

## The Orient put to the test of digital art Mohamed Rachdi, 2008

Since his residency in Marrakech, Miguel Chevalier has not ceased thoroughly exploring Morocco's artistic resources, the creativity displayed by its master craftsmen and the possibility of negotiating bold contemporary art displays in public spaces. Here, we plan to assess the impact the country has had on the artist; analyze the relationship his works hold to the physical and symbolic parameters of their settings; study the way in which he revisits the country's traditional arts; and also investigate the artist's digital expression and the fecundity of his resolutely contemporary works in an anachronous environment by taking a close look at the creative process of Moroccan master craftsmen and their aesthetic potential.

*Digital Arabesques* is the title of the project which came out of the artist's stay in Marrakech. Andalusia and Morocco continue, in fact, to be seen as gateways to the Orient: the Orient imagined by Orientalism, this purely Western invention which Edward W. Said described so well. Although Miguel Chevalier's research calls upon the very latest digital technology, once in Morocco, the artist seemed unable to create without taking into account the popular memory and imagination that has developed around the region over time.

When I looked through the catalogue of Miguel Chevalier's first exhibition in Morocco, I was struck by a particular image. An image indicative of the singularity this journey to Morocco represented for him. Indeed, after a few pixels animating the flyleaf, the catalogue opens with a picture the artist took of a screen in the airplane from Paris to Marrakech. An image, then, of a digital film indicating the flight position on the map, showing the line of the plane's trajectory as it heads towards Marrakech.

Can we not see in this an indication of how important this journey into the heart of Morocco was going to prove to be for him? Otherwise, why would someone who has long trotted the globe to produce and display his creations in the world's major cities suddenly need to highlight the idea of travel by inserting an image of the digital air traffic map into his catalogue? Unless it was to indicate that, for a Westerner, and more precisely an artist, he couldn't consider going to a so-called Oriental country as if it were just anywhere.

What's more, besides highlighting the importance of the trip, this map tracing the arabesques and interlacing of the air traffic network is also a way for the artist to create a direct link with his art, which has long focused on the aesthetics of communication networks and traffic flows that crisscross today's world... And besides, *Digital Arabesques* is conceived as an entanglement of networks, labyrinths and arabesques. A moving display set between heaven and earth and endlessly evoking the notion of voyage.

*Digital Arabesques* was designed for the famous square Jamaa El Fna in Marrakech - not an insignificant setting. Designated by UNESCO in 2001 as a "masterpiece of the oral and

intangible heritage of humanity", it continues to perpetuate the popular memory of the city it lies at the heart of. Though today, it's been turned into a tourist destination by travel agencies, we mustn't forget that above all, it is - and has been for centuries - a major crossroads and genuine marketplace. The vast, sunny expanse is like a pair of lungs for the mesh of dark, narrow streets winding through the medina. Jamaa El Fna is home to a multitude of outdoor activities - business, crafts, and various artistic expression: storytelling, music, singing, theater, etc. But unfortunately, up until Miguel Chevalier's project, there had never been any contemporary art interventions in this public space.

In the West, contemporary art began asserting itself back in the late 50s, notably via its presence in public spaces. Compared to Westerners who were busy turning the notion of art on its head, Moroccan artists of the same generation proved to be extremely "well-behaved". They seemed impermeable to the nascent artistic revolution and incapable of truly analyzing their own cultural heritage, which they nevertheless claimed to be reviving. They weren't, in fact, able to develop their work in the wake of the pictorial modernity of abstraction that came after WWII. Even the event organized by a few Moroccan artists at Jamaa El Fna in May 1969 was nothing but a bitter reaction against the salon organized in Marrakech by Club Med which they weren't invited to participate in. Though the action was historically significant, it didn't provide any real creative impact from an artistic point of view; it was an *extra muros* display of highly conventional paintings that offered no new formal declarations that could fit into the concerns of contemporary art. Admittedly, other actions followed later in Casablanca, and then the yearly festivals in Asilah which aren't without interest, but the majority of interventions never really ventured beyond paintings transposed into a mural. It's only now that a handful of young artists, like the collective *La Source du lion*, are beginning to more seriously question the public space with resolutely contemporary artistic tools.

By intervening in Jamaa El Fna, Miguel Chevalier hoped to bring the history, memory and public aspect of this square - and more broadly, the Moroccan population - closer to contemporary artistic expression.

