

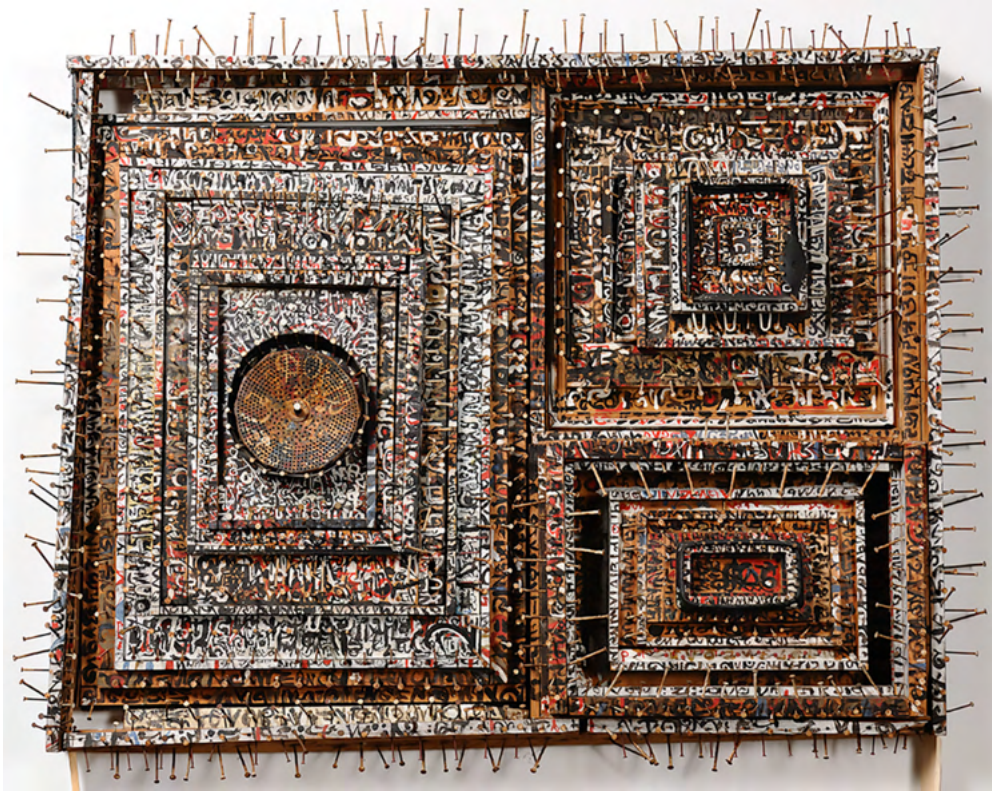
Frieze Masters

Mahjoub Ben Bella: The Formation of The Sign

Stand S29

14 – 18.10. 2026

The Regents Park, London, United Kingdom



Mahjoub Ben Bella, *Bois clouté*, 1971

Mixed media painting using nails and found objects assembled on a wooden frame, 84 x 108 x 12 cm

Elmarsa Gallery is pleased to present a focused survey of the formative decades of Artist Mahjoub Ben Bella (Algeria, 1946- France, 2020) as part of the Frieze Masters *Spotlight* Section. The presentation will focus on the artist's earliest documented period of work, made in the 1970's, during his time at the École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Bridging into the 1980's, a selection of canvases and mixed-media works will also be shown.

Studying art at the Fine Arts School of Oran until the age of nineteen, he left for France to study at the École des Beaux-Arts in Tourcoing, three years after the Algerian Independence. Ben Bella continued his studies at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, where his cohort included Samta Benyahia (Algeria, b. 1947), Nadia Saikali (Lebanon, b. 1936) and Abdulkader Arnaout (Syria, 1936-1992). Finding place for himself in Northern France, Ben Bella settled first in Montmartre and then Tourcoing with his wife Brigitte, embedding himself within the local arts community, and joining L'Atelier de la Monnaie, an anti-academic art movement in Lille that fought against the constraints of traditional French art education, advocating for freedom in artistic form and content.

