

The following text by philosopher and thinker, Antoin Maqdessi (1914-2005), was written about a discussion he had with the artist Ahmad Moualla in 1995 through Maqdessi's perspective and vision of the Moalla's artistic experimentation which opened new horizons for queries and limitless solutions. The text focuses on the concept of establishing and the development which Maqdessi had observed during the artist's exhibitions at that time, and the paths that enabled him to access the realms of the artist culturally, aesthetically, and experimentally. Maqdessi, the philosopher and thinker, nicknamed as the "Archintellect of Syria," was a beacon who left an important legacy in art and culture.

Ahmad Moualla's Tales by Antoine Maqdessi

At the dawn of existence, fire was the genesis; birthing dance and rhythm from its fervent heart. Humanity resides at the intersection of melody and form, celebrating its elegance through dance for sheer pleasure and delight. Similarly, the inception was marked by departure, illustrating the perpetual voyage of humankind. Is this odyssey to attain aspirations, to relish and exercise liberty, or is it driven by an unseen malevolent force within, hindering settlement? It seems as though the essence of stability remains elusive to our species. We travel for the intrinsic value of the journey, mirroring the creation of art for its own sake and the composition of music for the pure joy it brings. The human experience is a mosaic of images and visions, where each frame pulsates with its own beat, and every vision unfolds into a saga, woven together with narratives about imagery, visions, and harmonies.

In the genesis of time, myth reigned supreme. It is a profound truth that as humanity embarked on the quest for sustenance and the pursuit of stability, the harshness of reality dawned upon them, ushering in an era of pragmatism. The realization came with age; they confronted their own desolation and the raw exposure of their souls. Deprived of sustenance, besieged by hunger, individuals were compelled to script their own demise, inadvertently paving the way for the tyranny of autocratic dominion (...)

At the very start, there existed love, intertwined with the mortal coil that inevitably beckoned death...

During a conversation with Ahmad Moualla, I explored the foundation of his artistry, which he claims is rooted in shaping. I inquired if shaping meant extracting a part of space and defining it by the spatial organization rules. He elucidated, "The birth of a painting occurs when shapes transcend into forms." Acknowledging this transformation, I reflected on his art's current positioning—oscillating between defined shape and formlessness. I then pondered the stance of classical art, which captures the human form as perceived by the average eye, to which he responded, "Classical art, epitomized by the works of Fra Angelico, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and their ilk, operates on multiple levels, engaging viewers according to their cultural affinity and aesthetic sensibilities. Modern art, as seen through the lenses of Picasso, Salvador Dali, Dubuffet, and others, amalgamates these layers, striving to unify the profound with the superficial."

Curious about the representation of Arab art within this context, Moualla offered, "We are in the midst of self-discovery, with art serving as a pivotal means to this end, potentially the most significant and fruitful avenue." He highlighted the dynamic nature of Arab identity today, marked by a quest for self-definition and a rigorous examination across political, cultural, and artistic dimensions.

Reflecting on the terms *test* and *questioning*, I noted their connotation of skepticism, including the concept of *path*, underscoring the prevailing uncertainty in choosing the right course. My focus then shifted to the artistic journey, particularly the enigmatic essence of artistry.

Recounting my experiences, I mentioned visiting three of Moualla's exhibitions, with the latest being *Miro in Three Dimensions*, a spatial exploration manifested in sculptures varying in size, color, and shape. I questioned if Moualla had unraveled the dynamics of space, to which he proposed imagining the perception of a child, for whom the exhibition space becomes a playground of interaction with the art, embodying the magical world of stories.

Inquiring about the children's reactions, particularly if such vivid engagement was observed, Moualla confirmed, noting that most of these enthusiastic visitors were foreigners. This conversation not only sheds light on Moualla's artistic philosophy but also on the evolving dynamics of viewer interaction with art, transcending cultural and age boundaries.

