

*portée*

Yazid Oulab

Exhibition Dates | 12.11 to 8.01.16

Most works of art need language to be described. But other ones, more rare, describe the language. Yazid Oulab's artwork definitely belongs to the second category. Looking at his work is above all to listen to the whisper of the drawing, to the silent clamour of the painting and to the deafness of early writings. Be it drawing, painting or sculpture, they all relate to language or more precisely to the breath of words. That is indeed the primary quest of the artist: to learn to speak, to learn to breathe and to re-learn to write.

In the late 1980s, he left the School of Fine Arts in Algiers to join Luminy, the Marseille School of Art. During a study trip to Düsseldorf in 1988, he felt deeply disconcerted by a discussion with a German gallery owner. 'Where are you from? "Asked the gallery owner, "what story do you know of painting? You are a people of letters, not of images. Aren't you worried to ape infinitely a western art that is distant from you? ". To these questions, as legitimate as tendentious, and for twenty years, the artist will relentlessly provide the answers. "What is my filiation? "Asked Yazid.

Returning back to one's own roots is a blurry endeavour. He first begins his journey to the Sumerians to revisit cuneiform writing. He distorts Nails with his own hands and transforms them into Alif letters to re- carve out writing. He is seeking to return to the origins in order to recount anew that history. From his quest for beginnings, is born a visceral interest in the philosophy of Sufism and in Sufi contemplation, Sufi silence, Sufi repetition, and Sufi solitude. And it is precisely the delicacy and depth of Sufism that best qualify his drawings. Thereon, he will move on to rediscovering calligraphy and its relation to breath.

But he does not turn his back on the West, he makes of it a new home. He is surrounded with four totems that stand as the four cardinal points: Paul Cézanne, from whom he borrows the magic of simple forms, Antoni Tàpies, whose work frees him from the "beautiful", Joseph Beuys, with whom he assumes mysticism as a way of being in art, and William Turner through whom he preserves the mystery of the landscape. From this incessant back-and-forth movement between North to South, East and West, will be born an artistic practice both obsessive and free of all constraints, inscribed in the experience of partaking in the original gist of art.

To paint, you must free yourself from paint and finally paint. And that is what he will do throughout the years. He will soak leafs of paper in olive oil to represent transparency, exhaust the qualities of the graphite he uses in its raw state, sometimes tipped with a drill to make a Noyau cosmique or diluted core in order to "paint with graphite." He will question erasure and presence. There is even a Wall of erasure in the work of Yazid. But there is still painting. We got to return. Even if he keeps the canvas and frame of this illustrious practice, he has come to a new means of expression so that colour comes back to the canvas. He will

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paint with plumb line. Once again, the tool of the workman. "Each line of colour is a series of impacts upon the canvas made with a plumb line soaked with paint". I asked him to show me the process. With his initial movement, the paint is revealed. It is a question of music. These spans of music. A classic five-line, sometimes four line spans as in writing Gregorian chants, or a single line for single-level instruments. Musical spans without notes, silent. Many artists have tried to imprison sound. We know Beuys's famous piano wrapped in felt, we are now facing a painter who recorded "his music" on a canvas, with the delicate and unerring gestures of a Qanun player.

*Text by Abdelkader Damani*