Ben Bella's practice deepened, and an ongoing negotiation between the painting approaches of automatism and lyrical abstraction alongside principles developed by the Aouchem group (an Algerian arts collective founded in 1967 that focused on ancestral symbols as primary visual language, reclaiming indigenous heritage and rejecting Eurocentric frameworks of art education, opposing state mandated Socialist Realism) and the Hurufiyya movement emerged, creating the base for an artist's position rooted more deeply in the refusal to render legibility, to be categorized, claimed and translated. Ben Bella embraces and names the Graphy and the Hypergraphy seen within the Lettrist movement as a key component to his process, leading him through decades of creative practice.



Mahjoub Ben Bella, Composition abstraite, 1984, Mixed media and collage on canvas, 30 x 40 cm

The evocation of forgotten language and mystical ritual alongside postcolonial history using colour, line and found object become actions taken on the artists' terms alone. Firmly choosing his position, Ben Bella embraces the ritual of the process above all, inviting interpretation into the work, with a knowing that contextual imposition will be inevitable; it is expected. What is often pinned as musically influenced mark-making, becomes an active eluding to the context of the artists' nuanced history, which provides a more expansive reference for his body of work. The principles that the artist chooses to work alongside place emphasis on our inability to calculate the events that take place within the action of the moment. That deviation and improvisation go hand in hand with the action of having formed the idea of the finished piece. This transmutation of a thought into its materialized state is methodical, and purposefully aims to be uncalculated, much like our dreams, feelings, and emotions. As layers of paint are methodically placed onto his blank surface, his interests lie in filling space and saturating the canvas, much like the ways in which music saturates the physical space, so that he can work.

Contemporary with Arte Povera and the short-lived Supports/Surfaces movement, his creations reposition him as material experimenter. Ben Bellas early works are the beginning of an extensive career in material experimentation, with works on canvas, paper and three-dimensional medium such as ceramics and wood, crates, found industrial material, ink, mirrors, studs and nails, he is an investigator.

His practice is not one that lives within the linear trajectory. It may move from the experimentation of form using the graphy as seen in *Emotions*, 1971 and *Composition*, 1980 to found and hand-crafted objects enmeshed together, bearing resemblance to talismans and totems symbolizing power and prosperity, seen in *Composition*, 1985 and *Calligraphies*, 1981. He extends and stretches his roladex of graphies, shrinks and flattens them, painting new life into what they can be perceived as, and what they can create. Even within the titling of his work, memories of places, practices and pivotal events in a history less known are brought into the present, as seen in *Sans titre (Série Montmartre)*, 1972, when Ben Bella worked out of his studio in Montmartre or *Écritures imaginaires*, 1983, where the title points us into a more thoughtful interpretation of the shapes and graphy structures, evoking a potentially relevant remembrance of Judeo-Islamic talismans found across North Africa. Moving between mediums and styles, Ben Bella finds no limit in what is explored within his paintings. His ability for exploration is granted by his solid chosen position; this becomes a corrective moment to his reception as a painter of calligraphic surfaces alone.

Our presentation of Mahjoub Ben Bellas' process deviates from his later known, more colorful paintings labelled as lyrical abstractions, restoring a nearly forgotten dimension of Ben Bella's practice: the mixed media works of the 1970s and 1980s. *Bois clouté*, 1971, The nail work that will be shown during the presentation, is similar in process to the body of work that was exhibited at the 50th SIGMA 13 exhibition in Tournai in 1977, where the critic J.P. Gibiat described them as the invention of "La peinture sculptée, la sculpture peinte", sculpted painting, painted sculpture. It is Bristling with dozens of projecting nails; every surface is covered in signs with frames nestled into one another. Some components of this series come together to bear uncanny resemblance to elements found within the Nkisi Nkondi figures of the Kongo People. The tactility of Ben Bellas experimentation begs the question of what Ben Bellas body of work preserves. Alongside the wider context of the talisman and the graphy, the works are evolving even within their finished state. We are not privy to whether our interpretations are relevant, only that imposing our knowledge and experience is the only expectation of the artist.

