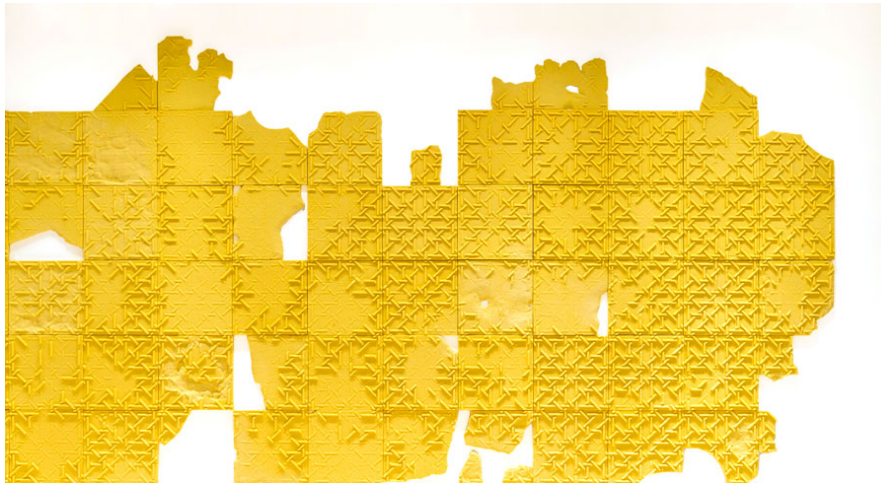


**Mehdi-Georges Lahlou.** And Even If Nothing Takes Root in this Oasis

**The third solo exhibition of Mehdi-Georges Lahlou at Galerie Transit (Mechelen) “And Even If Nothing Take Root in this Oasis” invites to an imaginary pilgrimage across the relicts and the memories of some “orientalist” civilization. By juxtaposing the elements of diverse cultural contexts, the artist deconstructs the relationship between the so-called "Occident" and "Orient", as geographical, cultural, and above all – mythical entities. Among the disintegrating heritage of an imagined past, we find ourselves in a *lieu* of paradoxes: a space without temporal, cultural or territorial landmarks that glides between reality and fiction.**

In “And Even If Nothing Take Root in this Oasis”, Mehdi-Georges Lahlou interweaves objects, ornaments, aliments and religious symbols from different epochs and cultures, into one multi-referential tissue. The eye cannot identify them with an image of a definite civilization – an image quite illusionary by itself. Hence, the artist not only interrogates their origins or authenticity, but also questions the Western perception of other cultures, and principally that of the so-called "Orient". According to Edward Said, “the Orient has been given it reality and presence in and for the West”<sup>1</sup>. As a result, its vanishing image, as “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences”<sup>2</sup>, advanced Said, was endured with a grief disappointment particularly in the Western world.

In the imaginary voyage towards Oasis, proposed by Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, one discovers a series of relicts that bear witness of some fictitious civilization and of its hybrid culture. One of the central



monuments, imagined by the artist, is ***Tawb, Mausoleum Fragment*** (2016). Representing an outside wall of a burial chamber, its modern appearance (square blocks) is counterbalanced by a variation of zellige<sup>3</sup> invented by the artist and named "Tawb". A mixture of cultural references: fictitious zellige, oscillating between Moroccan, Roman and

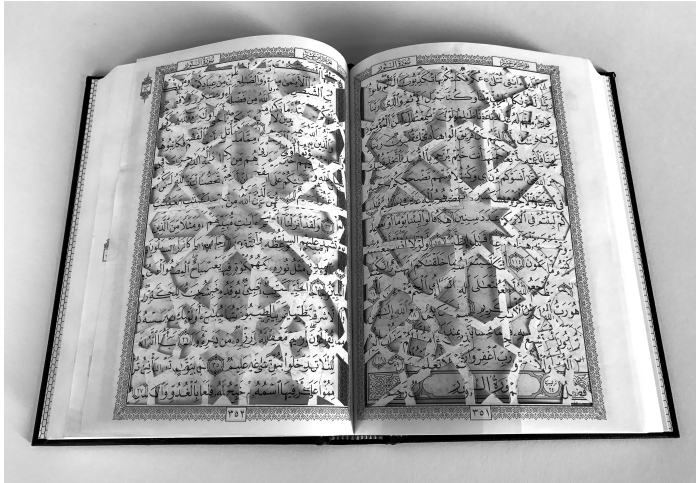
Byzantine mosaics, the material semolina, a base for couscous that has become an integral part of the French cuisine, – puts us into a continuous doubt on the origins of this object. *Tawb, Mausoleum Fragment* that also seems to be falling apart in front of our eyes, touches upon the problematic of conservation of cultural heritage, while its cartographical shape evoke past migrations or displacements of frontiers, due to which monuments often found themselves abandoned on "foreign" territories. *Tawb, Mausoleum Fragment* can also be seen as a symbolic trajectory in the frame of the show.

