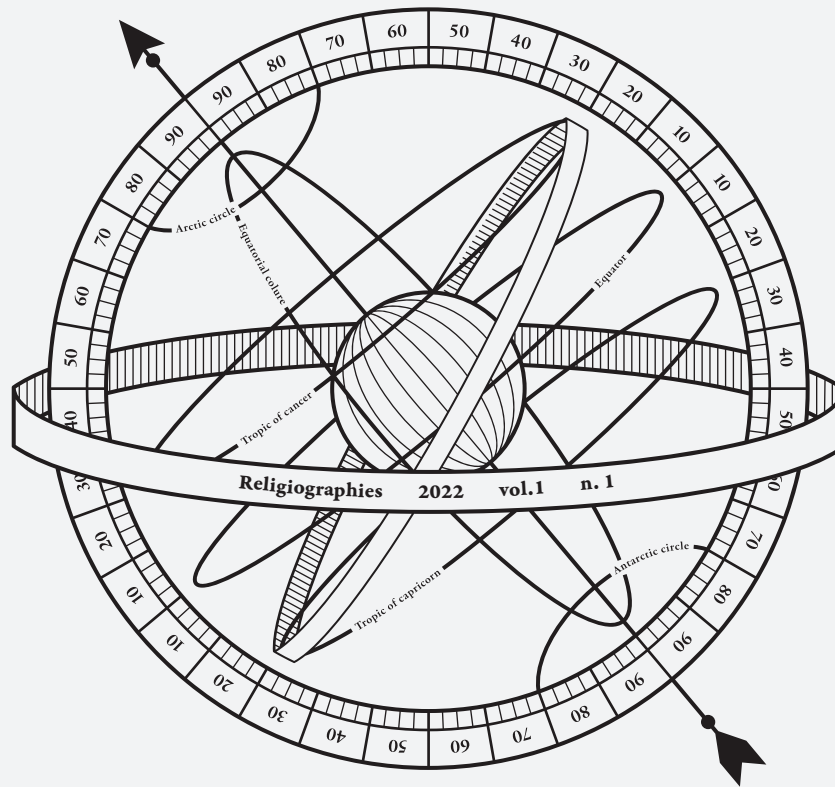


Religiographies



Special Issue

“Holy Sites in the Mediterranean, Sharing and Division”

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Heterography 1:

Rachid Koraïchi's Migratory Aesthetics

Sara Kuehn



CENTRO STUDI
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ
COMPARATE

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1

While 'refugees' and 'migrants' are two distinct legal categories, their status prior to death is unclear. As such, for the purposes of this paper, I will follow the policy of Al Jazeera and use the term 'refugee' because "the word migrant is no longer fit for purpose when it comes to describing the horror unfolding in the Mediterranean. It has evolved from its dictionary definitions into a tool that dehumanises and distances, a blunt pejorative." Barry Malone, "Why Al Jazeera Will Not Say Mediterranean 'Migrants.' The Word Migrant Has Become a Largely Inaccurate Umbrella Term for This Complex Story," *Al Jazeera* (August 20, 2015). Available online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/8/20/why-al-jazeera-will-not-say-mediterranean-migrants>. Accessed on October 3, 2022.

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Anonymous, "Mediterranean Crossing Still World's Deadliest for Migrants – UN Report," *UN News. Global Perspective Human Stories* (October 24, 2017). Available online: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/11/637162-mediterranean-crossing-still-worlds-deadliest-migrants-un-report>. Accessed on September 10, 2022; Nicholas De Genova, "Introduction. The Borders of 'Europe' and the European Question," in *The Borders of 'Europe,' Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering*, ed. Nicholas de Genova (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 1–35, here 1–2.

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Btihaj Ajana, *Governing through Biometrics: The Biopolitics of Identity* (London: Palgrave, 2013), 58; Maurizio Albahari, *Crimes of Peace: Mediterranean Migrations at the World's Deadliest Border* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Nadhem Yousfi, "The Mediterranean Sea, a Graveyard for Humans and Hopes," *Assafirarabi* (June 4, 2020). Available online: <https://assafirarabi.com/en/30281/2020/04/06/the-mediterranean-sea-a-graveyard-for-humans-and-hopes/>. Accessed on October 3, 2022.

