

selection of rugs made by Berber women.

On the face of it, this might seem an unremarkable act. However, it represented the entire ethos of a school that promoted the native over the imported — a school nowadays considered a vital example of 20th-century modernism.

The first ever exhibition in the UK devoted to the Casablanca Art School opens on 27 May 2023 at [Tate St Ives](#). It's a moment described by its curator, Morad Montazami, as one of 'rehabilitation'. He means that it shows how avant-garde art wasn't produced solely in Europe and North America — despite traditional, Western accounts of art history long suggesting that it was.

The exhibition covers the school's heyday, from 1962 to 1987, but to understand what made it special, some historical context is called for.





Mohamed Melehi (left) at his studio in Casablanca with Mohammed Chabâa. Photo: © M. Melehi archives/estate

During the course of the 19th century, France exerted an ever-growing colonial influence in Morocco. In 1912, the country became a French protectorate. The Casablanca Art School was founded in Morocco's biggest city the following decade. It adopted an Ecole des Beaux-Arts model, where classes typically involved easel painting and working from life models or statues.

After the Second World War, a nationalist movement in Morocco grew, culminating in independence from France in 1956. 'Artistic change took longer to happen, though, than political change,' says Montazami. 'Colonialism doesn't stop affecting a culture the minute a country is independent. It lasts until such a time as a local ecosystem incubates and emerges to subvert it.'

In the case of the Casablanca Art School, the incubation began in 1962, with the appointment of Farid Belkahlia as its director. He soon asked his compatriots Mohamed Melehi and Mohammed Chabâa to join him, and the teachings of this trio of artist-professors (all in their mid-twenties) ushered in a generation of progressive practice.





Farid Belkahia (1934-2014), *Cuba Si*, 1961. © Fondation Farid Belkahia

‘This wasn’t simply an aesthetic revolution, but a pedagogic one,’ says Montazami. ‘Students were encouraged to look beyond Western academic traditions and focus on local ones instead.’

They investigated Arab and Berber heritage, and made excursions across Morocco to visit calligraphers, potters, tanners, weavers and jewellers. The aim was to assimilate into their work the methods, techniques and styles of these artisans. There was no longer to be any distinction, as there had been in the school’s early years, between fine and applied arts.

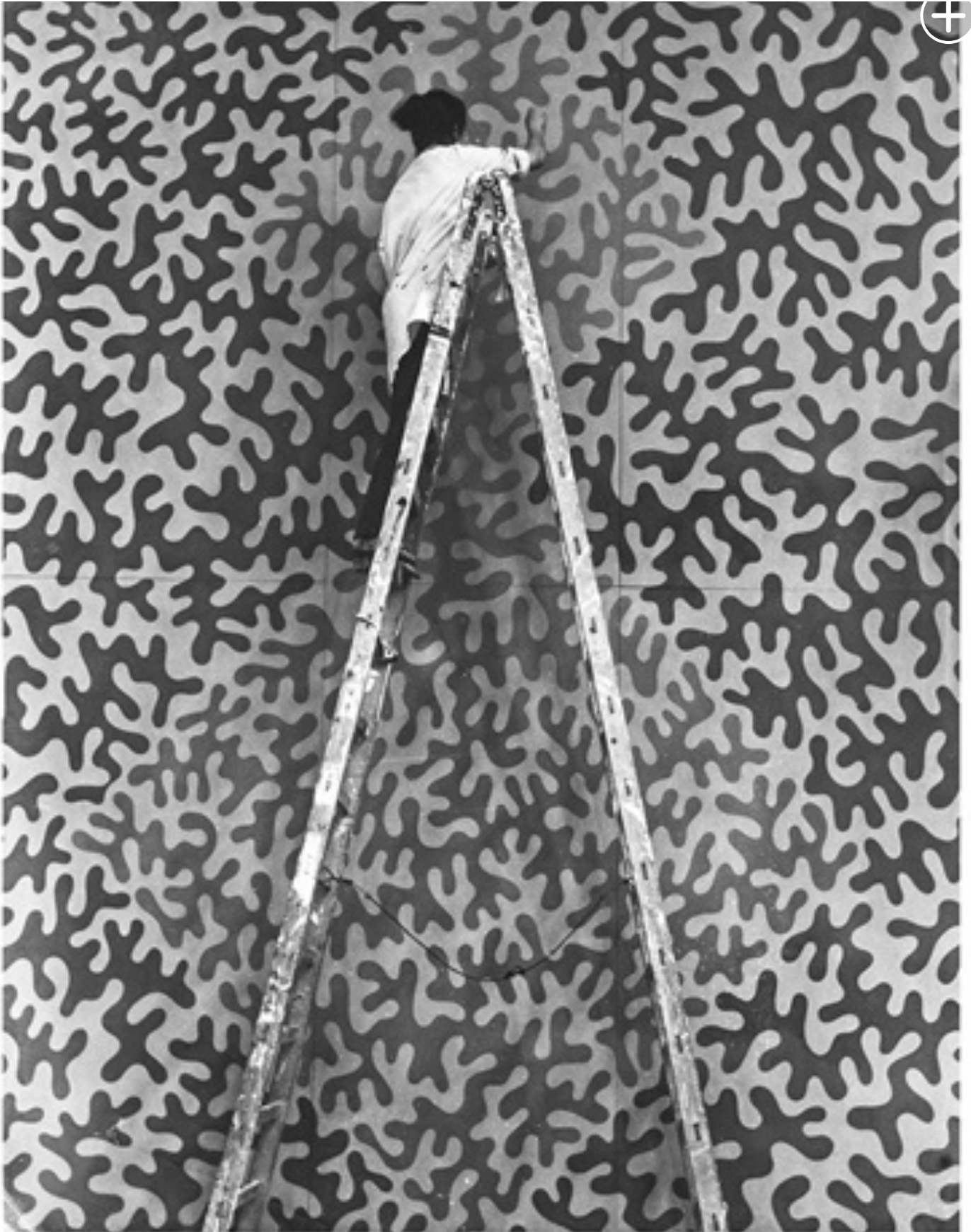
Belkahia became renowned for painting with dyes on animal skins. Chabâa, in his role as professor of graphic design, repurposed Arabic calligraphy for use in signage and posters.