Discovering oneself in a café alongside a colleague, serendipitously seated across from Ahmad Moualla, was an encounter of fortunate coincidence. Moualla, with a gesture of welcoming hospitality, seated us and positioned himself opposite. From a voluminous handbag, he commenced the unveiling of one painting after another, each mirroring the dimensions of an expansive notebook. With each presentation laid upon a chair between us, he narrated the saga behind every piece. These artworks, survivors of an unnamed calamity, bore a palette of burnt brown interspersed with blotches of black, their peripheries kissed by smoke, encapsulating realms of imagery, episodes, visions, postures, and escapades that unfurled briskly before our eyes. Engrossed, the café and its occupants faded into oblivion, as if the external world and its cacophony had vanished into thin air.

The passage of time became an abstract concept as we delved into the narratives of four tales, three entwined with the paintings and the fourth dedicated to the artist, his confrontation with fire, and the ensuing saga. Amid this narrative labyrinth, my colleague, upon query, confessed to a vague recollection of the tales' events, a sentiment I echoed with a deeper sense of regret.

This encounter, reminiscent of the *Box of the World* cinema from the halcyon days of our youth, had the power to eclipse memories of home, celebrations, familial bonds, and the looming specter of maternal reprimand for our tardiness. My colleague reflected, "Art is the childhood of the world, with every artist harboring a fragment of that infancy."

Yet, it's more than fragments; it's a substantial portion, only to be recalibrated back to its empirical age by certain reckonings. In the wake of Moualla's ceaseless narratives, I inquired about the exhibition of his paintings, to which he replied, "Now," indicating the café as the impromptu gallery. This sanctuary of art, as he described, resided within his bag, perpetually accessible to aficionados and devotees of art, every moment of every hour, if feasible. When asked about his studio, he professed, "Here and everywhere," encapsulating the essence of an artist whose inspirations are omnipresent, awakened by an unexpected bloom's smile, a melody that greets him at life's junctures, and the voracious eyes that feast on existence, signaling the time for love.

The subsequent Wednesday found us back at the café, harboring the belief that we had an appointment with Ahmad Moualla, only to find his presence elusive, mirroring our experience the following week. His perpetual quest for new sensations and vistas to amalgamate with the old took him on journeys far and wide—from the sea to the desert, the Ghouta, or the alleys of Damascus—always in pursuit, even in conversation.

On our third attempt, another colleague joined us, whose discernment in beauty I deeply trusted. She shared insights into Moualla's *fire*, revealing that what some might dismiss as mere accidental ink spills on paper were, for him, portals to visions far surpassing any conjured in his imagination at that moment. She recounted a serendipitous encounter with Moualla on a bus journey from

Tartous to Damascus, his ever-present bag by his side. Inquiring if the paintings of *fire* had become a core element of his existence, she learned of an incident: a spark from a taxi engine igniting a painting, illustrating his profound care for his art, akin to, if not exceeding, the care for his own being. This event, as Moualla suggested, diverted his path in ways yet unexplored.

"The story is not coherent...", I remarked, to which she countered, questioning since when art was ever constrained by the logic and its dictates. She explained that the fire, in another narrative, was merely a symbol among the myriad that populate the artist's fertile imagination, one that Ahmad chose to embody and dwell with for days.

Curious about the fourth narrative, she hinted at its ongoing formation, with a twist in its trajectory, the extent of which was unclear. She had glimpsed new, colored paintings during their bus ride, vibrant enough to momentarily eclipse the memory of the initial collection, suggesting some would feature in the *traveling bag exhibition*.

Reflecting on this, I mused about the inherent luminosity of colors and their power to uplift us into a state of contemplation and wonder. The artist's journey, I noted, is an evolution from his tangible artistic reality, which he may transcend or utterly transform. The development of the "Fire" imagery might evolve today, tomorrow, or later, challenging us and the artist himself to ponder the nexus between the new and the old.