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Mieke Bal, "Lost in Space, Lost in the Library," *Thamyris/Intersecting* 17 (2007): 23–36, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401204675_003; Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord, "Introduction: Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-making," in *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-making*, eds. Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 11–20.

The site will remain an enduring beacon of humanity in the face of suffering.
Rachid Koraïchi

Introduction

The artwork of Paris-based artist Rachid Koraïchi, one of the leading Arab artists of his generation, is steeped in the aesthetics of Sufism and distinctive in its thematic integration of migration, memory, and mourning. The traces of the perilous migratory movements that characterize our contemporary culture are a central preoccupation in his creations. One of Koraïchi's most important projects, the newly opened Le Jardin d'Afrique (The Garden of Africa) in southern Tunisia was created to honour and commemorate the increasing number of refugees and migrants¹ – women, men and children – who have drowned crossing the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa, especially Libya, while attempting to reach asylum in Europe. Koraïchi is one of the few artists worldwide whose work memorializes undocumented refugees. Fleeing extreme poverty and military conflict, a mounting number of people of various nationalities and faiths have died on what the UN calls the world's deadliest migration route,² resulting in the "world's largest mass grave."³

This article addresses the "migratory aesthetics" (a term coined by Mieke Bal in 2007) in Koraïchi's project. "As an incontestable source of cultural transformation," Bal identifies migration as a "constructive focus of an aesthetics that does not leave the viewer, spectator, or user of art aloof and shielded, autonomous and in charge of the aesthetic experience." For Bal the term enhances "the possibilities of art to be politically effective,"⁴ amply illustrated by Koraïchi's oeuvre, especially in his Garden of Africa project.

The exploration is also inspired by decolonial thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo.⁵ While engaging with postcolonial thought (for instance, Edward Said's foundational *Orientalism*⁶), they deliberately reject the concept of a single universal aesthetic traditionally posited for the Western tradition. In contrast to the univalent construct of Western aesthetic ideology, decolonial aesthetics postulates a plurality of aesthetics.⁷ Processes of displacement or migration also generate an aesthetic of transcultural formation, in which transculturation is understood as the "effects of cultural translations."⁸

Drawing on these recent methodological developments, the article explores how this contemporary global artist engages with the applied aesthetics of the 'lived' Sufi experience.⁹ It delineates the aesthetic junctures of embodied sensations (Birgit Meyer's "sensational forms")¹⁰ and the intersensorial nature of Sufi perception. As a manifestation of transcultural frames of reference,¹¹ Koraïchi's work articulates the culturally entangled dynamic of multi-religious engagement.

Sufism, social activism, decolonial aesthetics/aesthetics

During the chaotic post-colonial period, when terrorist violence escalated after 132 years of French colonial rule in Algeria (1830–1962), Koraïchi (b. 1947 in Ain Beida, Algeria) fled to Paris at the age of 21. There he continued his studies at the École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs and the École d'urbanisme. Koraïchi comes from a family of distinguished Sufis (his grandfather

was a Tijani *muqaddam*, or spiritual leader, in Ain Beida) descending from the Quraysh, the Meccan-based ‘tribe’ to which the Prophet Muhammad himself belonged. The French-Algerian artist is an active member of the Tijaniyya order, founded by Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani (1737–1815) in Algeria in the Oran region before spreading to other parts of the world. Known for their social reforms and longstanding resistance to European colonialism in Africa, Tijaniyya members combine mysticism with humanitarianism and social activism, a common thread running through Koraïchi’s works.

It is in this spirit that the Garden of Africa project aesthetically contests the “necropolitical” conditions (a term coined by Achille Mbembe)¹² of “this extended period of global Anthropocene crisis, ongoing ‘refugee crisis,’ mass incarceration, and endless war.”¹³ Due to hardline border security policies and new methods of migration control,¹⁴ refugee deaths in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas have increased since the 1990s.¹⁵ As a result, Europe’s “horrific modern hecatomb,” in the words of French-Senegalese novelist David Diop, is poignantly inscribed in the region’s death-scape.¹⁶ Yet the Mediterranean and Aegean sea borders are only one of many regions where refugees are dying in their search for asylum. In the Sinai, the Sahara, in Central America, at the US-Mexican border, on the Andaman sea and elsewhere, refugees are dying in untold numbers.