This presentation hopes to encapsulate the thoughtfulness that is to create work that breathes. As the act of painting often lives in the realm of the two-dimensional, Mahjoub succeeds in bringing life to a cacophony of marks made. To quote Jean-Louis Pinte, "...in his canvases, he composes sacred fields whose furrows carry us beyond mere lyricism. He lets himself be possessed by the vertigo of writing until ecstasy. Until he becomes the chanter of a prayer book in honor of art itself." (The Sacred Fields of Ben Bella, Figaroscope, 1995). In this statement, Jean-Louis Pinte begins to scratch the surface in a more nuanced attempt at acknowledging Ben Bellas' influences and drives. The work is deeply referential, to the histories of a world deeply connected to its past. His mind and body become a vessel for subconscious reference making. The subconscious transmits the fragmentation of Ben Bellas' heritage, thoughts and interests into the works made each time.



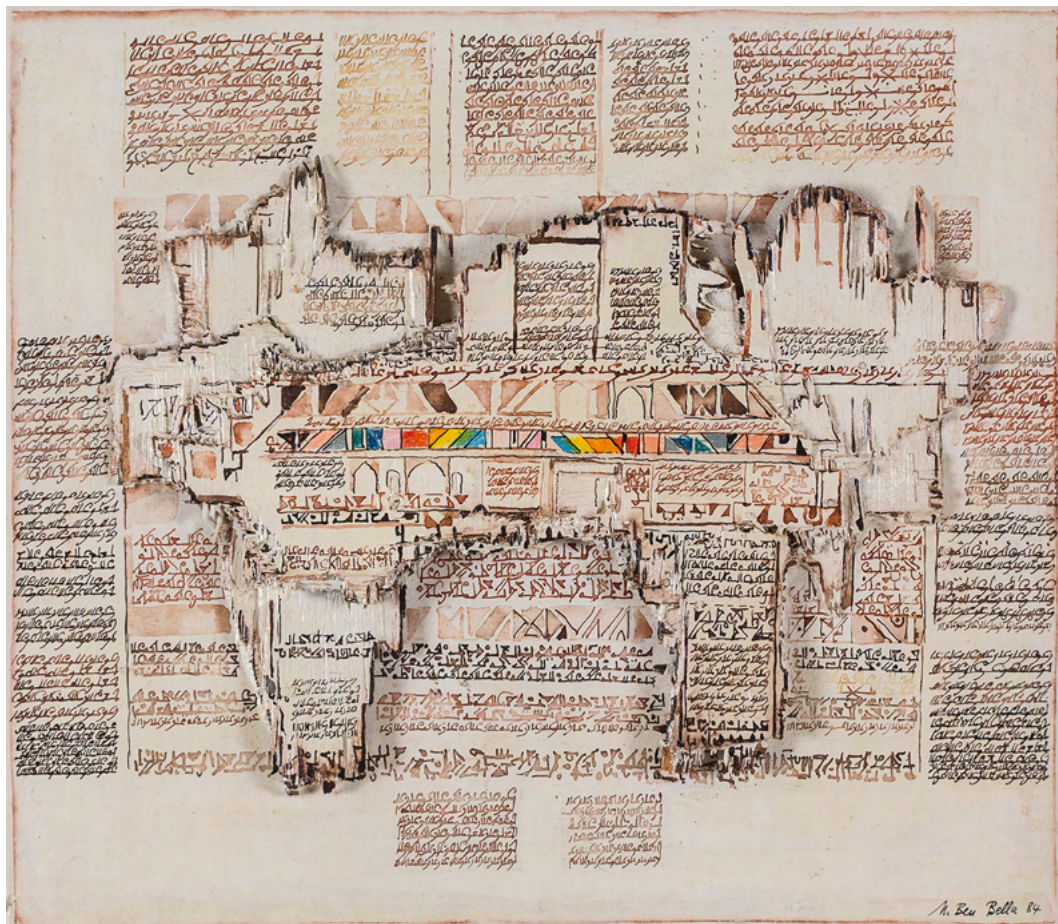
Mahjoub Ben Bella, *Untitled*, 1974, Oil on canvas, 80.8 x 66.5 cm

“The magical conception of the sign – a transcendence of calligraphic tradition – takes the symptomatic form of graphomania. As if, seized by an irrepressible urge to write, the artist’s body was transformed into a typewriter; a desubjectifying and deviant machine; transgressing the boundary of “beautiful writing” (calligraphy), moving towards drawn writing, and finally towards emancipated (even exploded) writing.”

