

**CASABLANCA ART SCHOOL**  
**A POSTCOLONIAL AVANT-GARDE 1962–1987**  
JULY 12–OCTOBER 13, 2024

**WALLPANELS**

Following the euphoria of Moroccan independence in 1956, teachers and students at the Casablanca Art School sparked an artistic revolution. Inspired by the region's rugs, jewelry, calligraphy, and painted ceilings, they combined abstract art with Arab and Amazigh traditions. Proclaiming a new art for Morocco rooted in Afro-Amazigh heritage, they triggered a social and cultural uprising that continued into the future. Drawing on the country's multicultural heritage and inspired by the Bauhaus artistic movement, Casablanca Art School teachers and students radically reimagined Moroccan art and arts education. They situated their art in everyday life, creating paintings, posters, magazines, and murals in public spaces and organizing festivals. This Moroccan "new wave" generated an urban movement that eventually contributed to artistic solidarity between countries on the African continent, Latin America, and West Asia. This exhibition focuses on the distinctive vision for modern life driven by five influential teachers at the school: Farid Belkahlia, Mohammed Chabâa, Bert Flint, Toni Maraini, and Mohamed Melehi. Known informally as the "Casablanca Group," this legendary collective developed into a cross-generational network of artists. This first institutional exhibition of their work and legacy in Germany unites artworks by twentytwo artists, encompassing dynamic abstract paintings and urban murals, as well as crafts, graphics, interior design, and typography. Rarely seen archive material, such as film footage, vintage journals, photographs, and prints, complements these displays.

**BEGINNINGS**

Founded in 1919 during the French protectorate, École Municipale des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca (later renamed the Casablanca Art School) followed Western pedagogical approaches, disregarding the region's traditional arts and crafts and admitting students on the basis of ethnicity, gender, and social class. Morocco gained its independence in 1956, and in 1962, Casablanca Art School appointed the young artist Farid Belkahlia as its director, a position he held until 1974. During his tenure, Belkahlia opened the school's doors to Moroccan and female students and appointed like-minded teachers who helped him to reimagine Moroccan visual arts and education. This room introduces the many intersecting paths paved by figures such as Farid Belkahlia, Mohammed Chabâa, and Mohamed Melehi, who formed the school's core; Toni Maraini, who articulated the group's shared vision through manifestos and essays; and André Elbaz, who, at Belkahlia's behest, taught for one academic year.

**Maurice Arama**

Maurice Arama was the Casablanca Art School's first Moroccan director from 1960 to 1962. He played an important role in the renovation of the school's building and studios, giving the curriculum a new direction, introducing art history studies as well as courses in ceramics, graphic arts, and advertising—innovations further developed by his successor, Farid Belkahlia. Perhaps Arama's most important innovation was to inaugurate Morocco's first grassroots "museum of modern art" within the school, which was open to the public. It formed part of the school's estate and curriculum, hosting both student exhibitions and international events.

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Ahmed Mesnaoui, *Le Maroc en marche*, (Morocco Forward), National television report about Maurice Arama and the Casablanca Art School, 1962, 2 min.

## Farid Belkahia

Before becoming director of the Casablanca Art School in 1962, Farid Belkahia had spent two years in Prague. There, he sympathized with global anticolonial movements. His painting *SéVICES* (1961–62) refers to the violence of the French army during the war in Algeria. In *Cuba Sí* (1961), Belkahia responds to the Bay of Pigs invasion, organized by the USA against the Cuban revolutionary government under Fidel Castro.

## André Elbaz

The artist André Elbaz was the first tutor Belkahia recruited while he was director of the Casablanca Art School. They had met at the first Paris Biennale in 1959 and shared an eagerness to return to Morocco to establish an innovative institution for the study of art. Elbaz, appointed professor of painting, experimented with collage during his first (and only) year at the school. The mixed-media works shown here were exhibited at the Zwemmer Gallery in London in 1963.

## The Casablanca Trio

The Casablanca Art School's first landmark exhibition was held in 1966 in the foyer of the Théâtre National Mohammed V in Rabat. Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chabâa, and Mohamed Melehi became known as the "Casablanca Trio" or "Casablanca Group" following this event. The presentation of their work in this semi-public space stood in complete contrast to the state-organized salon exhibitions that undermined Moroccan artists' work. A week before the exhibition opened, Chabâa published an important manifesto-like article in Arabic in the newspaper *Al-Alam* on the concept of painting and the plastic language, as well as the way in which Morocco's "abstract" plastic traditions challenge colonial standards and norms.