Koraïchi positions his work as a resistance to neocolonization. In the intolerable conditions of migration, he sees the tragic legacy of colonialism. But, he says, “colonialism is worse today because it is hidden.”¹⁷ In 2005, he built the Jardin d’Orient (Garden of the Orient) at Château Royal d’Amboise in the Loire Valley in France as a tribute to Emir Abdelkader (1808–1883), Algeria’s former spiritual (Sufi) and military leader in the anti-colonial struggle against the French invasion, and the Algerians killed in the resistance. Emir Abdelkader was imprisoned at the château from 1848 to 1852, together with his family and followers, more than twenty of whom perished and were buried in an unmarked mass grave in the courtyard of the castle. In an interview in 2020, Koraïchi offers insights into the “catalyst” that led him to create the Jardin d’Orient:¹⁸

I was praying there [the courtyard of the Château d’Amboise] one day. A woman’s pet dog came near me and peed near my feet. “Who are you?” she asked me. I said that I was Rachid Koraïchi. She said, “Are you working here? My dog has the habit of peeing here since a long time.” My response was, “At least you’re sincere and honest in telling me this!” This moment led to my thinking of making the cemetery [Jardin d’Orient]. So, the dog was the catalyst. It was also “maktoob” – destiny, fate. Choices we make and don’t make . . . like being at a crossroads.

The French-Algerian artist also views his mission as illuminating the human catastrophe resulting from the NATO-backed overthrow and death of Libya’s long-time president Moammar Gaddafi in 2011.¹⁹ The ensuing violence plunged the country into chaos and, in Koraïchi’s words, “opened the gates of hell” across the African continent and beyond.²⁰ “Now,” he says, “all the weapons that France, Italy, Britain and Germany sold to Libya for millions are in the hands of terrorists all over Africa. But no one is taking responsibility for these genocidal arms sales.”²¹ Terrorized Africans continue to flee to European shores, while for years the EU funded, trained and equipped the Libyan

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Walter D. Mignolo, “Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing. On (De)Coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience,” *EIPCP* (September 2011). Available online: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0112/mignolo/en>. Accessed on October 23, 2022; Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of Decoloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 1-2 (2007): 449–514, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647>.

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Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978).

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Mignolo, “Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing”; Tlostanova, Madina, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art: Resistance and Re-existence* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 29.

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Joel Kuortti, ed., *Transculturation and Aesthetics: Ambivalence, Power, and Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

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Heinz Streib, Astrid Dinter, and Kerstin Söderblom, “Preliminary Materials,” in *Lived Religion: Conceptual, Empirical and Practical-Theological Approaches: Essays in Honour of Hans-Günter Heimbrock*, eds. Heinz Streib, Astrid Dinter and Kerstin Söderblom (Leiden: Brill, 2008), ix–xiii.

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Birgit Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding,” in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Region and the Senses*, ed. Birgit Meyer (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–18; idem, “Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion,” in *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (Fordham University Press, 2009), 704–23.

11

Gilberto Freyre, *The Mansions and the Shanties*, trans. Harriet De Onís (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

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Politics surrounding death (Greek *necro-*) involve the policy of allowing certain groups to die under otherwise avoidable conditions. Achille Mbembe refers to these death-worlds as “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead.” Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

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Jill H. Casid, “Necropolitics at Sea,” in *Migration and the Contemporary Mediterranean, Shifting Cultures in Twenty-first-century Italy and Beyond*, ed. Claudia Gualtieri (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018).

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Maurizio Albahari, *Crimes of Peace: Mediterranean Migrations at the World’s Deadliest Border* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Leanne Weber and Sharon Pickering, *Globalization and Borders:*

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The exact number of refugees currently dying anonymously trying to cross the Mediterranean is unknown. Statistics indicate that 50,873 people died or disappeared between 1993 and 2020. Nicolas Lambert, "Fermer les frontières tuel," *Carnet (neo) cartographique* (February 26, 2020). Available online: <https://neocarto.hypotheses.org/9586>. Accessed on October 4, 2022.