Morad Montazami

Excerpt from *Mahjoub Ben Bella : toujours magique le signe est plus fort que les bombes*, 2024

Translated from French



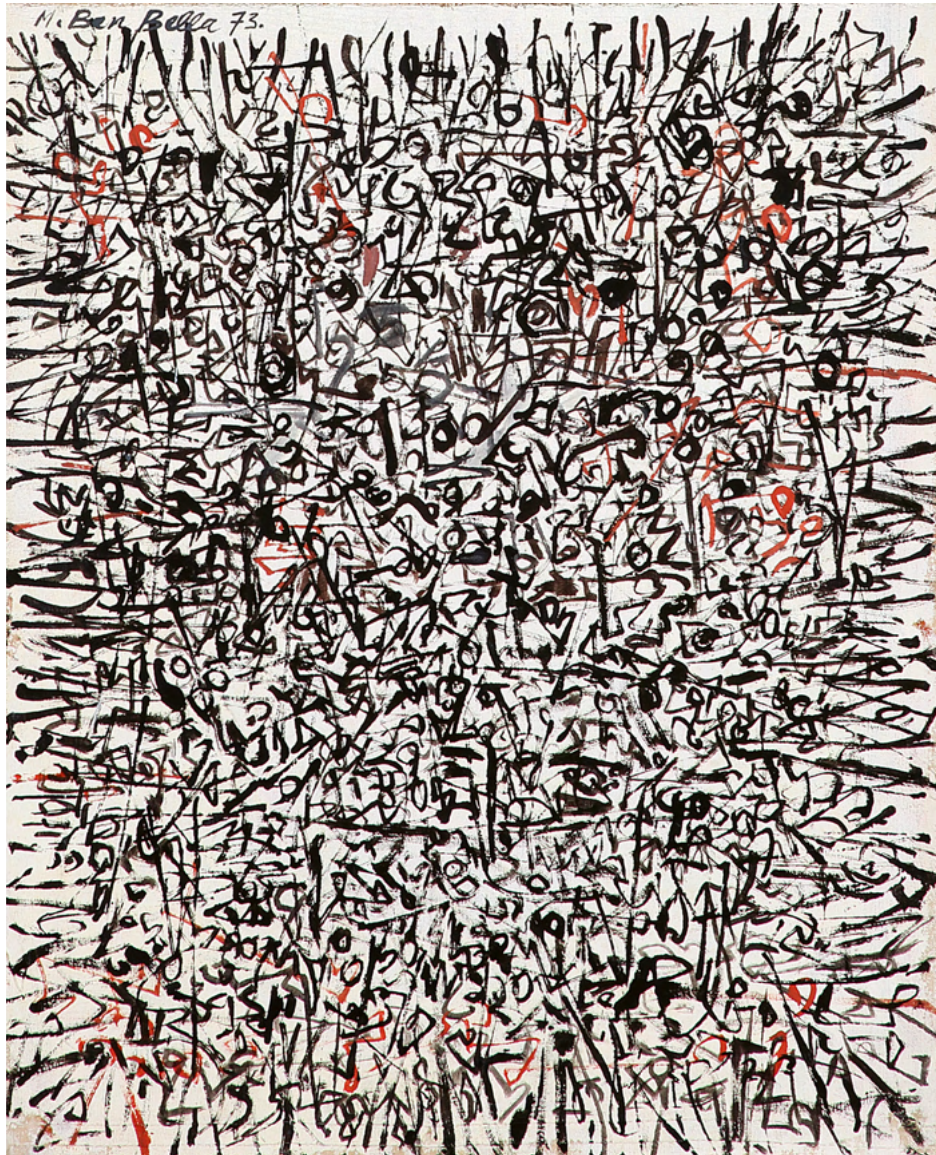
Mahjoub Ben Bella, *Calligraphies*, 1984, Mixed media on canvas, 30 x 40 cm



Mahjoub Ben Bella, *Ecritures imaginaires*, 1983, Mixed media on canvas, 46 x 33 cm



Mahjoub Ben Bella, *Sans titre (Série Montmartre)*, 1972, Oil on canvas, 80.8 x 59.7 cm



