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Thameur Mejri
Eroded Grounds

28 March – 7 May 2019



Gallery 1957 is pleased to announce the solo show, *Eroded Grounds* by Tunisian based artist Thameur Mejri. Taking place from the 28th of March until 7th of May, *Eroded Grounds* explores the image of Tunisian society as perceived by the artist.

“Color possesses me. I don't have to pursue it. It will possess me always, I know it. That is the meaning of this happy hour: Color and I are one. I am a painter.”

Paul Klee

Inspired by a trip to Tunisia in 1914, German-Swiss artist Paul Klee proclaimed himself as a painter obsessed by colour. Fast forward to 2019, and painter Thameur Mejri cites the same influence of Tunisia and its rich landscape as the colour catalyst for his latest series, *Eroded Grounds*. The most recent works by the young Tunisian artist show progress and a cultivation of his palette. For the young painter, the urgency is very real and it is crucial to create works that are activated, and exist as more than aesthetic or intellectual stimulus.

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It is commendable noting the evolution of his palette and compositions in recent years. The nuance of his paint strokes and erratic intensity have been replaced by an attention and meditation of objects. The current complexity of his compositions is striking both by its precarious balance and by its effectiveness. The current complexity is testament to the solidity of his reflexion, of his incarnation in his time and of the creative process but also of the intellectual endeavor which brings him to compose paintings that are powerful, abundant and sometimes even obscure if not unsettling. His compositions have become refined through distinctive and bold charcoal lines, which beguile you into following its path as it forms into the shape of a foot, an arm or a skeleton sometimes crushing against an undefined coloured shape.

Eroded Grounded is presented with allusions to a theatre or crime scene in which a play is taking place in suspension, ethereal and more readable. Although the colours have become more vivid, none of them manage to dominate Mejrî's compositions. Each canvas has become a battlefield where colours clash and canvases are like a burning landscape where everything is at war. Mejrî's colours have become more explicit, and reduced to, primary palettes of blues and hues of vermilion that antagonise each other on canvas. The distribution of colours seems to evoke the mapping of a territory in tension, occupied in a precarious way by forces in permanent conflict. Thameur Mejrî's chromatic variations are like a tribute to the theorists of colour and support Wassily Kandinsky's criticism of materialism, in favour of understanding of the world, by form and colour, which have the ambition to touch the spiritual. His palette sometimes recalls great moments of modern and contemporary painting, such as Jasper Jones' Map (1961), and his oranges in contrast to azure blues borrow just as much from Goethe's and Johannes Itten's theories of colour, referring to the principles of depth sensations and the dynamism of the composition, based on the juxtaposition of warm and cold colours. This dynamism is not only a compositional effect but induces a tension that is completely instrumentalized by the artist since it is a question of assuming, through colour, confrontation, opposition and, as we see later, violence and chaos.

Despite Thameur Mejrî's artistic excellence, his research is not only part of a pictorial tradition designed to elevate the soul through colour and gesture. Mejrî recalls Kandinsky Maxim's philosophy that "artistic freedom cannot be absolute, but limits can be crossed" to express the need for urgency in his work to communicate the responsibility he fully assumes as a Tunisian artist, male, husband, brother, son and father, in an Arab-Muslim environment in which he is an actor, like everyone else. His paintings are mirrors that reflect the image of Tunisian society as perceived by the artist.

Thameur Mejrî's paintings are full of narrative elements that function as if they were rebuses. Objects exist for what they are supposed to represent, as such, they are fragments of bodies, bones. However, another level of reading is played out on a pictographic scale. The pictogram is a graphic representation of a concept intended to embody a use or function in the public environment. These images have a symbolic function but must be identifiable by everyone, spontaneously, because they indicate the principles of danger, urgency and attitude. If their recognition must be obvious, it is nevertheless part of a language that, through images, can claim to be universal, but it is precisely here that the artist provokes his spectator. This rebus, which is composed, recomposed and decomposed, brings up banal, everyday elements (at least in the media), and this is how a television, a telephone, a gas can, a knife, a helicopter, a saw, a shovel, scissors, an aircraft and, above all, this omnipresent human skull emerge in the composition. The viewer may feel uneasy because most of the elements refer to communication, destruction and

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war. The recurring soccer ball in his paintings and the presence of children's drawings that refer to the artist's lost innocence will only reinforce this unease.

Indeed, the viewer begins to understand that violence and the opposition of colours are coupled with a semantic incarnation in the object. All these objects tell a story and Thameur Mejri's compositions unfiltered restore the depth of a reflection on a world he considers sick. He questions the means of communication and the tools of language to reach his contemporaries somewhere in spite of them. His painting is a succession of presences and these presences tell a story, that of everyday life. Where does Tunisian society come from, where does it go and, above all, what dominates daily life and the present, how to build the future, how to speak to one's contemporaries? All these elements reflect an emotion and an experience of the artist who assumes himself as witnesses of the present. The artist transposes in his paintings what he experiences and what he sees in his environment, the absence, in particular and in accordance with his terms, of a social project, and the vagueness in which Tunisian society and more generally the Arab-Muslim world float, questioning the contribution of the latter today to the history of humanity.

