

## Hearing the cry of migrants

The artist Rachid Koraïchi has created, in Tunisia, a cemetery for refugees who died at sea, the Garden of Africa, Garden of Paradise. From New York, where he is currently exhibiting, an international mobilization is being organized in solidarity with the tragedy in the Mediterranean.

## From the Mediterranean to the USA, the echo of the tragedy of migrants

SOLIDARITE

While he is currently exhibiting for the third time at the Aicon gallery in New York, with *Le Chant de l'Ardent Désir*, the world-renowned Algerian artist, Rachid Koraïchi, is also raising awareness in the United States of the plight of refugees who have disappeared at sea, in order to support the *Jardin d'Afrique*, a cemetery dedicated to them, in Tunisia, and to carry out other humanist projects on an international level

By Laure Filippi



"We are all going to leave this life, so it is fundamental to give dignity to the dead, because that is how we give dignity to the living." Much more than a simple conviction, this imperious requirement animates the existence and the work of Rachid Koraïchi. Descendant of the Prophet Mohammed and imbued with Sufi mysticism, the Algerian artist of international renown has never ceased, in over fifty years of intense creation, to embody this spirituality by honoring the dead.

A fervent defender of peace and tolerance between religions, in 2004 he created a monumental work composed of seven rare art boxes, *The Seven Sleepers*, in tribute to the monks of Tibhirine. In 2005, he also built the *Jardin d'Orient* in the Royal Castle of Amboise, consisting of twenty-five graves dedicated to Emir Abdelkader and his retinue, imprisoned

between 1848 and 1852 after their defeat by the French, In 2021, it is yet another cemetery, Jardin d'Afrique, Jardin du Paradis, that the humanist artist has entirely designed, conceived and financed in Zarzis, Tunisia, this time to "offer a decent final resting place to the damned of the earth and the sea," the countless migrants who have tragically disappeared in the Mediterranean, trying to flee wars and misery. "When I learned that thousands of bodies were piling up in a dump since 2003, I reacted instinctively and decided to build this place that I thought, by contrast, as a real palace," recalls Rachid Koraïchi. Inaugurated on June 19 in the presence of, among others, the Director General of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay, Tunisian authorities and local representatives of the three monotheistic religions, the site houses eight hundred tombs, surrounded by plants and trees carefully chosen with symbolic intent. "Jasmine, night gallants, bougainvillea, pomegranate and palm trees offer shade and fragrance to all those who take the time to sit, think and meditate," says the artist, who has also planted five olive trees, trees of peace, for the five pillars of Islam, and twelve large vines, in reference to the twelve apostles. From the entrance, the small low door, itself carved in the very large, sun-colored one, "forces a bow to all the deceased," while hand-drawn 17th century ceramic tiles line the prayer room and the aisles, "like an immense welcome mat. Each grave has the marks of DNA results and identifying characteristics of the body, the date as well as the location of the shipwreck. The hope is that this data will one day help families to identify their loved ones and to mourn," continues the man who carries the impossible mourning of his older brother, Mohamed, who disappeared at sea when he was a teenager. He is also guided by the words of his late grandfather: "What is not offered is lost."

A philosophy of life and a commitment whose echo can now be heard on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, from Africa and Europe to the United States, and more precisely in New York, where the visual artist is currently exhibiting, until March 12, at Aicon, in Manhattan.

### **"Uniting partners"**

Among the many works gathered under the title *Le Chant de l'Ardent Désir* (see elsewhere), the masterpiece, precisely named *Jardin d'Afrique*, depicts a man in the middle of a black circle, engulfed in a marine abyss. This monumental tapestry of five meters by three, woven in Flanders, "carries with it a part of the soul" of the memorial built in Zarzis intended as a "place of remembrance for future generations." The tapestry provides aesthetic support to growing awareness around the plight of migrants in the Mediterranean, as well as support for other solidarity projects internationally, according to the desire of Rachid Koraïchi and the co-owner of the gallery, Prajit Dutta.

