



The World is Alright: an Interview with the Moroccan Artist Youssef Wahboun

In this interview, the artist Youssef Wahboun reveals the secret of his despairing view of the world: love of humanity, independent of identity - ideological, ethnic, or racial. Anything that happens, even in the remotest place, irritates and pains him, and yet he insists on dreaming that the future of humanity will be better. In his exhibition at The French Institute in Rabat, this belief is evident in the butterflies that pervade his works as a chromatic echo conferring glamor upon a dark reality.

Conversation / Fatiha al-Nuhu April 2, 2022

The horrific universe is the artistic product of Youssef Wahboun (يوسف وهبون), a Moroccan artist, writer, academic, and art critic (b. 1968). His exhibition "The World is Alright" was on view at The French Institute in Rabat, which is identified with the French embassy to Morocco. The Center, with its dozen branches throughout the country, is the main support of a cultural bridge connecting Morocco and France, also contributes to the revival of the local cultural and artistic scene through the organizing of events and hosting of many cultural and intellectual seminars.

The Aesthetics of Pain

Drawing and writing have defined Wahboun's childhood: drawings and spontaneous emotions that motivated him to write poems in Arabic, already at age six, even though he had not studied art until he was 24. In 1922, while studying at the Department of French Literature, he participated in a workshop led by the Algerian artist Ali Salim (سليم علي) at The French Institute in Rabat. Salim was one of the Algerian refugees who had found a haven among writers and intellectuals who had come to Morocco following the rise to power of the Islamist party in Algeria – the *Jabhat al-Islamiyya lil-Inqad*. This has been Wahboun's only experience as a student in this area, but he never stopped painting on his own. His contact with the arts took place while sharing an apartment with professional artists, when he was studying toward his Ph.D., in 1995. At that time Wahboun went from drawing to participating in exhibitions, encouraged by a friend who had suggested he showed his work in the auditorium of the Law School in Rabat. His work began to be seen by broad audiences. He had two shows at the Goethe Institute in Rabat, and another one, in 2004, at the Nadira Cultural Center, which belonged to the Ministry of Youth and Sports at the time. He used colors, except in two or three paintings shown in various exhibitions. He continued to paint, in addition to his other activities, so as not to sever the umbilical cord connecting him to tangible materials. His academic work and his focus on the history of art and aesthetics had an impact on his artistic output, as did his literary work, which gave his art an extra dimension.

I met him for an interview on the occasion of his exhibition "The World is Alright".

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[1]Youssef Wahboun, the Needle, The French Institute, Rabat, 2019
Photography: Cécile Laroche-Coignet



Fatiha al-Nuhu: why did you disappear from the art world for 15 years?

Youssef Wahboun: I stopped doing solo shows in 2004, but I continued to paint, sporadically, probably because I was busy writing about art and contributing to the field by writing about artists and their experiences, or providing texts to galleries requesting articles from me for their exhibitions. Besides, in 2009 I began to deliver lectures in Germany about art and literature in Morocco, which are not very well-known there. I've been busy with my literary writing, especially my novel *Three Days and an Absurd*. A painting of mine appeared on its cover. This novel is like an autobiography, in a way. I wrote in it about my experience as a consultant to the left-wing government in Morocco. It required a psychological effort on the one hand, but on the other hand, I am a critical person, and I'm never happy with what I write or paint. The self-criticism is always there, to the point where it becomes an obstruction. I participated in several group shows, but to work on a solo show, you need to isolate yourself with your work, and my other commitments to my job and my travel preclude it. Writing is with me everywhere I go, but visual art does not allow that, especially when I work on a large scale. I acknowledge the effect of my poetry on my urge to paint with colors. Ever since my collection of poems, *People Die and Do Not Fall*, had been produced as a play, in which I had a part, I've been gripped by the desire to express the distressed and lost humanity, which does not know where it is heading; humanity that needs peace, solace, love, and friendship, to heal its wounds and scars through art. I felt this need to use colors and materials and movement to express humanity's anxiety and negativity alongside evil and violence in imaginary scenes, connecting humanity to the thing that threatens its existence.