Artistic visions, however, seemingly contradictory, eventually coalesce at a singular, original point of inspiration. Just as a person's identity remains cohesive amidst diverse, often paradoxical behaviors, so too are the trajectories an artist traverses. This unity becomes apparent when we juxtapose expressive pieces from various phases of an artist's evolution within an abstract continuum, unveiling the singular truth that has guided all their creative endeavors.

For a moment, the second meeting seemed to falter in its impact. The paintings and their narratives that had been my constant for three weeks seemed to fade, overtaken by a new realm captured in the colored canvases. The only continuity lay in the dimensions of the artwork and its display within the café's familiar space. This abrupt transition to a different visual language was jarring; I hadn't anticipated the challenge of adjusting as swiftly as needed. It reminded me of an overlooked truth: the rhythm of color flows with ease, adaptable and ever-changing, unlike the rhythm of words, which remains steadfast, eluding capture just when you feel it's within reach.

Ahmad's silence throughout the unveiling of his latest collection added layers to my confusion. He proceeded with the display mechanically, as if fulfilling an obligation, his mind seemingly navigating distant thoughts. Attempts to draw him into dialogue after the presentation were in vain. His replies were brief, offering mere glimpses into a narrative that beckoned me to conjure it from the sparks of immediate inspiration. This evolution from shared storytelling to a silent urging for individual interpretation marked a nuanced shift in the interaction between the artist, his art, and the viewer.

From our second encounter, I had hoped to delve deeper into the *fire* paintings, carrying with me unresolved inquiries about the first artwork seen in the prior showcase and its counterparts: Are the figures, seemingly ascending a hill, fleeing an external blaze that encircles them with black ash, rendering them indistinguishable from one another? Or are they propelled by an internal inferno, pursuing an unknown salvation, elusive to both them and us?

The allure of the colored paintings was undeniable, momentarily distracting me from recent memories while simultaneously transporting me to the not-so-distant past. I was reminded of the exhibition at the French Cultural Center in 1993, which also

featured a vibrant display of colors. His paintings appeared as streams of hues emanating from an everlasting spring of color, reaching a climax under a sun whose brilliance nearly or entirely effaces the figures and objects within, only to recede like a swift backflow to its origin.

Reflecting on the second meeting, which remains vivid in my memory, it felt like an exposition of entities dancing in the stark light of day, divisible into two groups: the majority, whose dance is a series of transformations—a plant morphing into an animal, an animal into a human, an object into another—under a brilliant sun that seems to defy or rather challenge the conventional belief in the singular essence and identity of all beings. These transformations command our attention and challenge the mind to discern in each entity not a fixed law, but perhaps the primordial law that underlies both order and chaos.

The second group embodies Sufi dances, including the *Zār* or akin rituals. Ahmad identifies these as the sole realistic depictions within his oeuvre. This revelation prompts an internal dialogue: Are the others, then, purely figments of imagination? In pondering the demarcation between reality and fantasy within any artistic medium, I question the dichotomy itself. Is not the imaginary also tangible in its essence, and the real suffused with elements of the fantastical? Such inquiries spiral into further contemplation on the nature of reality versus illusion, a rabbit hole of thought I presently choose to sidestep.

Dance, in its myriad forms, represents an eternal facet of existence, transcending the confines of time—past, present, and future alike. It is humanity's innate response to the challenge of gravity's tether to the earth—a realm of pure space—and the temporal bounds within which life tenderly unfolds. Through dance, beings manifest their capacity to sever the existential ties binding them to the natural elements, navigating beyond the conventional dimensions of time and space, in a celebration of liberation and the human spirit's resilience.

Indeed, liberation represents the seminal step towards the exercise of freedom. For the Sufi, this emancipation from terrestrial gravity marks the commencement of a journey towards glimpsing the *Absolute*, followed by an alignment and eventual merging into its serene vastness. The *Zār* dance, as perceived by its practitioners, emerges as the quintessence of Sufi ritualistic expression. It encompasses a repertoire of movements and chants designed to evoke profound emotional states, culminating in an ecstatic union with the *Absolute* as emotions peak and the collective voice of singing begins.