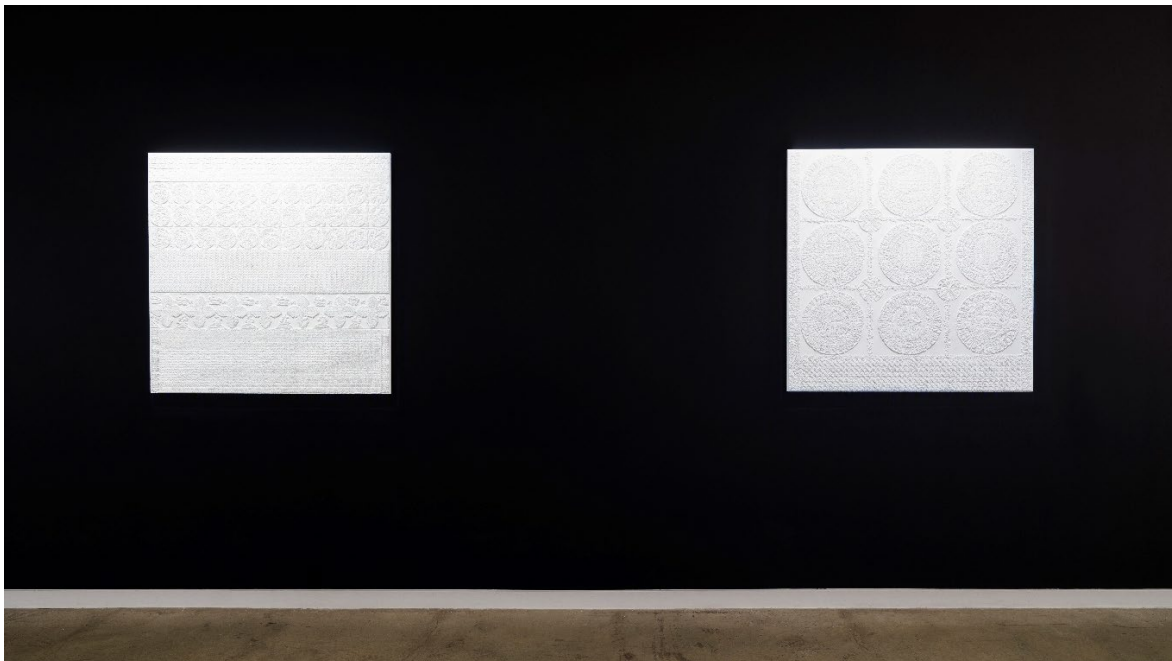
Alongside director, Harry Hutchison, and his team, Prajit Dutta, who is also a professor of Economics at the prestigious University of Columbia, is working to raise American awareness and to "unite partners" on behalf of this cause. "I first came across Rachid Koraïchi's work in 2006 at an exhibition at MoMA," he says. "I then had the opportunity to meet him in 2015, during an exhibition at the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, and proposed that he exhibit in New York, *Le Chant de l'Ardent Désir* being his third exhibition at Aicon in six years. Rachid is an exceptional artist, very ambitious, connected to a spiritual tradition, whose use of symbolism as a meditation, as well as his extremely rare combination of ornamentation and minimalism, are quite fantastic. But he is also a wonderful human being, who has created a project with the *Jardin d'Afrique* that no one has ever done before. It is such a unique and inspiring act of humanity that we feel it is essential to publicize and support it. In the United States, the story of immigration is more specifically linked to Mexico, but despite the geographical distance, people are also concerned by the terrible dramas that are being played out in the Mediterranean and in Europe. We are therefore trying to mobilize international organizations and donors to help finance the cemetery of

Zarzis through a foundation. But also, to support the rehabilitation of the old landfill nearby, and the creation of another cemetery, le Jardin des Iles, in Fuerteventura, in the Canary Islands, that is also supported by Rachid Koraïchi."

### **"Not statistics"**

These projects were explained a few days ago at a ceremony at the Algerian Consulate in New York, during which the Consul General, Brahim Chennouf, gave Rachid an award. He also presented his projects at Aicon, during an exceptional event attended by many figures from the economic, political, academic and artistic worlds. Among them, the founder, general and artistic director of the New York cultural center The Shed, Alex Pootz; the Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations in New York, H.E. Mohamed Abushahab; the Consul General of the United Arab Emirates in New York, H.E. Amna Almheiri; the Ambassador of Ireland, Anne Anderson; businessmen, Sudip Thakor and Bill Martin, among others. Also in attendance was guest of honor for the evening, David Miliband, former British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, currently President and CEO of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), founded in 1933 by Albert Einstein, which helps victims of racial, religious and ethnic persecution, as well as those affected by war and violence. Denouncing in particular the situation on the island of Lampedusa, as well as the ravages of "globalization and indifference," David Miliband praised the "remarkable project carried out in Zarzis, which is an inspiration to us all. All over the world there is every reason to think that nothing can change, but through your art and your determination to remind us of our common humanity, you show that special things happen when people take responsibility," he said to Rachid Koraïchi. "This is an impressive gift you are giving us. There is an interaction between art and public affairs, and in a time marked by so much drama, perhaps it is art that reminds us of our humanity," he said. Before adding that the artist has made a lie of Stalin's famous phrase: "The death of a man is a tragedy. The death of a million men is a statistic. With the Jardin d'Afrique, you have shown that the thousands of migrants who die in the sea are not statistics," he concluded.