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That is, material expressions in the landscape of practices relating to death. David Diop, "The Depths of Our Humanity," trans. Anna Moschovakis, *The New York Times* (December 8, 2021). Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/03/special-series/africa-migrant-deaths-mediterranean.html>. Accessed on October 5, 2022. See also the SEA WATCH election campaign video circulated by DIE PARTEI (a German political party headed by EU parliamentarian Martin Sonneborn) before the EU election in spring 2019. Die PARTEI & Sea-Watch, "Hold your Breath," *Wahlwerbespot zur Europawahl 2019* (May 8, 2019). Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obDJQNRnyus> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKZ9m_qWYqI (with English subtitles). Accessed on October 4, 2022. Cf. De Genova, "Introduction. The Borders of 'Europe' and the European Question," 2.

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Hadani Ditmars, "Jardin d'Afrique: A Moving Memorial to Forgotten Migrants," *MEI@75. Peace, Prosperity, Partnership* (July 13, 2021). Available online: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/jardin-dafrique-moving-memorial-forgotten-migrants>. Accessed on October 15, 2022.

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Laila Rahman, "Mystic Artist in Our Midst," *The Friday Times* (March 13, 2020). Available online: <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/2020/03/13/mystic-artist-in-our-midst/>. Accessed on October 1, 2022.

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Ditmars, "Jardin d'Afrique."

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Rachid Koraïchi, "Virtual Tour and Talk. Tears that Taste of the Sea," *Aga Khan Museum/UK Patrons' Circle Webinar* (October 3, 2020). Available online: https://octobergallery.co.uk/exhibitions/2020_rachid_koraichi. Accessed on October 15, 2022.

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Ditmars, "Jardin d'Afrique."

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Ditmars, "Jardin d'Afrique."

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Anonymous, "World Cup 2022: How has Qatar Treated Foreign Workers?," *BBC World* (November 9, 2022). Available online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60867042>. Accessed on October 11, 2022. See also "FIFA/Qatar: Commit to Compensate Abused Migrant Workers," *Human Rights Watch*

coast guard to intercept those trying to cross the border and send them back to Libya, where they are held in detention centers.²² Refugees also arrive from Qatar, Koraïchi says. To build the stadiums for the World Cup finals Qatar's government hired 30,000 foreign labourers, mostly from Bangladesh and Pakistan. Forced to pay exorbitant recruitment fees, their wages withheld and their passports confiscated,²³ they are reduced to conditions of modern slavery. The bodies of thousands of migrant workers dying in Qatar after it won its World Cup bid are said to be used as a filling material in the construction of the stadiums.²⁴ Many flee these inhumane conditions via the sea route, which explains the large number of refugees from Pakistan and Bangladesh arriving in Tunisia, many perishing on the way and arriving in body bags at the Garden of Africa, says Koraïchi.²⁵

In past decades, refugee deaths have been addressed only occasionally in photography, documentaries, and artwork. Among the few works of art that depict the deaths is Berlin-based artist and activist Khaled Barakeh's (b. 1976 in Syria) 'Multicultural Graveyard,' a censored Facebook album of photographs of refugee children drowned off the coast of Libya.²⁶ His testimony of death is intended "to make life matter."²⁷ Runo Lagomarsino's (b. 1977 in Sweden) installation 'Sea Grammar' draws upon metonymic refraction to articulate the muted tragedy of those drowned to death in the Mediterranean. It depicts an aerial view of the Strait of Gibraltar, pierced by more and more holes until finally these holes completely obscure the strait. The holes recall an expression seafarers use when their comrades are carried away by the waves: "making a hole in the sea." The work is part of the exhibition 'They Watched Us for a Very Long Time,'²⁸ named after the title of a 2014 work at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin,²⁹ in which Lagomarsino illuminates European neocolonialism and the way history is constructed as a "a mirror with amnesia." With this work, Lagomarsino refers to Walter Mignolo's words of warning that:³⁰ "The colonial past is not a past; it's part of our contemporary life. [...] Modernity hides coloniality behind its darker side, in other words, coloniality is constitutive of modernity – there is no modernity without coloniality." Also worth mentioning is the 17-minute video 'Liquid Traces: The Left-to-Die Boat Case,' directed by the activist-researcher and filmmaker Charles Heller and the architect Lorenzo Pezzani, produced in Berlin in March 2014;³¹ and Swiss-Icelandic artist Christoph Büchel's (b. 1966) project 'Barca Nostra' (Our Boat), the wreckage of a fishing boat that had sunk with hundreds of refugees aboard, displayed at the 2019 Venice Biennale.³² These artworks enunciate the *abjection* of marginalized refugees: Julia Kristeva describes this as what was once part of the self but was cast off because the self violently expelled it due to its disgust with the abject.³³