This particular *Zār* involves a swift, circular motion executed on a single leg, progressively gaining momentum until the dancer appears to sever ties with the earth, entering a state of rotation in the void. At its zenith of velocity, this spiraling dance carves a conduit to the divine, positioning the dancer in the sacred presence. Notably, this transcendental state of singing in the *Absolute* is attainable only through the collective effort of a sizeable ensemble, each participant mirroring the dance's intricate steps and rhythms, thereby manifesting a unified pathway to the divine embrace.

Allow me the opportunity, dear reader, to guide you back through time to Aristotle and his profound philosophical legacy, which intriguingly parallels the foundational principles of Sufi movements and dances. Aristotle posited that all beings are innately drawn to the *Prime Mover*, a supreme entity representing the ultimate purpose of existence, albeit an unreachable goal. This natural gravitation is the catalyst for all cosmic motion, with stillness merely signifying the absence of movement. In Aristotle's view, only the *active intellect*, embodying pure actuality and eternity, attains fulfillment by shedding their individuality to merge with the universal essence.

This philosophical notion finds resonance in the Sufi tradition, which, though emerging from a monotheistic context as opposed to Aristotle's polytheistic frame, shares the quest for unity with the divine. Sufis engage in accelerating dances and movements,

driven by a deep-seated yearning for spiritual perfection. These practices, characterized by a relentless pace and rhythm, are designed to evoke an overwhelming emotion that pervades the dancer's entire being. At the emotional apex, the Sufi may experience a momentary trance or fainting spell, symbolizing alignment and, in some interpretations, a transient dissolution into the divine.

Aristotle also observed the celestial dance of planets, whose circular orbits around the celestial pole in eternal rotation epitomize the closest approximation to the serenity of eternity, guided by the *Unmoved Mover*. This cosmic ballet, marked by flawless precision, mirrors the Sufi and *Zārdancers'* endeavors. As the *Zār* dancer spins with increasing velocity, he metaphorically detaches from earthly bounds, reaching a state of ecstatic fainting at the emotional climax. This moment of transcendence is viewed by proponents of the dance as a purer form of the spiritual fainting Aristotle described, achieving a sublime union with the eternal through the perfect harmony of motion.

The critique of my interpretation of Ahmad Moualla's colored paintings as overly elaborate diverts us from our main discourse, suggesting a perceived disconnect with Sufism and likening Moualla's approach to childlike spontaneity rather than deliberate artistry.

In defense, I reference Anatole France's view of literary art as a divine endeavor, positing that art's "playfulness" may indeed carry more depth than conventional seriousness. This implies that art inherently possesses a spiritual dimension. An artist, driven by instinct and absorbed in creative pursuit, embodies a form of Sufism, with their art as their unique dance.

Furthermore, anyone deeply committed to their work, treating it as life's mission, mirrors the Sufi's dedication. This suggests that my reading of Moualla's paintings—based on fleeting impressions due to their size and the nature of viewing—holds validity, recognizing that each artist channels distinct facets of creativity.

Addressing the comparison to prominent artists showcased in Damascus, like Marwan Kassab Bashi, Nadir Ismail, or Dia Al-Azzawi, underscores the vast spectrum of artistic expression. It reaffirms that art, in its myriad forms, reflects a dance of creativity, with Moualla's dynamic approach contributing to this rich mosaic, akin to the varied expressions of Sufism.

In discussing the subjective nature of artistic comparison, I maintained that judgments between artists of substantial merit are predominantly subjective and prone to fluctuate over time. For example, I recounted how my appreciation for Ahmad Moualla's *Fire* paintings shifted within a single day: initially favoring their artistic embellishments in the morning, only to later value their unembellished, natural form for its more profound soulful impact by evening. This stance evolved once again when a colleague presented a colored work by Moualla, framed artistically, which I found exceedingly beautiful compared to its bare version.

