

Abderrazak Sahli (1941 – 2009)

Wisdom of the crowd

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 Nejib 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.

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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]

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Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 142 x 142 cm



Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 206 x 140 cm



Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 127 x 108 cm



Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 142 x 142 cm



Untitled, Acrylic on jute, 242 x 157 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.

2003	Professor at the University of Fine Arts of Nabeul, Tunisia
2000	Professor at the University of Fine Arts of Tunis
1982	Studied engravings at the Superior College of Fine Arts in Paris
1974	Master in Visual Arts of Paris VIII Vincennes, France
1969	Diploma in Fine Arts School of Tunis

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2022	<i>Wisdom of the crowd</i> , Elmarsa Gallery, Dubai
2016	<i>Tolerance and Peace</i> , Elmarsa Gallery, Dubai
2008	Exhibition at Galerie Hélène Lamarque, Paris, France
2007	Gulf Art Fair (Art Dubai 2007) in Art projects « Buissons Ferriques », installation of 100 metal stakes in steel sheet metal. Height: from 180 to 270 cm. Represented by Elmarsa gallery.
2007	Galerie Atrium, Carthage, Tunisia
2007	University of Fine Arts in Sfax, Tunisia
2006	Exhibition at the Palais Kheireddine, City Museum, La Medina, Tunis, Tunisia
2005	Galerie Ammar Farhat, Sidi Boud Said, Tunisia
2004	La Table Mobile, Cologne, Germany
2002	Palais Kheireddine, La Medina, Tunis, Tunisia
2001	Galerie Jeanine Rubeiz, Beirut, Lebanon
2000	Galerie Ammar Farhat, Sidi Boud Said, Tunisia
2000	Residence of Art in Dordogne, Musée du Périgord, Périgueux, France
2000	Galerie Kalyste, La Soukra, Tunisia
1999	Museum of Marburg, Germany
1998	Exhibition of ceramics at La Maison des Arts, Belvédère, Tunis, Tunisia
1997	Galerie Yahia, Tunis, Tunisia
1997	European Centre of Ceramics, Den Bosch, Holland
1997	Kirn, Germany
1996	Galerie Chiyem, Tunis, Tunisia
1996	Maison des Comonis, Toulon, France
1995	Bakou, Leighton House Museum, London, UK
1995	Museum of Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia
1991	Galerie El Mechtel, Tunis, Tunisia
1990	Galerie Ain Le Kram, Tunisia
1989	Galerie Edition Alif "El Bakou", Tunis, Tunisia
1989	Museum of Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia
1988	Galerie Arlogos, Nantes, France
1984	Cultural Centre of Fontenay-aux-Roses, Paris, France
1970	Galerie Irtisem, Tunis, Tunisia
1969	Galerie de l'information, Tunis, Tunisia

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2021	<i>A Tunisian Story...</i> , Elmarsa Gallery, Dubai
2017	<i>Tour du Monde en Tondo</i> , Musée de l'Hospice Saint-Roch, Issoudun, France
2017	<i>E-Mois, Autobiography of a Collection</i> , Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden, Marrakech, Morocco
2015	<i>Rituals of Signs and Transitions (1975-1995)</i> , Darat al Funun - The Khalid Shoman Foundation, Amman, Jordan
2012	<i>Intervalles</i> , Elmarsa Gallery, La Marsa, Tunisia 2012 Intervalles, Elmarsa Gallery, La Marsa, Tunisia
2008	Kunstforum Arbeitsgericht Marburg, Germany
2008	Les pieds dans le plat, Galerie Ammar Farhat, Tunis, Tunisia