## MAKING ART PUBLIC

The two open-air "Présence Plastique" exhibitions presented by the Casablanca Art School in 1969 made a bold statement: modern art would now be part of Moroccan everyday life. By this time, three additional artists had joined the school as professors—Mohamed Ataallah, Mustapha Hafid, and Mohamed Hamidi. But more than ten years after independence, Moroccan artists still found it difficult to find spaces or galleries to exhibit their work. In a bid for visibility, six Casablanca Art School artist-professors united to develop the manifesto exhibition series "Présence Plastique". "Présence Plastique" was staged in protest against the state-organized Salon du printemps (Spring Fair), a colonial relic that considered Moroccan artists' work "naïve." Casablanca Art School artists brought their artwork to the streets. They installed paintings in two public squares in May 1969: Jemaa el-Fna, Marrakech, and a few weeks later, Place du 16 Novembre, Casablanca. Tutor Toni Maraini described: "People from all walks of life (urban, rural, and every social class) gather[ed] in a unique state of mind. We hung our work here for ten days [...] to show works outside of the closed doors of galleries and salons, where this audience had never been." This nomadic exhibition also traveled to two high schools in Casablanca in 1971, reaching a next-generation audience. It became a defining moment for Moroccan art history.

Showreel with photographs by Mohamed Melehi: "Présence Plastique" exhibition, Marrakech and Casablanca, 1969, and Mohammed V and Fatima-Zahra high schools, Casablanca, 1971. And with a Sequence from Mohamed Abbazi's *La Longue Journée* (The Long Day); with recordings of the exhibition "Présence Plastique" exhibition, Casablanca, 1969

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## CREATING COLLECTIVELY

The 1968 annual Casablanca Art School exhibition launched Moroccan “new wave” art. In collaboration with their teachers, some of the school’s most pioneering students, such as Malika Agueznay, Abdellah El Hariri, and Houssein Miloudi, produced and displayed works at the city’s Parc de la Ligue Arabe La Coupole gallery. In his first years as the school’s director, Farid Belkahia invited Toni Maraini to establish the first modern art history course in Morocco. Bert Flint taught visual anthropology, and the school appointed two new tutors: Mohamed Melehi to teach painting, collage, and photography, and Mohammed Chabâa as a tutor in graphic design and interior design. These new departments merged ideas from art, craft, design, and architecture, influenced by their staff’s studies abroad and the interdisciplinary approach of the Bauhaus movement. Working alongside their students, the teaching staff began to dismantle the Western styles and methods previously taught at the school, such as easel painting. They encouraged students to research African and Amazigh heritage and led study trips focused on archaeology, pottery, calligraphy, and religious paintings, as well as techniques of weaving, leatherwork, jewelry, and tattoos. Collectively, by the 1968 exhibition, their artwork demonstrated a synthesis of Afro-Amazigh influences in a modernist language and style.

## Ahmed Cherkaoui

Ahmed Cherkaoui was a pioneering, internationally renowned representative of modern Moroccan art who paved the way for rethinking the relationship between artists and artisans. Although he was not a lecturer at the Casablanca Art School, he remained an artistic friend and mentor, exhibiting alongside the school’s artists. Mohamed Melehi photographed Cherkaoui’s drawings, shown here, to illustrate both artists’ fascination with the patterns found in Amazigh talismans and tattoos.

Showreel with photographs by Mohamed Melehi: annual Casablanca Art School student exhibition at La Coupole gallery, Parc de la Ligue Arabe; studios and workshops of the Casablanca Art School, Casablanca, 1968

The exhibition at Casablanca’s Parc de la Ligue Arabe La Coupole gallery in 1968 represented a high point of collective creativity. In the booklet accompanying the exhibition, lecturer Toni Maraini announced three goals: “the understanding and practical knowledge of integrated and applied arts”; “the notion of anonymous and collective creation” inspired by “the traditional artistic past”; and the need to seek “a future perspective” that would reflect “the reality of a country that is being built”—a reality in which the artist is called upon to participate in the country’s social and economic reform.