In spring 2018, social media reported large numbers of decomposing bodies of drowned 'others' of refugee origin that had washed up on a Tunisian beach near the old port of Zarzis, many of them remaining unburied. Koraïchi's daughter Aïcha heard about this humanitarian disaster and alerted her father. Soon after father and daughter visited the small coastal town and were "terrified" by what they saw.³⁴

Locals refused to bury the dead in their own cemeteries, often on the basis that the religious beliefs of the deceased were unknown – described by Koraïchi as "open racism."³⁵ As Judith Butler has shown, a subject emerges through a process of abjection, by not conforming to the norm of the human subject, in this case the citizen.³⁶ To find out the faith of the deceased, the locals even went so far as to check whether the dead

(often in an advanced stage of decomposition) were circumcised or not, but only a few bodies were accepted in local Muslim or Christian cemeteries.³⁷ A makeshift cemetery for refugees known as the “Cemetery of Strangers” in the middle of a wasteland received all the dead (regardless of their religion). The humanitarian initiative was managed single handedly by Chemseddine Marzoug, a local fisherman and occasional taxi driver,³⁸ but by 2019 the cemetery of mostly unmarked graves had no space left for more burials. Many bodies were therefore simply dumped on rubbish heaps. “There were piles of bodies along a very long beach,” says Koraïchi. “The bodies are carried there by the ocean currents, and they were collected by rubbish trucks and dumped on heaps infested with dogs and rats.” “It was unbelievable,” he recounts.³⁹ This description corresponds with what Butler describes as the process of rejection: “The refuse of such a process includes various forms of spectrality and monstrosity, usually figured in relation to non-human animal life.”⁴⁰

This spectrality is reflected in the invisibility and inaccessibility of the ‘burial sites,’ the denial of identification, mourning and care for the refugee dead. Far from the nearest human settlement, anonymous and abandoned, the remains of the dehumanized refugees are dumped in mass graves. With no genealogical ties, cut off from their families, they leave no trace. The depersonalized bodies are merely covered with earth. They receive no proper ritual burial and there are no grave markers or other recognized symbol to commemorate the dead. The insinuation that the “martyred” corpses⁴¹ can rot below the ground and be easily forgotten betrays the disregard for the refugees as actual members of a political, social and cultural community.⁴² The denial of state responsibility for these violations of rights reveals a profound inequality even in death for these refugees,⁴³ as well as for their relatives, left behind in a limbo of uncertainty, with no means of finding the missing.

Koraïchi recalls, “I immediately said that we must buy a piece of land to build a cemetery. Since they [the locals] refuse to give them [the refugees] a dignified burial, I will build them a palace,”⁴⁴ “with an oasis, to roll out a prayer rug for them,” he says.⁴⁵ In late 2018, Koraïchi together with his daughters Aïcha and Fatma purchased a 2,500 square meter field of olive trees near the small town of Zarzis to create a dignified and peaceful final resting place for the hundreds of unburied corpses (Fig. 1). Because of its location, sharing borders with both the European Union and Libya, the town is particularly concerned with migration issues. Irrespective of their (mostly unknown) religion, all are received and equally honoured. In doing so Koraïchi follows the Sufi tradition of universal humanism that God embraces all humans without regard to race, religion, or any other distinction. This holistic, humanitarian ethic is the central thread linking together all the facets of human rights and humanitarian action. It represents Koraïchi’s personal tribute to the countless men, women, and children who have perished in search of a better life. He believes that “the site will remain an enduring beacon of humanity in the face of suffering.”⁴⁶

What makes Koraïchi’s Garden of Africa stand out from most other artworks on the suffering of refugees is that it actively helps those in need by providing a place of refuge and sanctuary for both the dead and their living friends and relatives. While all of these artworks are important expressions of a decolonial aesthetic, Koraïchi’s work is also exemplary for its humanitarian activism. Rather than confining his art to the traditional aesthetic of “feelings of beauty or sublimity,” Koraïchi’s garden cemetery