Mohammed Chabâa (1935-2013), *Untitled*, 1977. Acrylic on canvas. Tate collection. Photo: Fouad Mazouz

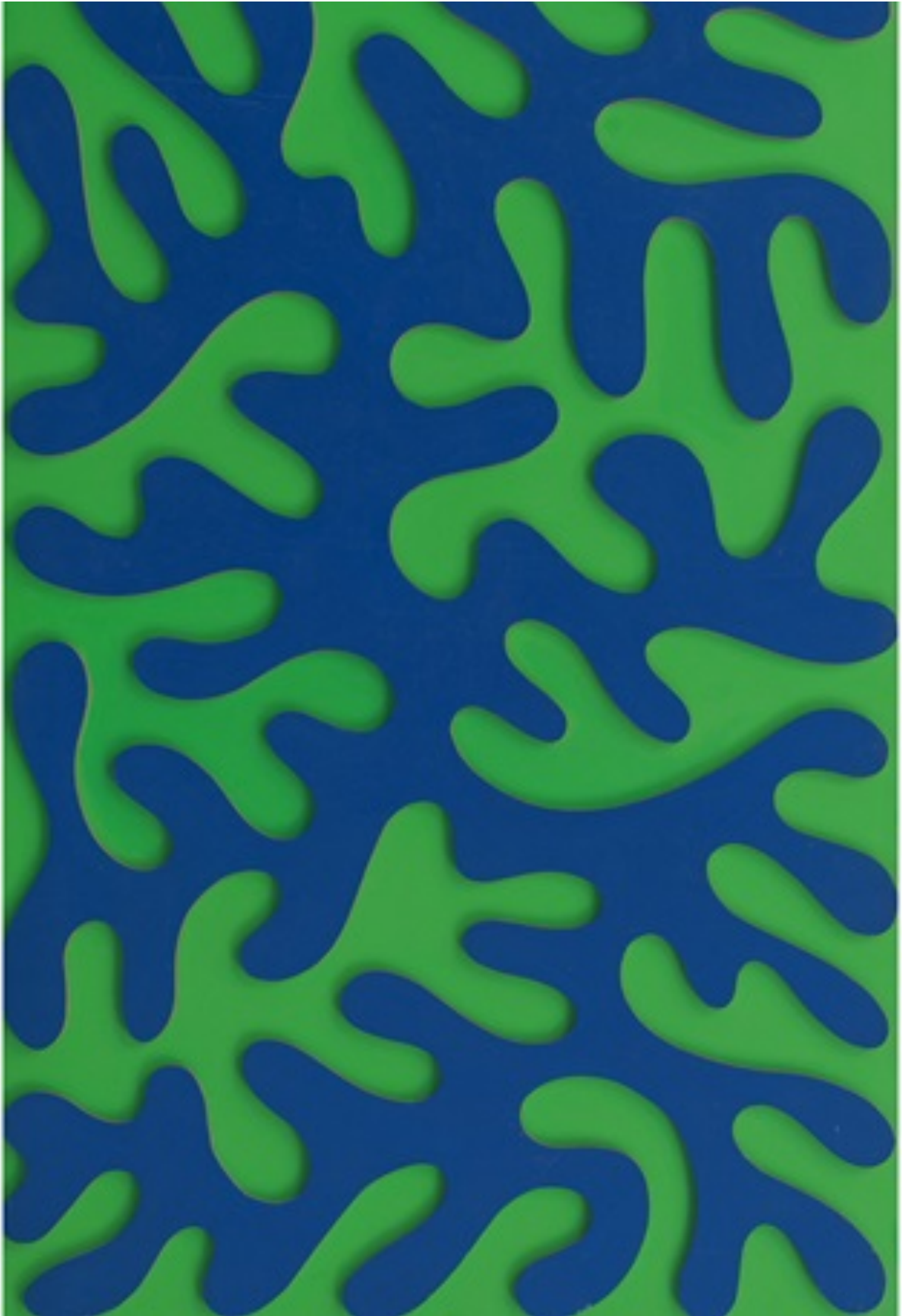
Melehi, as professor of painting, encouraged students to reinterpret the geometric patterns of traditional Berber carpets and Islamic decoration. As a support, he favoured wood over canvas; he also oversaw the execution of many murals.