## GRAPHIC DESIGN

According to Casablanca Art School tutor Mohammed Chabâa, “the poster is a painting that is accessible to all.” Casablanca Art School artists used graphic design to bring art into the public sphere, enhancing traditional mediums like painting in their workshops with new approaches and strategies borrowed from other fields. Tutor Mohamed Melehi, for example, combined painting with collage and opened a photographic studio, while Chabâa taught the decorative arts, scenography, and neo-calligraphy. Melehi and Chabâa co-designed the journal *Souffles*, as they did many of the posters and books displayed here. Melehi described *Souffles* as a “thought-provoking blend of poetry, literature, and cultural critique,” which aspired to decolonize and democratize Moroccan arts and culture. During Morocco’s decolonization period, parallel historical developments motivated solidarity with other countries and movements. The posters on this wall, where art merges with cultural and political activism, feature calls for the support of the people in

Chile who rose up against the Pinochet regime, the people caught up in the violence of the Angolan Civil War, and solidarity with the Palestinian people. Some of the posters contain depictions of violence and militarized combat.

## **Souffles**

The journal *Souffles* aimed to decolonize the arts and democratize the field of culture. In issue 7–8 (1967), Chabâa and Melehi advocated an abstract and modern art rooted in the vernacular and emancipated from colonial influence. The journal was published from 1966 until 1972, when it was banned and Chabâa (its sole graphic designer) was imprisoned for being a Marxist activist by the Moroccan authorities. The journal's founder, the poet Abdellatif Laâbi, was also imprisoned for eight years for cultural activism. The cover designs shown here are by Mohammed Chabâa and Mohamed Melehi.

## **Intégral**

In 1971, Mohamed Melehi founded the journal *Intégral*, launched by his publishing and graphic design studio, Shoof, for which he worked as a photographer, editor, and artistic director. This “journal of plastic and literary creation” played a key role in documenting the modern movement in Morocco between 1971 and 1978.

## **Herbert Bayer**

Herbert Bayer and Mohamed Melehi met in 1968 at the International Sculpture Symposium in Mexico City. A major figure at the Bauhaus School in both Weimar and Dessau, Germany, Bayer had taught composition, advertising, and typography—all fields that Melehi was very interested in. From 1963 on, Bayer traveled to Morocco regularly. His 1970s lithographs, in particular, show the influence of these visits, which he describes as follows: “Before I came here, I painted with monochrome colors and very sophisticated forms. But once in Morocco, I started a new plastic experience, and my research shifted. I returned to primary colors and pure geometric forms.”

## **DESIGN FOR THE EVERYDAY**

To inject art into daily life, the artists of the Casablanca Art School, together with architects and a wider network of collaborators, created a vision for public art and the regeneration of neglected urban spaces and neighborhoods. One of the most important players was the architectural studio Faraoui & de Mazières. Based in Casablanca and Rabat, they developed a visionary design concept that reached across numerous sites and public infrastructure projects. Between 1967 and 1982, the network designed interiors at Casablanca's National Tourist Office, the National Bank for Economic Development, factories, hospitals, universities, holiday parks, and new-build hotels. The artists and architects regarded the buildings' lobbies, walls, ceilings, furniture, and fixtures and fittings as “plastic territories” awaiting creative intervention, integrating art and craft with architecture. The trio—Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chabâa, and Mohamed Melehi—collaborated on several hotel projects with artists represented in this exhibition: Carla Accardi, Hamid Alaoui, and Mohammed Hamidi. Toni Maraini describes their mission as “to make art present to life, to (re)integrate creation into the human environment, to the lived space, and into the daily things [...] a work of prevention from environmental degradation.” After decades of neglect, efforts are now underway to protect the remaining elements of these previously forgotten designs.

## **Carla Accardi**

During the 1970s, Carla Accardi, an important postwar Italian artist whose abstract paintings are inspired by traditional calligraphy, spent several periods in Rabat and Casablanca. She met the

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artists from the Casablanca Art School through the art historian Toni Maraini and held a productive artistic dialogue with artists such as Abdellah El Hariri. At the invitation of the architectural studio Faraoui & de Mazières—alongside Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chabâa, and Mohamed Melehi—Accardi created a decorative relief panel in the Hotel Tarik in Tangier, which still exists today.