(August 12, 2022). Available online: <https://www.brv.org/news/2022/08/12/fifa/qatar-commit-compensate-abused-migrant-workers>. Accessed on November 10, 2022; also Pete Pattison and Niamh McIntyre, “Revealed: 6,500 Migrant Workers Have Died in Qatar since World Cup Awarded. Guardian Analysis Indicates Shocking Figure Over the Past Decade Likely to be an Underestimate,” *The Guardian* (February 21, 2021). Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/23/revealed-migrant-worker-deaths-qatar-fifa-world-cup-2022>. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

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Koraïchi, telephone interview with author on November 10, 2022.

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Koraïchi, telephone interview with author on November 10, 2022.

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Anne König, “The Multicultural Graveyard. A Conversation with Khaled Barakeh About His Censored Facebook Posts that Changed the Way the West Viewed Immigration,” *Collecteurs* (2015). Available online: <https://www.collecteurs.com/interview/khaled-barakeh-the-multicultural-graveyard>. Accessed on September 30, 2022.

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Nicholas D. Mirzoeff, “Facebook Censors Refugee Photographs,” blog post *How to See the World* (September 1, 2015). Available online: <https://wp.nyu.edu/howtoseetheworld/2015/09/01/auto-draft-78/>. Accessed on October 3, 2022.

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Runo Lagomarsino, “They Watched Us for a Very Long Time” (September 25, 2015). Available online: https://www.la-cricce.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/press_pack_runo_lagomarsino.pdf. Accessed on October 3, 2022. The installation was one of seven contemporary art projects in the 2015 exhibition *Refugees, réfugiés: quand l’art contemporain résonne avec l’actualité*.

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Runo Lagomarsino, “Against My Ruins,” *Nils Stark* (March 22, 2014). Available online: https://www.nilsstark.dk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=152&catid=10. Accessed on October 3, 2022.

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Runo Lagomarsino, “Q&A with Runo Lagomarsino,” *Kunstforum* (April 7, 2014). Available online: <https://kunstforum.as/2014/04/qa-with-runo-lagomarsino/>. Accessed on October 3, 2022.

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Sophie Hinger, “Transformative Trajectories – The Shifting Mediterranean Border Regime and the Challenges of Critical Knowledge Production. An Interview with Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani,” *Movements. Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 4/1 (2018). Available online: <https://movements-journal.org/issues/06.wissen/12.hinger-transformative-trajectories-the-shifting-mediterranean-border-regime-and-the-challenges-of-critical>

cal-knowledge-production-charles-heller-lorenzo-pezzani.html. Accessed on October 1, 2022. The film was also shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as part of the group exhibition, *Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter*, October 1, 2016–January 2017.

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Balasz Takac, “Barca Nostra – Christoph Büchel’s Shipwreck in Venice Biennale,” *Widewalls* (December 4, 2020). Available online: <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/barca-nostra-christoph-buchel-ship-venice-biennale>. Accessed on October 3, 2022.

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Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982).

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James Imam, “As ‘Mountains of Corpses’ Wash Up on Tunisian Shores, Artist Rachid Koraïchi Builds Burial Site for Migrants,” *The Art Newspaper* (June 11, 2021). Available online: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/06/11/as-mountains-of-corpses-wash-up-on-tunisian-shores-artist-rachid-koraichi-builds-burial-site-for-migrants>. Accessed on September 30, 2022.

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Ditmars, “Jardin d’Afrique.”

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Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

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Koraïchi, “Virtual Tour and Talk. Tears that Taste of the Sea.”

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Thessa Lageman, “The Cemetery of Unknown Refugees from the Mediterranean,” *Al Jazeera* (December 29, 2016). Available online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/12/29/the-cemetery-of-unknown-refugees-from-the-mediterranean>. Accessed on October 5, 2022; Sarah Mersch, “Tunisia’s ‘Cemetery for the Unknown’: The Gravedigger of Zarzis,” *Qantara* (2018). Available online: <https://en.qantara.de/content/tunisias-%E2%80%B3cemetery-for-the-unknown%E2%80%B3-the-gravedigger-of-zarzis>. Accessed on October 5, 2022. See also the short documentary by Walid Falleh, *Le cimetière des inconnus* (The Cemetery of Strangers) (1:19 mins) *Mobile Film Festival Africa* (March 3, 2020). Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9z9F4A05uZk>. Accessed on November 1, 2022.