## **This luminous object of desire**



Painting, sculpture, ceramics, textiles ... For over fifty years, the multiform practice of the artist Rachid Koraïchi knows no limits. Nor any border. From Egypt to Spain, from Tunisia to Dagestan, he hires the best local craftsmen, trained in ancient traditions, to create rare pieces, often monumental, always inhabited by his link to Sufism and imbued with a deep spirituality, itself translated into an infinity of symbols, glyphs, traces and numbers. Recognized and exhibited throughout the world, he presents February 3 until March 12, his third exhibition in six years at Aicon in New York, under the title *Le Chant de l'Ardent Désir*. Borrowed from one of the most important mystics of Islam, Ibn Arabi, this title "does not evoke the desire for a woman or a person, but the desire for God, the desire for peace and elevation," explains the artist who also refers to the poet and philosopher Rûmi, another great mystic, singer of music and dance, in the tradition of whirling dervishes. "As with the mandalas, it is a form of meditation, of silence that allows one to go inside oneself to feel these vibrations, to find peace and to reach a transcendence. Without necessarily being specialists in the techniques used, people who immerse themselves in the observation of the pieces realize that there is a very long, structured, meticulous work, to create this dialogue between the viewer and the object looked at."

An intense, fascinating and moving dialogue, almost hypnotic, is established throughout this unique exhibition, which presents part of the work carried out by the artist in Madrid over the last three years. "I systematically think the project in advance, depending on the exhibition space, as an installation, a global concept," he says. "The volume and space of Aicon, which extends over almost three levels with very high ceilings, requires gigantic and numerous pieces, knowing that I only work on the number seven and its multiples." Among the works on display, large Corten sculptures run through the rooms from end to end and stand there like "vigilantes," while the first-floor houses six alabaster tablets set like jewels on huge black walls. "Usually, alabaster comes in an oval shape, while here it is flat slabs found in areas very difficult to access, with an almost non-existent veining, transparency and purity of exceptional white," said Rachid Koraïchi. "This material is like glass, so the incisions and the very fine sculptures are like the work of a diamond cutter." An absolute sophistication sublimated by the meticulous care brought to the lighting of the works, themselves revealed by the light and the play of shadows, also holds a very strong meaning in the eyes of the artist. "Looking at the work of Rachid Koraïchi, who transforms the place into a sanctuary, implies paying special attention to the shadow, because it represents for him our soul and absolute fidelity, insofar as it never leaves us, from our birth to our death," confirms Harry Hutchison, the gallery director. Upstairs, there are fourteen of the twenty-one paintings in this series, done in acrylics close to ancient gold on a background of vibrant indigo blue, "the color of the invisible, like that of the sky and the earth," adds the artist. "It is no coincidence that the ceilings of churches and mosques are painted blue, he continues. Here, it is a reference to the Koran calligraphy and written in the seventh century by my ancestors who built the city of Kairouan. This Quran was made on handmade paper, dipped in indigo, calligraphy in gold, in the type of writing Kufi, very difficult to read, with geometric letters," adds the artist, whose writing of Arabic is not, however, calligraphy.

The paintings are also reminiscent of the ceramic tiles lining the floors of ancient mosques and the alleys of the Jardin d'Afrique, the cemetery for migrants built by the artist in Tunisia, which also gives its name to the monumental tapestry of five meters by three, in Nepalese sheep's wool woven in Flanders, and occupying the central space of the gallery. *Jardin d'Afrique*, the centerpiece of the exhibition, will soon join the important collection of Rachid Koraïchi's works already assembled at the Kiran Nadar Museum in New Delhi, India.