The term 'Casablanca Art School' refers to anyone connected to the institution, students and teachers alike. It wasn't long into the Belkahia era that they were being dubbed *artistes contestataires* ('protest artists') by the national press.



Malika Agueznay working on *Symbole féminin*, 1968, at the Casablanca Art School. Photo: Courtesy of the artist





Malika Agueznay (b. 1938), *Composition*, 1968. Courtesy the artist

In many cases, the school's projects were of a public and collaborative nature. This included occasional work with the architecture studio Faraoui & de Mazières in designing interiors for buildings such as Casablanca's National Bank for Economic Development and National Tourist Office.

It's true that the school had conventional exhibitions in conventional galleries, but Belkahia was always looking for new horizons. In 1969, he and his colleagues took art to the streets, with a now-legendary outdoor exhibition known as *Présence Plastique*, held first in Marrakech's main square, the Jemaa el-Fnaa, and then in Casablanca's 16 November Square. (Both iterations lasted a fortnight.)



View of *Présence Plastique*, the exhibition held by Farid Belkahia and his colleagues in Casablanca (and previously in

The idea was to make art an everyday part of Moroccan life, in contrast to state-organised exhibitions such as the Salon du Printemps, which were attended predominantly by a social elite. As the six exhibiting artists explained in a joint statement in *Souffles*, a journal affiliated with the school, they wished to ‘awaken the average person’s curiosity, his critical spirit, to stimulate him so that he integrates new plastic expressions into the rhythm of his life, into his daily space’.

Inspired by the success of *Présence Plastique*, in 1978 Melehi co-founded the International Cultural Moussem of Asilah, an annual arts festival held across civic spaces in his home town of Asilah in northern Morocco. It ranks as an enduring legacy of the Casablanca School’s cultural activism and is still held today.