- 2008 Le rouge et le noir, Galerie le Violon Bleu, Tunis, Tunisia
- 2008 Algiers museum collection from the Institute of the Arab World, Paris, France
- 2008 Museum Collection: The twenty years of the Institute of the Arab World, Paris, France
- 2008 Expérimentale 14, Germany
- 2008 Tribute to Gorgi, Galerie Gorgi, Tunis, Tunisia
- 2008 Dubai Contemporary Art Fair (UAE), Saragosse (Spain)
- 2008 Cologne Biennial, Germany
- 2008 Art Connexion, Elmarsa Gallery, Tunisia
- 2007 Galerie Gorgi, Tunis, Tunisia
- 2007 Galerie Ammar Farhat, Tunis, Tunisia
- 2007 Dar El Founoun: The Union of the Tunisian Artists Exhibition, Tunis, Tunisia
- 2007 Kunsthalle Dominikanerirche Osnabruck, Germany
- 2007 Dialogues Méditerranéens, St Tropez, France
- 2007 Gulf Art Fair Dubai, Elmarsa gallery, Tunisia
- 2006 Rencontre Internaionale 2006, Galerie Espace Top Action, Algiers, Algeria
- 2006 Cologne Biennial, Cologne town hall, Germany
- 2006 Poétique de l'Existence, Hammamet, Tunisia
- 2006 International Contemporary Art Fair, Istanbul, Turkey
- 2006 Expérimentale, 14th of July 2006, Germany
- 2006 Galerie Le Violon Bleu, Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia
- 2006 Elmarsa Gallery, La Marsa, Tunisia
- 2006 Galerie Gorgi, Le Belvédère Tunis, Tunisia
- 2005 L'Art Ephémère, Palais El Abdelliya, La Marsa, Tunisia
- 2005 Célébration, Salon 2005 in Monaco, organised by AIAP and UNESCO
- 2005 Galerie Ammar Farhat, Tunis, Tunisia
- 2005 Contemporary sculpture exhibition at Dar Kamila, the Residence of France at La Marsa; with renowned artists Bernard Venet and Bernard Pages; organised by the French Embassy in Tunisia
- 2004 Opus III, Algiers, Algeria
- 2004 Akteins Köln participation, Cologne, Germany
- 2004 Chebba Exhibitions: Hammamet and Sousse, Tunisia
- 2003 Contemporary Art Meeting (French-Tunisian Artists), Tunis City Museum, Tunisia
- 2003 Sculpture Urbaine, Opus II, Grenoble, France
- 2003 Symposiium, Kunstforum at Köln (Cologne), Germany
- 2002 Exhibition at Two: Salhi and Haser, Galerie Holbein in Lindau, Germany
- 2002 Pop Art Exhibition, Geneva Fair, Switzerland
- 2002 Galerie J.J Donguy, Paris, France
- 2001 Palais Kheireddine, City Museum of Tunis, La Medina, Tunisia
- 2001 The Spring of Poets, Performance Conference, Tunis, Tunisia
- 2000 Alexandria Biennial "Jury Prize", Egypt
- 2000 Séville University Exhibition, Spain
- 2000 Exhibition and performance of Ventabren Contemporary Art, France
- 2000 The Tunisian Painter, Hannover International Fair, Germany
- 2000 On the banks of Isère, Grenoble, France
- 1999 Galerie Ammar Farhat, Tunis, Tunisia
- 1999 Art without Borders, Timotca Exhibition, UN, New York, USA
- 1998 City of Nevers, France
- 1998 Travelling exhibitions: Timotca Exhibition, Art without Borders, UNESCO in Paris, France / Exhibition for The Union of Tunisian Artists, Tunis, Tunisia / Galerie Municipale Mitra, Lisbon, Portugal / Espace Saint Séprien, Toulouse, France
- 1998 Kif Kaf Handicap event, Mahjoub Tébourba, Tunisia
- 1998 Maghreb Cultural Centre
- 1997 International Cultural Centre of Hammamet, Tunisia
- 1997 Doha Biennial, Qatar
- 1997 100 Artists of 5 Continents, Pont Lapa, Rio De Janeiro, Brazil
- 1997 Tunisian Contemporary Painting, Kuwait
- 1996 Galerie Mille Feuilles, La Marsa, Tunisia
- 1996 Galerie Plus Arts, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France
- 1996 Galerie J and J Donguy, La Roquette, Paris, France
- 1995 Tunisian Season: Spain
- 1995 Look at Tunisian Contemporary Art, Toulouse, France
- 1995 Look at Tunisian Contemporary Art, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, France
- 1995 Africa 95, The Delphinium Trust Studio, London, UK
- 1995 Al Fan Kassel, Germany
- 1994 Paintings of the Maghreb, Madrid Museum of Modern Art, Spain
- 1994 Schilders Uit Maghreb (Painters from Maghreb), Gant, Belgium
- 1993 Paintings from Maghreb, Madrid, Spain
- 1992 Doha Biennial, Qatar
- 1992 Galerie Ken Bouficha, Tunisia

- 1992 Galerie Kalysté, Tunisia
1992 Galerie Chiyem, Tunis, Tunisia
1992 New Delhi Biennial, India
1992 Universal Exhibition, Seville, Spain
1990 Galerie Civaca of Contemporary Art, Marsala, Italy
1990 Trends of contemporary painting of the Maghreb: Travelling exhibitions at Casablanca, Morocco, Nouakchott, Mauritania, Tripoli, Lebanon and Tunisia: Galerie Chiyem, Tunis; International Centre Cultural of Hammamet, Tunisia
1990 Vent Jaune, Editions Alif "EL Bakou", Tunisia
1990 Museum of Modern Art, Paris, France
1980 Paris Biennial, Museum of Modern Art, Paris, France
1979 Galerie Lara Vinci, Paris, France
1979 International meetings, Grand Palais, Paris, France
1979 Galerie Arlogos, Nantes, France
1978 Arab Painters in Paris, Espace Cardin, Paris, France
1978 Exhibition of Young Painters, Paris, France
1978 Salon de Mai, Paris, France
1971 Paris Biennial, Museum of Modern Art, Paris, France

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS (Selection)

Institut du Monde Arabe (Institute of the Arab World) Paris, France
Tunisian Bank at Tunis and Amman, Jordan
The Ministry of French Culture
The Ministry of Tunisian Culture
Collection of the City of Tunis
Kunsthalle Dominikanerkirche, Osnabrück, German

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
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