## AFRO-AMAZIGH HERITAGE

Using tradition to inspire the future instead of relegating it solely to history, the Casablanca Art School's teachers and students rediscovered local cultural heritage as a source of inspiration for their art. They began to work in collaborative and experimental ways. Tutor Bert Flint found motivation in researching the most striking rugs and jewelry from rural regions, resurrecting them as teaching tools. Absent from museum collections, influences from African, Amazigh, Islamic, and Mediterranean heritage, as well as ancient Mesopotamian and Phoenician artifacts, began to surface in the works of Casablanca Art School artists. They revisited craft traditions that Western art history had considered utilitarian or ornamental and started to incorporate calligraphy, decorative symbols, and geometric patterns with spiritual significance, using locally sourced materials such as copper, animal skin (leather), wood, and wool. Mohamed Melehi explains: "Bert Flint [inspired] the students with their own but ignored cultural roots, to lead them to believe that there is a strong and local—not foreign—artistic expression in Moroccan culture, with its own right to modernity."

## Bert Flint

Bert Flint conducted extensive research in the High Atlas and Anti-Atlas Mountains. His work shows that civilization arises not only in the urban and trading centers but also among the nomadic and desert populations in cultural exchanges that go far beyond national or colonial borders, which makes the distinction between "North African" and "Sub-Saharan African" meaningless. Flint's work later led him to coin the transcultural term "Afro-Berber," which was then replaced with the now preferred term "Afro-Amazigh" because it better describes the Indigenous peoples of this region and opposes the racist foreign designation used by the French colonial power.

Showreel with photographs by Mohamed Melehi: painted ceilings, 1969

Amazigh jewelry and brooches, documented by Toni Maraini, Bert Flint, and Mohamed Melehi

## Bert Flint and Mohamed Melehi

Bert Flint and Mohamed Melehi knew each other before they both joined the Casablanca Art School as lecturers, having found common ground artistically in Melehi's wave-pattern paintings and Flint's studies of Amazigh ornamentation. Melehi created a photographic inventory of Flint's research in the Souss region, which included the area's distinctive decorative heritage as well as the painted ceilings in the mosques and mausoleums of saints that, like the brotherhoods that venerate them, are called zaouias. The research report was published in the Casablanca Art School journal *Maghreb Art*, no. 3 (1969).

## DOCUMENTATION ROOM

Ahmed Bouanani, *6 et 12* (6 and 12), 1968, 35mm video, 18 min.

Ahmed Bouanani (1938–2011) was a poet, essayist, and novelist, as well as an important film director, editor, and screenwriter. While working at the Centre cinématographique marocain

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(CCM) in 1968, Bouanani and his two colleagues, Majid Rechiche and Mohamed Tazi, created the experimental film *6 et 12*. Shot between six in the evening and midnight, the film offers a wild, nighttime perspective on Casablanca—a work that could be likened to a kinematic “urban symphony” reminiscent of 1920s Soviet cinema. It reflects a remarkable new approach to Moroccan cinema: documentary, independent, and postcolonial.

Bik van der Pol, *At the end of this long journey* (2023), Single-channel video, 35 min.

Bert Flint was an eminent collector, cultural anthropologist, and expert in the Afro-Amazigh arts, a category he established through the Marrakech-based Musée Tiskiwin, which he founded in 1996. Flint taught popular African arts at the Casablanca Art School from 1965 to 1968. In the video, *At the end of this long journey*, conversations with Bert Flint before his death in 2022 are combined with a documentary about the Musée Tiskiwin. This video was produced as part of the School of Casablanca residency program initiated by the KW Institute for Contemporary Art (Berlin) and ThinkArt (Casablanca), in partnership with the Sharjah Art Foundation, IFA, Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, Goethe-Institute Morocco, and Zamân Books & Curating.

Mujah Maraini-Melehi, *Mémoire future* (Future Memory), 2024, Single-channel video, 40 min

The Italian anthropologist and art historian Toni Maraini initiated the Casablanca Art School's first history of art program focused on African and Mediterranean art while working as a lecturer at the school between 1964 and 1969. She wrote articles for the journal *Souffles*, co-founded the art magazine *Intégral*, and was heavily involved in the arts and cultural festival Asilah Moussem Culturel, founded in 1978. In this conversation with Morad Montazami, she discusses her legacy and her history.

## TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Artists associated with the Casablanca Art School combined the search for a specific Moroccan cultural identity with international aspirations and artistic and political solidarity between independent Arab nations. In 1974, the first Biennale of Arab Art took place in Iraq's capital, Baghdad, at the Museum of Modern Art. Organized by the General Union of Arab Artists, it brought together artists from fourteen Arab nations and displayed over 600 artworks. Morocco was represented by fourteen artists related to Casablanca Art School who, rejecting popular trends in painting, were seen as the most vibrant and dynamic “new wave,” standing out for their lack of compromise with Socialist Realist iconography or Surrealist trends. The Moroccan delegation included, among others, Farid Belkahia, Saâd Ben Cheffaj, Mohammed Chabâa, Abdelkrim Ghattas, Miloud Labied, and Mohamed Melehi. The Casablanca artists extended communication with other Arab nations, organizing the second Biennale of Arab Art in Rabat, Morocco, in 1976. Two years later, Mohammed Chabâa and Mohamed Melehi designed the official poster for the International Art Exhibition for Palestine in Beirut. Organized by the Palestine Liberation Organization, the exhibition displayed 200 artworks donated by artists from around thirty countries.

Showreel with photographs by Mohamed Melehi: the Moroccan delegation at the first Biennale of Arab Art, Baghdad, 1974

## OPEN AIR MUSEUM

The annual international arts and cultural festival Asilah Moussem Culturel is famous for its open-air exhibitions, murals, live art, and music. The festival—co-founded in 1978 by Mohamed Melehi and the politician Mohamed Benaïssa, in collaboration with Toni Maraini—transformed the two

founders' hometown in northern Morocco into a landscape of street exhibitions and frescos. They organized exhibitions of painting, sculpture, and ceramics, as well as activities for the public, lectures, theater performances, and concerts. Toni Maraini led workshops for children, contributing to community murals and revitalizing the city's neglected buildings. As Maraini recounted, "We wanted to reach the general public where they live, in a casual and accessible way [...] paintings shown outdoors, in the public space." Melehi invited artists from the Arab nations, other parts of Africa and Asia, Europe, and the United States to participate in the festival. Their collective mission was to beautify everyday life, equating art with social progress. The Asilah Moussem Culturel continues to this day as a legacy of the Casablanca Art School's activism to decolonize and democratize art. Every year, the festival brings contemporary arts to the community and to all those who do not have access to museums.

## **Chaïbia Tallal**

Chaïbia Talal was Morocco's most famous self-taught female artist, unattached to any schools or groups. Her work had been dismissed as "naïve" or folk art, but the artists of the Casablanca Art School appreciated it, sharing her interest in popular iconography and mythology. Mohamed Melehi and colleagues included Talal's work in the exhibition *Exposition nationale des arts plastiques* at Rabat's Galerie Nationale Bab Rouah in 1976 and invited her to participate in the 1986 arts and cultural festival *Asilah Moussem Culturel*.

Showreel with photographs by Mohamed Melehi: murals at the arts and cultural festival *Asilah Moussem Culturel*, 1978–1986

## **ROTUNDA**

### **BIK VAN DER POL – SCHOOL OF WALKING**

Liesbeth Bik and Jos Van der Pol have worked collaboratively as Bik Van der Pol since 1995. They see walking as an act of collective thinking that addresses questions of citizenship and publicness, as well as a mode of interweaving relationships between individuals, communities, and urban infrastructure within the context of broader discussions about decolonization and modernization.

Their video series *School of Walking* portrays Casablanca as a modern city and creative center, where a generation of artists and cultural workers from the 1960s and '70s designed their dreams of a collective future. A selection of three videos from the series are shown here. The protagonists—Imad Dahmani, Maria Daïf and Nabil Qerjj—are accompanied by Bik Van der Pol and share different experiences of the city and its history. *School of Walking* was produced as part of the School of Casablanca residency program, initiated by the KW Institute for Contemporary Art (Berlin) and ThinkArt (Casablanca), in partnership with the Sharjah Art Foundation, IFA, Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, Goethe-Institut Morocco, and Zamân Books & Curating.