed the recognition of South American artists, catalyzing the South American kinetic and optical movement. His optical approach, inspired by Zen philosophy, retained a human sensitivity, distinguishing him from the purely mathematical focus of other kinetic artists. Upon his return to Buenos Aires in 1952, he joined the Academy of Fine Arts and the artistic circle including Raúl Soldi, and Osvaldo Svanascini. Amongst his painting practice, Agüero was involved in muralism, painting the mural "Christ on the Mount of Olives" in Olivos' Catholic Church in 1953. With a love for Japan ever-present, Agüero made another move, relocating to Japan from 1959 to 1962. At this point in his creative practice, Agüero's style shifted towards abstraction and Op Art. With honor, Agüero served as the Argentine ambassador to UNESCO in 1994, a role he held until his passing. His contributions were acknowledged with the Palanza Prize in 1989.

Hedi Turki (Tunisia, 1922 – 2019) is an emblematic figure of Tunisian painting. Turki was born in Tunis to a family of Turkish origin. At first, he learnt, self-taught, the fundamentals of painting, before completing an art course in Paris at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in 1951. From 1956 to 1957, he obtained a two-year scholarship to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. In 1959, he travelled to the United States, where he discovered American abstract art and enrolled in a class at Columbia University. From 1963 until his retirement in 1985, he taught at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Tunis. In 1964, Turki was one of the founding members of the Ecole de Tunis. His work has profoundly evolved over time from his early figurative work to abstraction. A further significant influence was the work of Abstract Expressionist artists, mainly of prominent American painters Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. His work was key in introducing abstract painting in Tunisia. Meanwhile, Turki's work is deeply rooted in his attachment to Tunisia and to spirituality. He lived and worked in Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia, where he died in 2019. Turki's work has been regularly exhibited in Tunisia, France, England and across Europe.

Chafic Abboud (Lebanon, 1926 – 2004) was born into the Greek Orthodox community in Lebanon, and produced a diverse body of work spanning oil painting, ink, watercolor, ceramics, and artists' books. His practice reflects a keen interest in the material essence central to global modernism. Studying under notable Lebanese painter César Gemayel at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts, he later trained in Paris with notable artists like Jean Metzinger and Fernand Léger, Pioneers of Cubism. Departing from Lebanese figurative art after the second world war he embraced vibrant abstract styles by 1948, crafting expressive canvases with textured surfaces and unique color palettes. In 1952, he was presented with the Lebanese government scholarship to study drawing and engraving at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Awarded the Victor Choquet Prize in 1960, he gained recognition as part of the Paris school and earned further acclaim, including the Prix du Salon d'Automne awarded by Lebanon's Sursock Museum in 1964. His international exhibitions include Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art's inaugural show (2010) and a significant retrospective at the Institut du Monde Arabe (2011). Abboud's pieces grace various public and private collections, including acquisitions by the French state and Paris Museum of Modern Art.

Nasser Assar (Iran, 1928 – 2011) was born in Tehran. Growing up in an intellectual milieu, he immersed himself in the philosophy-laden poetry of Rûmî, Hafez, Sa'adi, and others. In the late 1940s, he joined the Young Communists and pursued his art studies at the University of Tehran's Fine Arts School from 1950 to 1953. He remained connected to these influences and embraced the philosophies of Suhrawardî and Ruzbihan Baqli throughout his life. In 1953, he ventured to Hamburg, Germany, and later settled in Paris, despite speaking only Persian and English, and lacking employment. Marking his entry into the "nuagisme" movement, He debuted a solo exhibition in 1955 at the Prismes Gallery, introduced by Julien Alvard, emphasizing transparency and immateriality as a response to thick brushwork and surrealism. In the 1950's he embraced non-figurative sign painting and his philosophy was shaped by Liou Kia-hway's exploration of Taoist thought. He participated in the Antagonismes group exhibition in 1960, engaging with Herbert Read and existentialist philosophies. In 1961, he held his first London solo exhibition, where he connected with Francis Bacon and poet Yves Bonnefoy. His relationship with influential figures like Henry Corbin and Patrick Waldberg shaped his artistic journey. He produced portraits, ventured into printmaking, and in 2007, an exhibition at la galerie Lambert Rouland in Paris titled "Les Arbres de Nasser Assar" displayed his works. In 2009, the Christophe Gaillard Gallery presented a panorama of his works from the 1950s to recent canvases, and on this occasion, published a lithograph and a catalogue with texts by Rémi Labrusse and Alain Madeleine-Perdrillat.