For centuries, travellers and creators have been meeting in Jamaa El Fna, making it a vibrant space that continues to offer visitors a slice of local daily life as well as a rare taste of enchantment and fantasy. Consequently, Miguel Chevalier gave himself a true challenge when he came up with an art intervention that, while respecting the square and its activities, would blend into the scenery. The concept is as clever as it is pertinent. So as not to disrupt the usual activity on the square, which burgeons with continuous crowds, the artist opted for the air instead of the ground. He conceived a display based on two minimalist synthetic elements - carpets and helium balloons floating above the square. Located up in the sky this way, the two elements create a dynamic that encourage physical movement and imaginary trajectories.

Jamaa Al Fna lives round the clock and *Digital Arabesques* is conceived to embrace this, operating *in situ* both day and night. In the daylight, visitors can admire the visual display of silkscreen prints covering the shapes hanging in the intensely luminous Marrakech sky. But when the sun goes down, the graphic dynamics and chromatic vivacity of the work are turned up a notch. Smoke wafting up from the food stalls, beams from electric lights and oil lamps intermingle with the incandescence of the spheres and flying carpets on which a riot of fluorescent colors and digital constellations are projected.

Because of its capacity to engender unusual encounters, only the voyage, no doubt, can rouse the poetic curiosity that animates flying carpets and digital light beams. It seems that for a Westerner, you can't travel in an Oriental country like anywhere else. Consequently, the image of the flying carpet reactivated by the artist also shows how deeply anchored the

imagery surrounding the Orient is within him.

No one knows for sure where the flying carpet originated, though probably in Persia. What we do know is that it's a magical, fantastical mode of transport made popular by *One Thousand and One Nights*. This symbol of the voyage of the imagination has always delighted and enthralled. Western painters have long used flying carpets to evoke the Orient in their paintings, and XVIII<sup>th</sup> and XIX<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalist Painting is packed with magic carpets and intricately crafted objects that explicitly evoke the exotic. It wasn't until Matisse, with his rejection of the anecdote and passion for the decorative power of Islamic art, that we saw re-emerge a view which no longer aimed to simply reproduce the magic carpet but to produce paintings which themselves were 'magic carpets', capable of elevating us to the garden of the imagination.

For a visual artist, a carpet is firstly a two-dimensional surface with patterns, shapes and colors. It can also become a volume with a few turns of the hand, and this is how Miguel Chevalier works with it, combining tradition and modernity into an object that takes us on a journey into the imaginary realms it opens. With *Digital Arabesques*, the artist moves pixels into the carpet and the carpet into pixels. Weaving is based on the knot as the structural unity that spawns the patterns and images through interlacing the threads of the warp and weft on the loom. Since the analogy between the points of pixels and those of the knots is obvious, it's logical that the carpet found itself part of Miguel Chevalier's creative field.

The carpet requires ancestral know-how handed down over generations of craftsmen, and both women and men are involved in the various stages of its fabrication and commercialization. The wool is spun by women, but coloring it in vats of dye is a job for the men. Men also do the selling, but the intricate weaving is performed by the agile hands of women who are constantly striving to invent new patterns and motifs. Miguel Chevalier is careful to take the skill of this craft and its refinement into account in his digital creation. He uses patterns from this traditional aesthetic, but his main intent is to cultivate the various forms of collaboration with these master craftsmen and women. The goal is to use their know-how to create a new vocabulary and a bridge between art and the craft industry.

A real carpet is an object belonging to the ground, something we walk or sit on. But removed from this practical function, the human imagination changes it into a flying object, an elegant form of air travel for poetic journeys and exploring the evanescent realms of dreams and fantasy. The transport of choice in *One Thousand and One Nights*, the flying carpet kindles all kinds of musings in the sky above Jamaa El Fna where tales, stories and legends have entwined for centuries and it's hard to distinguish the bounds between reality and fiction.

Miguel Chevalier uses sophisticated means to get these constellations to float over the square and, in so doing, opens up a playful and fantastical artistic world. A world that beckons us on a journey through the labyrinth of the medina's tiny streets, and into the popular memory of the Islamic aesthetic and poetic imagery of the flying carpet. Indeed, when you look closely at the virtual prefigurations of *Digital Arabesques*, you notice that three formal registers interfere with the ornamentation on his spheres and flying carpets, created in close collaboration with computer scientist Eric Wenger who perfected the software.

The digital worlds that are silkscreened or projected onto the carpets display the labyrinthine pattern of the medina, inciting visual wanderings in the sky and imaginary journeys. The paths traced in the sky echo those which visitors cover on the ground. Consequently, after the visitor has explored the narrow streets of the medina, he arrives at Jamaa El Fna and discovers the sky decorated with carpets and spheres. If he looks closely,

he can't help but notice the pattern of the streets. And if, as is often the case with tourists, he holds a map in his hand to find his way through the medina, he's able to locate - up above - the path he's just walked.