He replied, acknowledging that the subjective perception of art, despite its variability, is indeed an integral dimension of its essence.

To this, I responded, asserting that while the subjective lens through which we view art is significant, it doesn't overshadow the concept of beauty itself. Beauty's manifestations may differ across cultures, times, and individual perspectives, yet it harbors a self-evident essence. This intrinsic quality enables us to recognize and cherish beauty in various forms, guiding our subjective evaluations of aesthetic value.

After a contemplative pause, I reflected on the intrinsic relationship between movement and stillness, echoing Plato's wisdom from over two millennia ago: every motion finds its counterbalance in stillness, and every stillness, in essence, emerges from motion. This paradox suggests that tranquility can possess a vitality surpassing any physical movement, its dynamism and temporality born from its profound calm.

In synthesis, I proposed that every distinguished artist crafts a unique balance between movement and stillness, or time and space, a balance that evolves with the artist's shifting perception of their world. This artistic value is derived from the vision's dynamism and the artist's skill in achieving and sustaining harmony among the painting's colors and elements amidst its inherent dynamics.

Among the many artists who explore this interplay, Ahmad Moualla stands out. The color in his work is not static but dynamic, transforming a single vision into multiple perspectives. It is this vibrant dynamism that captivates audiences in Moualla's exhibitions from 1993 and 1995, to which I have devoted my musings. As for whether I will continue these reflections, that remains uncertain. Like all art, writing is bound by its era.

Just as an individual's core identity remains cohesive despite the diversity and sometimes outright contradiction in their actions, so too are the various journeys they undertake. This underlying unity becomes apparent when we juxtapose representations from different phases of an artist's evolution within a conceptual space, unveiling the singular truth that underpins all their creative explorations.

In response to the concern about whether lauding Ahmad Moualla as a distinguished artist of movement subtly disparages other luminaries showcased in Damascus galleries, like Marwan Kassab Bashi, Nadir Ismail, or Dia Al-Azzawi, I replied, "Evaluating and contrasting artists, especially those of profound talent, often relies on subjective, ever-shifting viewpoints. Our artistic preferences are inherently fluid, changing with the passage of time. Take, for instance, my recent reflections on Moualla's *Fire* series: Initially, I found their adorned state more visually appealing than their natural form. Yet, by evening, my perspective had shifted, favoring the unembellished for its deeper resonance with the soul. Interestingly, this view was upended the following day when a colleague presented a framed, colored work by Moualla, which I then perceived as surpassingly beautiful. This illustrates that such comparisons are not critiques but reflections of the dynamic and personal nature of artistic appreciation."

He said: The subjective aspect of the painting, even though it is changing, is one of its dimensions. I said: True. But it is not the most important dimension. For beauty, even though its manifestations differ from nation to nation, from era to era, and from one perspective to another, it is a self-existing meaning, a meaning that makes us recognize the beauty wherever and whenever we find it, and we implicitly rely on it in our subjective estimations of beauty.

After minutes of silence, I added: Every movement has its stillness, it moves in relation to it, and every stillness, initially, has a movement that is stillness in relation to it. This is an axiom that Plato reminded us of from twenty-four centuries ago. And there may be a tranquility more active than any movement, and from its action. It derives its dynamism and temporality. I summarize and conclude that every artist of a certain level has his style in composing between movement and stillness, or between time and space. A composition that changes with the artist's changing vision of his world. And it derives its artistic value from the dynamism of the vision and the artist's ability to achieve coherence between the colors of the painting and its other elements, and to maintain

this coherence in the essence of the painting's dynamics. So, there are many artists of the movement, but Ahmad Moualla remains at the forefront among them. The color has its changes, or rather its dynamics. Such dynamics that turns the vision into visions. Moreover, these dynamic visions are what amaze you in Ahmad Moualla's exhibitions in 1993 and 1995, which I dedicated my reflections to. Shall I say until another time? I don't know! For writing, like any other art, is subject to its times.