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Imam, “As ‘Mountains of Corpses’ Wash Up on Tunisian Shores.”

40

Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 141.

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Mirzoeff, “Facebook Censors Refugee Photographs.”

42

Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and*

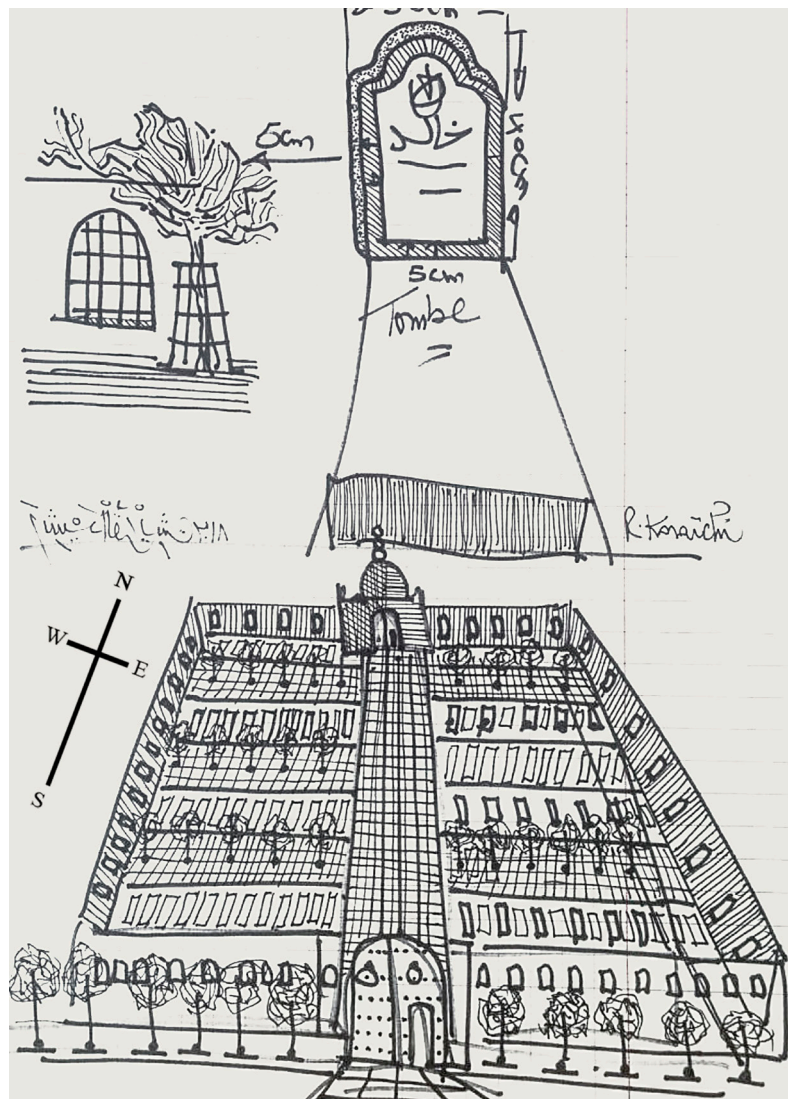


Fig.1 Design sketches for *Le Jardin d'Afrique*, Zarzis, Tunisia, see Rachid Koraïchi, *Tears that Taste of the Sea* (London: October Gallery, 2021), 9.

speaks to “sadness, indignation, repentance, hope, and determination to change things in the future.”⁴⁷

When Koraïchi took on the task to self-finance the sanctuary with proceeds from the sales of his works, he was following the example of his grandfather, who had reminded him on his deathbed that: “Everything that is not given is lost” [not passed on, not given in a spirit of humanity and generosity].⁴⁸ He was reminded of the fact that whatever money the grandfather did not spend for his family and on the Sufi shrine (*khanqah*) was used for humanitarian purposes, so that the public benefited.⁴⁹