The human body occupies a special place in the artist's work, which sometimes evokes the slow appropriation of the artist and his image in Europe because of the spiritual transcendences and the relationship between the image of man and the divine, highlighted by religious culture. It took hundreds of years after the Middle Ages and the intellectual conquests of the Renaissance to allow medicine and art to be able to look at, manipulate and restore the human body. This conquest of his own body, the acceptance of its limits and its purely carnal dimension has not always been shown in the different European societies and Mejri explores the way in which the Arab-Muslim world maintains a complex and conflictual relationship on the subject, a pretext for so many other refolements. Beyond the representation of the forbidden, it is the very object of the male body that becomes here the weapon of precision of the painter's iconographic arsenal. This body which in the artists 2010 series carries a phallus as a murder weapon. The human body can be a machine to build, produce and love but it can also be an instrument of destruction, domination and death. According to the artist's iconographic scheme, the body of man and the phallocrat society he intends to maintain is the main responsible for the cultural, political and health emergency situation in which Tunisian society finds itself, a society entangled in the non-resolution of tensions resulting from insoluble conflicts between tradition and modernity, the secular and the religious, closure and openness, the past, the present and the future. Thameur Mejri, like all the artists of his generation, takes a close look at the choices of the elites in his country and notes that the political revolutions in North Africa and the Arab world have not generated the awareness necessary to change behaviour, mentalities and politics. Revolutions that are more economic, in short, than societal. The Internet, smartphones and thus communication and the circulation of ideas help, but the counter-information and immobility of the ruling class still dictate its rules, despite these paradoxes.

The power of the abstraction of Mejri's composition is based on one of the striking principles of Kandinsky: "The artist must have something to say, because his task is not to master the form, but to adapt it to the content. An internal necessity that has become a constraint." Mejri's painting is a mirror, a mirror and not a window. The painter holds this mirror and forces his contemporaries to observe their symbolic reflection without concession - the whole world stands, according to him, in his paintings, they will find the society in which they live for which they are responsible. Despite all these clues, a certain blur continues to float over Thameur Mejri's works, who believes

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that "painting must flee to be stronger". This blur is in the image of Tunisian society and the contradictions that the artist points out. Total mastery of language is an illusion and many of his contemporaries have neither the desire nor the energy or time to understand these fundamental issues and imperatives for change. This is precisely where painting can be stronger than the media because painting is the fruit of imagination and will. In his works, Thameur Mejri seems to stage a one-act play, bringing together all the chronicles of a predicted disaster. Its title, *Eroded Grounds*, is not an action, which is essential but factual and sometimes useless, which the Tunisian Revolution was able to show. Rather, *Eroded Ground* refers to the urgency of becoming aware of the context and the very root of the problems. Without this real awareness of the whole society, no action will be effective. The ground will break and everything will collapse.

Text by Matthieu Lelièvre

About Thameur Mejri

Born in 1982 in Tunis, Thameur Mejri trained as a painter at the Institute of Fine Arts in Tunis and now lives and works in Nabeul, Tunisia. He currently teaches at the Higher Institute of the Arts & Crafts in Kairouan while completing a PhD in Sciences and Technology of Arts and continuing to exhibit in Tunisia and internationally. His recent solo exhibitions include "Male (God) scarecrow" (2010) at Artyshow gallery in La Marsa, "Disaster pieces" (2012) at Elmarsa Gallery in Tunis, and "Before You Split the Ground" (2017) at Jack Bell Gallery in London. Produced in collaboration with his brother film director Kays Mejri, his video piece "The Plague" won the Prize for the best experimental short film in 2007 at the New York International Independent Film and Video Festival (NYIIFVF). He has also participated in several group shows and international art fairs in the UAE, France, UK, Morocco and the United States. His works are part of several private and public collections including Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah and Sindika Dokolo Collection, Luanda.

About Gallery 1957

Based in Accra and working internationally, Gallery 1957 has a curatorial focus on West Africa. The gallery presents a programme of exhibitions, installations and performances by the region's most significant artists currently bridging the gap between local and international practices. Founded by Marwan Zakhem in 2016, Gallery 1957 has evolved from over 15 years of private collecting. Opened in 2017, Gallery 1957 II is the gallery's second space, situated in Accra's Galleria Mall. The gallery serves as a vital platform, promoting West Africa's presence within the art scene by hosting ambitious exhibitions, providing resources for residencies and participating in international art fairs.

Notes to editors:

Exhibition: Thameur Mejri: *Eroded Grounds*

Dates: 28 March – 7 May

Address: Gallery 1957, Kempinski Hotel Gold Coast City, PMB 66 – Ministries, Gamel Abdul Nasser Avenue, Ridge – Accra, Ghana

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