Of course the patterns of a real carpet or those of the paving stones of a small street can be observed when you walk on them, but transposed into the sky, the patterns appear for none other reason than to be enjoyed and to beckon the observer on an imaginary journey. Indeed, since Miguel Chevalier's work is spread out over a vast expanse, visitors must walk around if they want to see the different elements of the installation distributed overhead in the square. And if they walk from one carpet to the next, from one sphere to the next, they must nevertheless stop a moment if they want to study the printed patterns projected on the floating objects in the air. Even more so with the animated projections of *Digital Arabesques* which offer the combinatory display of interlacing geometric figures directly inspired by Islamic art as they take shape and transform.

In Marrakech, the artist's encounter with Islamic aesthetics proves particularly fruitful for his creation. The repetition of formal elementary structures made up of abstract and rectilinear or curvilinear geometric figures paired with simplified vegetal designs; the use of bright or even fluorescent chromatic hues; the immensity of the works that generally fill the entire space of their setting: all these decorative traits were actually already characteristic of Miguel Chevalier's artistic propositions even before he conceived *Digital Arabesques*. However, his passion for the decorative dimension is no doubt even more visible with this project.

Intended to celebrate divine transcendence through the enchantment of the Garden of Eden, Islamic art is above all decorative, seeking to engender a visual delight capable of spiritually elevating the faithful towards the invisible unity that lies behind the multiplicity of appearances. Based on the articulation of two registers, stylized vegetal designs and geometric shapes, this art of entanglements managed to develop a visual language which, in its application, could shift from floor to wall, from wall to ceiling, from earth to heaven and vice versa. Carpets, zellige, stucco, mashrabiya, moucharabieh and muqarnas: all these decorative registers, rigorously designed with respect to practical function, aim to provide glimpses of heaven to us here on earth, while endeavoring to free us from earthly bonds and elevate us the realms of the infinite.

Miguel Chevalier's art already potentially held all the ingredients that would blossom in contact with the Islamic aesthetic whose visual vocabulary is founded on decorative art and the substitution of reality, on the generative dynamic of shapes and on governing space with geometric lines and algebraic and algorithmic calculations. Combinatory play and morphogenesis are the undeniable evidence of the high degree of creativity of different master craftsmen.

Indeed, Miguel Chevalier's various works are structured by movement, formation, transformation and metamorphosis. The artist is thus constantly engaged in the creative dynamic, the journey made by the shapes taking shape, as is the case, for example, with his generative work entitled *Supernature*, a work where living energy is expressed through an entirely artificial nature. Thanks to new technology, the work can leave its immutability behind - these plant forms sprout, grow and die in perpetual motion.

In the catalogue entitled *Artificial Paradises*, Françoise Gaillard brings up the notion of *Digital Thoughts*. Is this not the best name for the Islamic aesthetic whose decorative unfolding in geometric interlacing and vegetal arabesques is always underpinned by strict mathematical equations? Can we not then talk about Islamic art as a digital art before the

term even existed? Designed to elevate us above Jamaa El Fna through new technologies in direct resonance with the forms and poetry perpetuated for centuries by generations of artists and other master craftsmen, does not Miguel Chevalier's *Digital Arabesques* - via its flying carpets, myriad pixels and other fractal galaxies - in the end represent one of the best formulations of this Islamic aesthetic?

- In fall 2004, Miguel Chevalier was invited by the French Institute of Marrakech for an artist's residency at the riad where Orientalist Denise Masson lived. It's a handsome building in the heart of the medina where Matisse would no doubt have loved to work, since it possesses a fabulous garden - an oasis of refreshing shade and gentle luminosity in the blazing furnace of the red city.

- Edward W. SAID, *Orientalism*, 1978.

- *Miguel Chevalier – Digital Arabesques*, published for an exhibition at the French Institute of Marrakech, 2005. The image on page 2.

- Let us mention here that after his project *Digital Arabesques*, Miguel Chevalier also made carpets for the ground with interactive digital projections shone down from above.

- "Miguel Chevalier," writes Françoise GAILLARD, "calls some of his fuchsia-colored efflorescences "Digital Thoughts". There is no better name for this flora of mathematical intelligence, generated by computations rather than digitized images taken from nature. "Digital Thoughts" do not represent the reality that their form evokes. They simulate it..." in *Miguel Chevalier, Artificial Paradises*, cat. non-paginated, 2004, ed. Galerie municipale de Vitry-sur-Seine et Suzanne Tarasiève (Paris).

- To fully understand how the Islamic arabesque functions and its metamorphosis, cf. the highly technical study by mathematician Jean-Marc CASTERA, *Arabesques*; éd. ACR; Paris 1996.