Mohammed Khadda (Algeria, 1930 – 1991) was an Algerian painter, sculptor, and writer. He is considered one of the founding fathers of modern art in Algeria. Synthesizing western painting techniques with the fluidity of Arabic writing, Khadda represents a generation of Algerian artists who wove together calligraphic heritage and the formal language of Western abstraction through the 1950s. Forging a distinct Algerian artistic practice became more critical in the aftermath of the country's independence from France in 1962. The political transition influenced the founding in 1967 of art movements known as 'Aouchem', Arabic for tattoo, and School of the Sign, of which Khadda was an active participant along with Baya. Often working with a palette of earth tones, Khadda layers Arabic writing and calligraphy over atmospheric abstract compositions. In 1953, he travelled to Paris, where he spent a decade before returning to Algeria. Khadda was a founding member of the National Union of the Visual Arts, established in 1964, and participated in producing a number of collective murals during the 1970s. In addition to exhibiting regularly in Algeria and abroad, Khadda illustrated novels and books of poetry for several well-known Algerian writers, including Rachid Boudjedra.

Mahjoub Ben Bella (Algeria, 1946 – 2020) was born in Maghnia in the province of Tlemcen, Algeria. Studying art at the Fine Arts School of Oran until the age of 19, he left for France to study at the École des Beaux-Arts in Tourcoing and finally at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, settling permanently in Tourcoing in 1975. Ben Bella traverses' terrain both physical and spiritual, arduously piecing together a practice of intricate mark-making, embedment and labyrinthine layering. With an ode to automatism, Ben Bella moves towards a reinterpretation of European painting practices, leaning into a style that evokes a remembrance of forgotten language through the use of colour, line and object. Throughout his practice, he references the science of letters, cosmology and amulets found in Sufi cosmological theory. Through numerous exhibitions around the world and acquisitions by prestigious collections and museums, his mastery of various techniques and media was also stated in his monumental works: mural of the international airport in Riyadh (1982), a 12 km painted cobble-stone roadway for the international cycle classic Paris-Roubaix (1986), the mural of Nelson Mandela at the Wembley stadium in England (1988), a 4000 m² artwork projected on stage in the Pacaembu stadium in Sao Paulo, Brazil (1999) and also the design of 1,800 ceramic tiles in the subway station of Tourcoing in (2000) in France.

Asma M'Naouar (Tunisia, b. 1965) holds a degree in Aesthetics and Arts Science from the Institut des Beaux-arts of Tunis (1988) and furthered her studies at the Rome Art Academy in Italy (1993). Her densely textured paintings are composed of a gestural process of removal, scratching away at oil paint to produce perspectives primarily concerned with light, color and space. A practice informed by predecessors of the action painting process, her work is also heavily inspired by Art informel, specifically Antoni Tàpies' matter paintings. She's received artist residency grants in Switzerland, France, and Lebanon and settled in Italy in 2002 to complete her Master's in Conservation at Palazzo Spinelli in Florence. Notable awards include the "Giordano Bruno" 1st Prize in Solerno, Italy (1993) and the First Golden Prize at the Biennale of Kuwait (1996). She also received the 1st Prize for Visual Art from Tunisia's Ministry of Culture in 1999. Since 1996, Asma has exhibited at Elmarsa Gallery, showcasing her work across North Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, including venues like Sharjah Biennale (1995), the Arab World Institute in Paris (2008), and the Palais Namaskar in Marrakech as part of the exhibition "Symbiose de deux mondes-L'Europe et le Maghreb." She's engaged in international art forums like the Global Art Forum at Art Dubai. Her pieces are held in various public and private collections, including The Foundation Pietro Caporella in Rome, the Center Rachid Karamé in Tripoli, Lebanon, and the Ministry of Culture in Tunisia, along with private collections in Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

About the gallery

Founded in 1994, Elmarsa Gallery is located in Tunis and Dubai, with 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, 10am – 7pm

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

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