<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin, 1977, p. 22.

Edward Said linked this idea to a long history of relationship of power between the West and the East.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> A geometrically patterned mosaic, attributed to the Maghreb culture.



The recurrent motif of the exhibition is that of mashrabiya<sup>4</sup>. More than a simple architectural element, mashrabiya presents a dispositive of vision. Thus, one standing next to it in a house, can see well the street without being seen. In the work **Sans Titre, Découpe** (2015-2016), Mehdi-Georges Lahlou applies this principle to the Koran by cutting the double page of the open book. In the end, the sacred text, transformed into abstract ornament, becomes unrecognizable, in the same way as mashrabiya blocks the eye of a passer-by in front of a window.

The fact that mashrabiya can be easily

found today within the European boundaries, for example, in the region of Andalusia in Spain, calls into question its unilateral identification with the Arab culture.

The opposite side of this problem, that of the "migration" of historical heritage from one cultural context to another and of the multi-layeredness of national identity, is treated in the works **Bénitier** (2016) and **Divine Comédie** (2016). Here, the Christian religious symbols and texts integrate into the Oriental ones, and their *mélange*, perceptible only by a keen observer, gives place to unpredictable combinations. In **Bénitier**, a Christian stoup is filled with the rose water – a little detail that we perceive only if we approach the object and strain our senses. **Divine Comédie** shows three prayer rugs for children (the objects that, by the way, the artist first discovered in Europe) that appear to be Muslim religious attributes. Although, if we look closer at the two of them, we start to distinguish Catholic symbols embroidered inside of the Oriental ornament, while the third one is covered with some text in Arabic, that turns out to be one of the sacred texts of Christianity.

The mixity of various cultural elements reaches its highest degree in the work **Jannah** (2016). Initially the bust of the artist, it is made of chickpeas, partially covered with a marine cord and crowned with an exotic plant. Here, an anthropomorphic shape is transformed into a strange biological creature. It explodes with multiple references, those to the primary arts' masks and sculptures, to the bust of Nefertiti (enacted by the artist in one of his previous sculptures *I Used To Be Nefertiti*, 2014), to the shape of the neck of the Kayan tribe women<sup>5</sup>, making the sculpture simultaneously polyvalent and unidentifiable with a single context. The prevalence of organic materials sends us to the image of an oasis – a flourishing island of vegetation in the middle of a desert. It is also no accident that the first two meanings of the word "Jannah" in Arabian are: "paradise" and "garden".

"And Even If Nothing Take Root in this Oasis" becomes a fiction of a fiction, that of the "Orient" perceived and constantly reimagined by an outside "spectator". Here, the borders between epochs and cultures seem to fade out letting a series of forms and ideas, that overpass the concept of a singular cultural identity, come to the fore. The picture created by Mehdi-Georges Lahlou becomes illusionary and unstable: like moving figures behind mashrabiya, it constantly slips out of vision, and of a single explanation.

Sasha (Alexandre) Pevak  
Independent curator

<sup>4</sup> Mashrabiya is an Arabian architectural element, a carved wooden screen placed on a window. From the one hand, it contributes to a better air ventilation of a house. From the other, it provides the occupants of the house with the needed privacy, as the interior cannot be seen from the outside thanks to mashrabiya, and at the same time it gives a good view of the street from inside of the house.

<sup>5</sup> Women of the Kayan Lahwi tribe in Myanmar are widely known for wearing neck rings, brass coils that are placed around the neck, appearing to lengthen it.