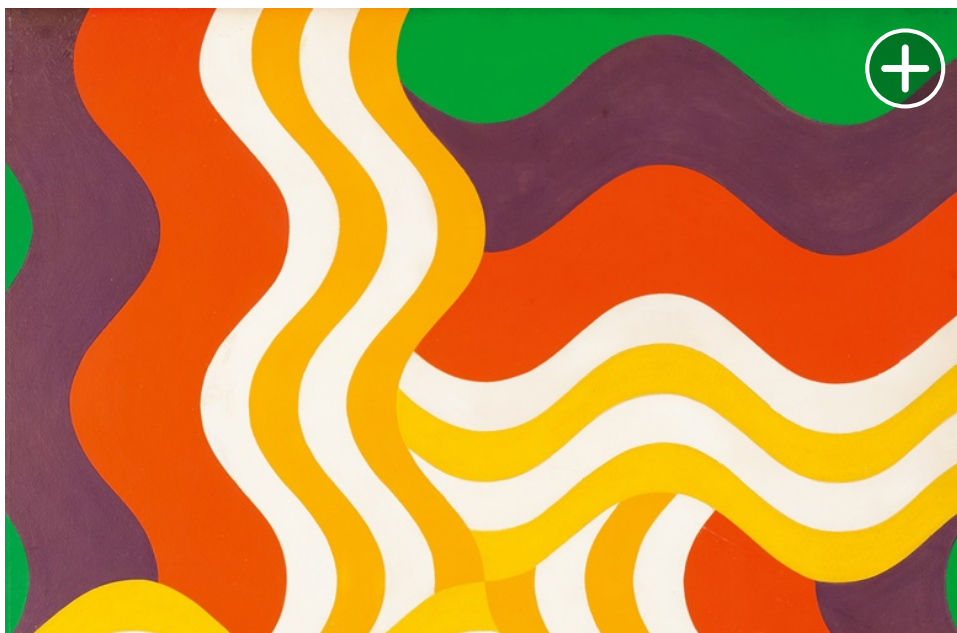




Mohamed Melehi (1936-2020), *Untitled*, 1983. Cellulosic paint on wood. 150 x 200 cm. © Mohamed Melehi Estate

It's worth stressing that the school's outlook and activities weren't entirely without Western influence. Belkahia, Melehi and Chabâa had all studied in Europe and/or North America before taking up their teaching posts back home (Belkahia chiefly in Prague, Chabâa in Rome, Melehi in Rome and New York). They openly acknowledged the Casablanca School's debt to its German predecessor, the Bauhaus — specifically the interdisciplinary approach whereby art, craft and design were all taught under the one roof.

The trio were also aware of the experiments in abstraction being carried out in the West, some of which were ostensibly not dissimilar to their own. Melehi's work, in particular, shows an affinity with hard-edge painting, which was popular in the US in the 1960s, exemplified by the likes of Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly.





Mohamed Melehi (1936-2020), *Composition*, 1970. Acrylic paint on cardboard. 120 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist, MACAAL and Fondation Alliances

The tantalising question is how much, and how consciously, Casablanca artists were influenced by their Western counterparts. (The staging of the current exhibition in St Ives seems apt, given the Cornish town's association with its own generation of innovative abstractionists active in the post-war years.)

Belkahia left his role as the school's director in the mid-1970s, by which time his achievements had also included significantly increasing the number of female students, Malika Agueznay probably being the most prominent among them.





Mohamed Melehi (in chair) at the Casablanca Art School with a group of teachers (including Mohammed Chabâa and Farid Belkahlia) and students (among them, on the far right, Malika Agueznay). Photograph by Toni Maraini. Photo: Courtesy of Malika Agueznay

The school still exists today, but Tate's exhibition focuses only on the period up to 1987, as that was the year in which Belkahlia, Melehi and two of the artists they had mentored, Mohammed Kacimi and Fouad Bellamine, were asked to represent Morocco at the São Paulo Biennial. In other words, that was the year the school received what might be deemed official recognition.

Although most of the major Casablanca Art School works are today found in Morocco and the Middle East, Western institutions such as Tate, MoMA and the Centre Pompidou have also acquired examples in recent years.

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Melehi died in 2020, aged 83. After leaving the Casablanca Art School, he twinned a successful career as a painter with another in government (he was Director of Arts at Morocco's Ministry of Culture between 1985 and 1992). In an interview shortly before his death, he looked back fondly on his time as a professor.

'Everything felt as fresh for us, as artists, as it did for the audience,' he said. 'There was a feeling of newness everywhere... [It was] the post-independence era, one of high hopes and new visions.'

*A collaboration between Tate and Sharjah Art Foundation, The Casablanca Art School is at Tate St Ives from 27 May 2023 to 14 January 2024, before moving to Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE, where it will open in February 2024*

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POST-WAR & CONTEMPORARY ART | ARTISTS

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Words by Alastair Smart

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Main image: A mural by Mohammed Chabâa at the inaugural International Cultural Moussem of Asilah, the annual arts festival co-founded by the artist and teacher Mohamed Melehi in his home town in 1978. Photo: M. Melehi. © M. Melehi archives/estate

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