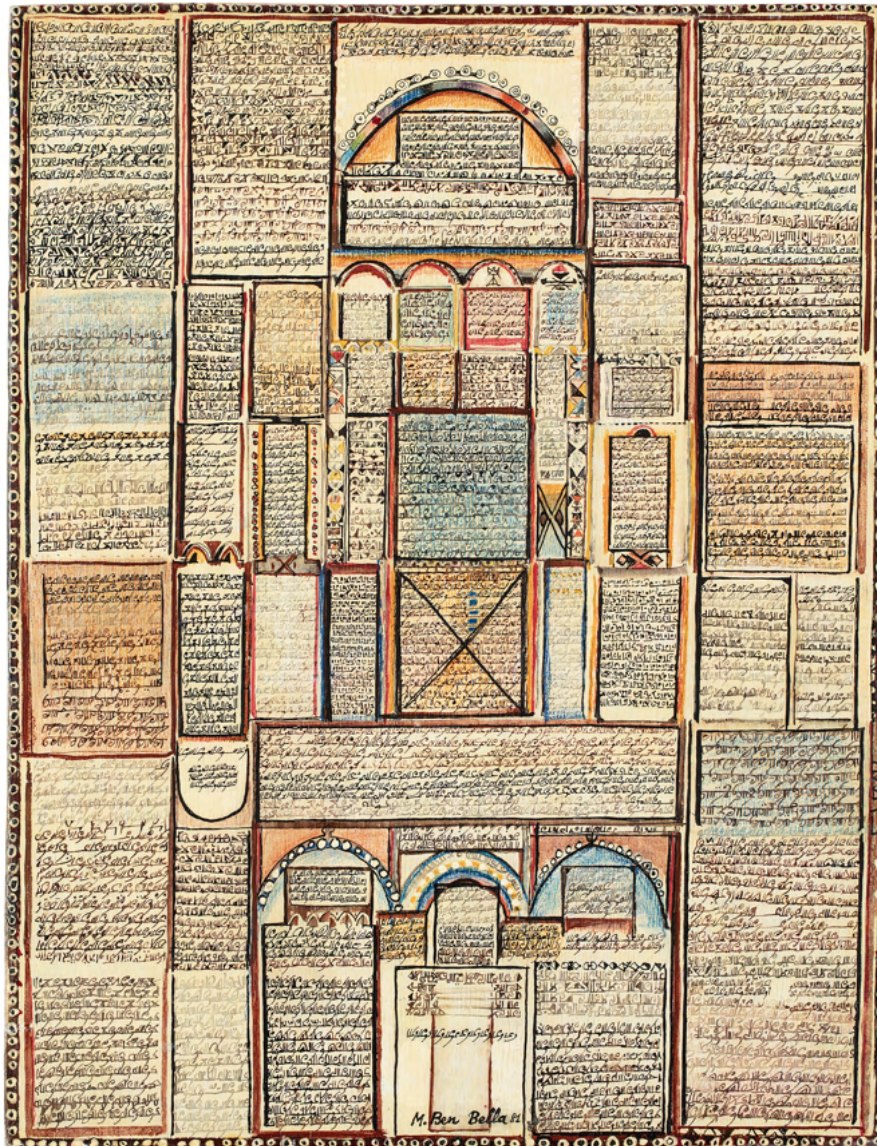
Mahjoub Ben Bella, *Untitled*, 1973, Oil on canvas, 46.5 x 38 cm