I had decided to seclude myself and concentrate on my idea, and in February of 2018, I started to work on the current exhibition.

[2.jpg](#) [2]



[3]Youssef Wahboun, the Swing, The French Institute, Rabat, 2019
Photography Cécile Laroche-Coignet

F.N.: let's start with the title of the exhibition, "The World is Alright." Does the phrase refer to a surrendering to the situation, or does it provoke to change direction, or is the title addressing a dying world, as the contorted figures that appear in your paintings, overtly and covertly, might suggest?

Y.W.: I do not deny the presence of a despairing world view, which is why I have chosen this cynical title, wrapped in an ironic sentence, saying that the world is certainly not alright. Man has become hostile in a world undergoing a collapse of values. We live the lie of globalization and its false tidings of breaking the boundaries between nations and even people. But what we actually see is regression



and self-regard, rejection of the Other, and a return to the notion of "stranger," as reflected in the behavior of people belonging to the same nation. But in my paintings, the same as in my poetry, I emphasize the pure place that gives people an opportunity to rebuild their strength and reconsider reality, in order to heal the wounds and move on. This is what the butterflies stand for in the paintings

[Le Crâne, technique mixte sur toile, 160-160 cm, 2019. \(1\).JPG](#) **[4]**



[5]Youssef Wahboun, *The Skull*, The French Institute, Rabat, 2019
Photography: Cécile Laroche-Coignet

F.N.: the techniques and the materials in your work, even the collages, suggest to the viewers that the beings in the paintings have no sense of security, but rather they fake it to create an interaction: is today's world being tested through some kind of a quiet collision?

Y.W.: the material I've used is that of someone groaning in agony. I didn't work on the painting when it was moist; it was covered in a paste made of white vinyl paint, with marble dust and rough sea sand mixed with bits of sea shells on top of it, and dense fabric, all of which I paste on the face and body using collage technique. It looks ugly, and it's hard to color the figures, which makes it physically difficult for me, and it helps me identify with the real pain of the figures and the psychological burden they shoulder. The world of painting is a mirror reflecting an existence that is difficult, even impossible, to traverse in peace. Human suffering manifests in the painting through its various forms, and its connection to other ominous things does not serve it or contribute to it or befriends it. They turn into enemies and add significantly to the suffering. Spiritually, what humanity



needs is the essence of joy, love, and friendship.

F.N.: considering the symbolism of the butterfly in many cultures and its representation between the positive and the negative, we find that it is present in all the paintings in the show. What is the meaning of this? Can we see a spark of hope in the butterfly, even though this is about "the funeral of the world?"

Y.W.: in the midst of such choking and tearing, the butterfly appears as a sign of a possible better tomorrow. Butterflies usually symbolize death and life that passes quickly, but my butterflies stand for hope and patience, alongside their aesthetic role. They exist as a multicolored, harmonious echo, giving motion to figures immobilized by stress. These movements and the materials confer a realistic look on the world of painting, and they have the same effect on the viewers, who linger near the paintings in the show, perhaps because they are accustomed to confront the beauty of ugliness. I may consider myself an expressive artist, and I don't wish the reader, or the viewer, to be calm and relaxed. From the moment they enter the world of the story or the painting, I want them to never stop until they reach the end. But, at the same time, we are facing an artwork, and we must extract beauty from this suffering, according to the geometric harmony of the painting and the way it has been made, which are dictated by the visuals.

F.N.: is this the moment when the unconscious of the academic and the critical suddenly emerged?

Y.W.: on the contrary, it didn't suddenly appear – it was very present. It is an adventure, returning to a solo exhibition after a 15-year absence, when many people know you as a writer, art critic, and academic. So much so that when I sent invitations to the exhibition some assumed I was the curator rather than the artist. There were no reporters or social media people in the exhibition. At the same time, while I was working, I wasn't sure about the paintings even when they were almost finished. There were always surprises that pushed me to omit or add details, something that makes you lose confidence in the correlation between your initial vision for the painting, and the finished product.

F.N.: your focus on humanity overpowers your artistic and written experiences. What is the secret behind the exhausted spirit drifting above your literary vocabulary and around your paintings?

Y.W.: the secret is my love for humanity. I feel its pain. I am very affected by the tragic events that are taking place all over the world, reaching us through the media. The ongoing evil and the ever-widening methods of violence, all these calamities and tragedies affect me and cause sadness and anxiety in me. Hence my work is about collective suffering, or even global, not the personal or individual kind. The works in the show do not attest or hint at the range of my identities or a certain place, or deal with a specific ethnic, religious, or racial group – they relate to all of humanity, and if the world is not alright, I cling to the naïve dream that, starting tomorrow, it will be better.

[Le Pistolet, technique mixte sur toile, 160-120 cm, 2019..JPG \[6\]](#)



[7]Youssef Wahboun, the Gun, The French Institute, Rabat. 2019
Photography: Cécile Laroche-Coignet



F.N.: as one who is up-to-date and interested in Moroccan visual art, as well as being a critic and lecturer on art theory, can we talk about growth in this field now? Or are these just sporadic events?

Y.W.: truthfully, I can say that contemporary art in Morocco is very good. There are some pioneering cases. What's wrong is the art institution and the way it operates, both in helping to expand the reach of art and connecting it to other artistic fields, and in building bridges to the public. Unfortunately, money has trumped art, because art is now in the hands of dealers and brokers who are not very knowledgeable about it. Even galleries are rare, including those who obey artistic standards. The art community was gratified when [the Mohammed VI Museum for Modern and Contemporary Art \(MMVI\)](#) [8] opened, seeking to upgrade the art scene by assuming the role of organizing the art institutions and the art market. However, it turned out that it did not have a collection and it had settled for being just a gallery.

Furthermore, financial institutions contribute somewhat to the market by opening their spaces for exhibitions and purchasing works, albeit without any philosophical dimension to it, or an artistic vision.

[Whaboun.jpg](#) [9]



[10]Youssef Wahboun by one of his paintings
The French Institute, Rabat, 2019

F.N.: as an academic critic documenting many experiences, how do you evaluate the Moroccan art scene?

Y.W.: I am not an art historian, but I am an expert aesthetician. I am not interested in documenting eras but in the issues we find in artists' works, such as women, body, war. For example, some young artists have worked on themes of terror and genocide in certain countries. There are technical issues that I have included in papers published in art journals in Germany, Canada, and Italy. I use books about contemporary Moroccan art in classes for my MA students. The Institute for Higher Education expressed concern when I suggested an academic course on behalf of the Philosophy of Art Department, and dedicated it to Moroccan art. However, a colleague and I managed to convince them to accept the course using documents and papers I had written, and we taught Moroccan art alongside Western art, which this department at the university had initially intended to teach.

The Moroccan experiences in this field are profound, casting doubt on the whole world and its proceedings, while also following events in Morocco and its policies. The work of the Moroccan artists is connected to the core of society's concerns, and they often show them abroad. This reality does not weaken the aesthetic aspect of works by artists such as Mohamed Fettaka, Anjdad Mohamed, and Mustapha Akrim. Unfortunately, these new sensibilities of artistic expression received no positive reaction from art collectors, who cling to painting and do not consider purchasing photographic or video works.

F.N.: a good deal of your activities take place at The French Institutes in Morocco. What is the secret



of this connection?

Y.W.: there is no particular connection. It's simple: I write and teach in French. I deal with all the realms culturally and artistically, not leaning this way or that. I am indeed a member of the International Association of Art Critics, which is based in France, but I am active in the Moroccan branch, and this organization includes many nationalities. Concerning quality, I do not focus on the French art scene. I am interested in international art in general, and I know a lot about the Western experience of this field.

A solo exhibition of the artist Youssef Wahboun, "the World is Alright," was presented at The French Institute in Rabat, between November 6 and 22, 2019.

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