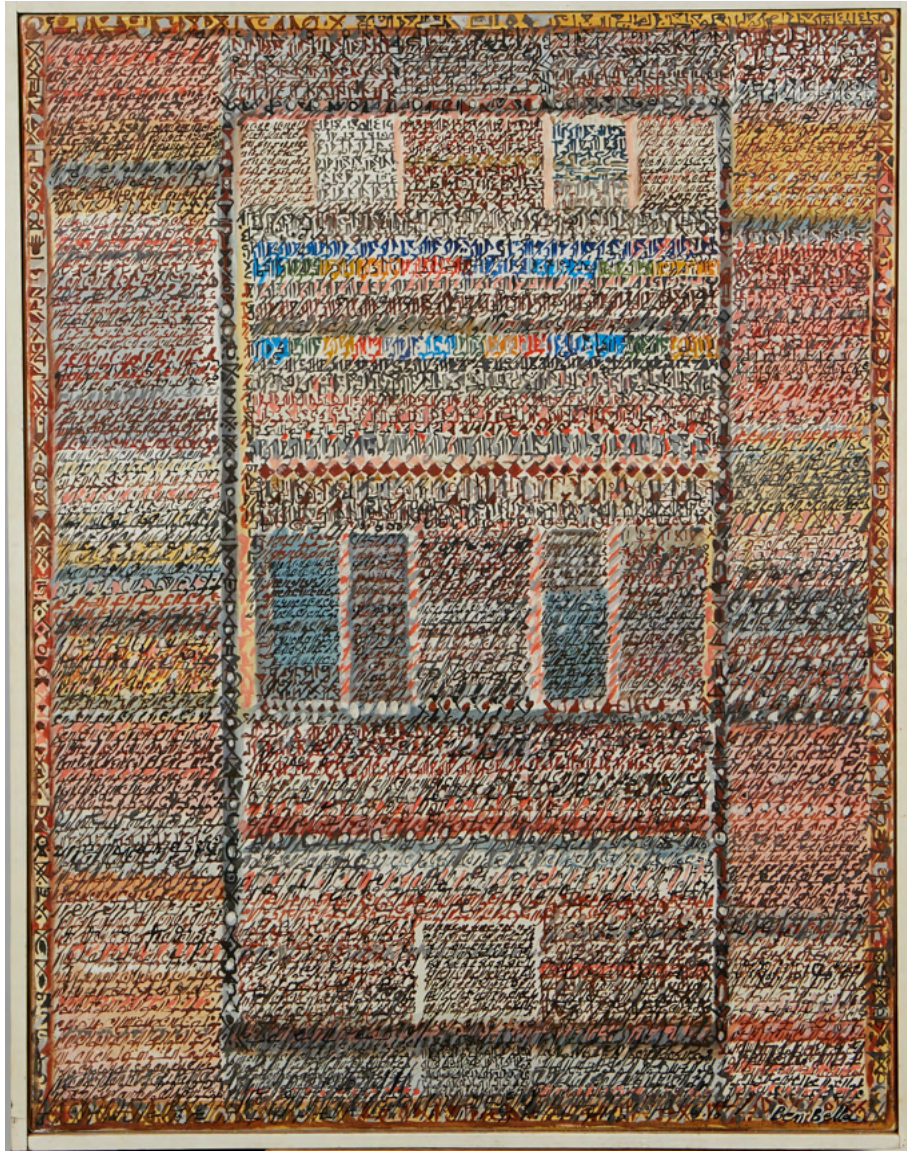
Mahjoub Ben Bella, *Composition blanche*, 1971, Oil on canvas, 112 x 81 cm



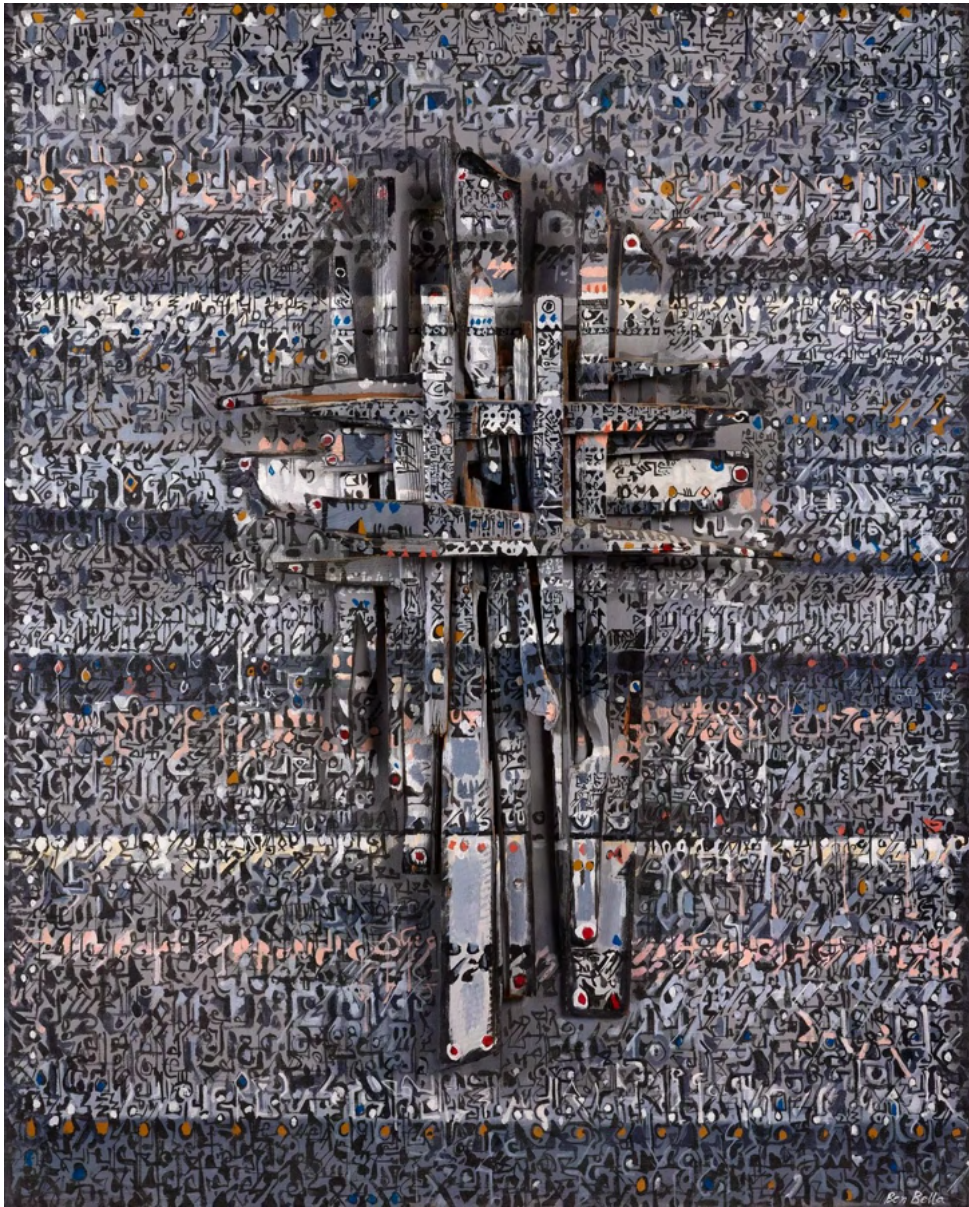
Mahjoub Ben Bella, *Emotions*, 1971, Oil on canvas, 161 x 119 cm



Mahjoub Ben Bella, *Composition*, 1980, Oil on canvas, 65 x 50 cm



Mahjoub Ben Bella, *Composition*, 1985, Wood and acrylic on canvas, 100 x 80 cm



Mahjoub Ben Bella, *Composition*, 1985, Wood and acrylic on canvas, 100 x 81 cm

Art Fair Facts

Frieze Masters, *Spotlight* Section

Stand S29

Location: The Regents Park, London, United Kingdom

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About Mahjoub Ben Bella

Mahjoub Ben Bella was born in 1946, 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. He settled permanently in Tourcoing in 1975 and worked there until his passing in 2020. Having painted invariably on canvas, paper and three-dimensional medium such as ceramic and wood, he is not only the maker but the ritual specialist too. Ben Bellas work has been acquired by prestigious collections and museums globally, From the Institut du monde Arabe, Paris, British Museum, London, Museum of Fine Arts, Tourcoing, Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation (DAF), Beirut, Museum 2000, Luxembourg, National Fund of Contemporary Art, Paris, Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman, the Museum of Modern Art, Lille Métropole, and the National Museum, Tunis to name a few. 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.

About Elmarksa Gallery

Founded in 1994, Elmarksa Gallery is in Tunis and Dubai, with an expanding European presence. 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 diaspora, with a wide-ranging exhibition programme at its gallery space in Tunis. Active in both the primary and secondary markets, Elmarksa also represents its artists at major international art fairs focusing on North African artists in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Paris, London, Marrakech, Miami and New York.

www.galeriemarksa.com