The multi-faith memorial garden cemetery

The result, an ecumenical garden cemetery of great beauty, embodies shared-ness. Tapping into the long history of shared sacred sites and practices, the complex serves as a memorial, a cemetery and a garden, providing sanctuary and a final place of rest for all those who have perished on the dangerous sea routes in search of a dignified life and whose countless unidentified and unclaimed bodies all too often wash up on the Tunisian coast. Irrespective of their (mostly unknown) faith this shared space represents a special



Fig. 2. View of the garden cemetery and multi-faith prayer room, Le Jardin d'Afrique, Zarzis, Tunisia. Photograph © Rachid Koraïchi.

arrangement for all (Fig. 2). The sacred space embraces not only the dead but their families and friends as well, who can mourn there and pay a dignified final tribute to their loved ones.

It is important to remember that the remains of the dead do not simply constitute inert and passive material, merely to be handled and disposed of by local communities; rather, they “provide an agency to affect the experience and actions of mourners and evoke memories of the past.”⁵⁰ Koraïchi’s Garden of Africa gives them this voice. In this way he invokes the conceptualization of Ottoman multi-religious cemeteries which, as Amila Buturović points out, offered a space where “[t]he dead . . . can maintain an affective social presence with a lasting impact on the way they are remembered and can enhance coexistence through rituals and narratives, synchronically and diachronically, that engage communities and groups across ethnic and religious lines.”⁵¹ This time-honoured approach began to break down with the import of Western ideas of nationalism, when nation states tried to construct univalent societies which were inherently inimical to religious pluralism.⁵² It was in the context of this socio-political upheaval that the practice of sharing sacred spaces began to change and that “traditions of mixing and sharing began to disappear.”⁵³

At the Garden of Africa, Koraïchi created a transcultural (from the Latin prefix *trans-* meaning “across,” “beyond”) aesthetic in terms of cultural signification: a juncture between cultures and a site for transitioning between them, endowing it with a distinctive state of a cultural liminality. The cemetery’s transcultural aesthetic focusses on local and trans-regional traditions in a new formal language that both appeals to the local population and represents the various religious communities housed in the cemetery (who Koraïchi affectionately calls the “United Nations”) through

Dying on the Migrant Trail (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 17.

43

Oscar Martínez, *Los Migrantes que no Importan* (El Faro: Icaria Editorial, 2010), 175.

44

Rachid Koraïchi, “Le Chant de l’Ardent Désir” (2022). Available online: <https://www.aicon.art/exhibitions/rachid-koraichi2>. Accessed on September 30, 2022.

45

Laetitia Fernandez, “A Zarzis, dans le sud-est du pays, l’artiste algérien Rachid Koraïchi a conçu le ‘Jardin d’Afrique pour accueillir avec dignité les dépouilles des naufragés,” *Le Monde* (June 14, 2021). Available online: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/06/14/tous-les-reves-finissent-ici-en-tunisie-un-jardin-cimetiere-pour-les-migrants-morts-en-mer_6084012_3212.html. Accessed on October 5, 2022.

46

Imam, “As ‘Mountains of Corpses’ Wash Up on Tunisian Shores.”

47

Walter D. Mignolo, and Rolando Vázquez, eds., “Social Text: Periscope,” *Decolonial AestheSis Dossier* (2013). Available online: https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/the-decolonial-aestheSis-dossier/. Accessed on September 15, 2022.

48

Rahman, “Mystic Artist in Our Midst.”

49

Rahman, “Mystic Artist in Our Midst.”

50

Amila Buturović, “Headless, They March On: Cephalophores and Coexistence in Ottoman Bosnia,” in *Architecture of Coexistence: Building Pluralism*, ed. Azra Akšamija (Berlin: ArchiTangle, 2020), 100–9, here 103.

51

Buturović, “Headless, They March On,” 103.

52

Elazar Barkan and Karen Barkey, *Choreographies of Shared Sacred Sites. Religion, Politics and Conflict Resolution* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014), 3.

53

Maria Couroucli, “Sharing Sacred Places – A Mediterranean Tradition,” in *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean: Christians, Muslims, and Jews at Shrines and Sanctuaries*, eds. Dionigi Albera and Maria Couroucli (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 1–9, here 3.



Fig. 3. Koraïchi attaches a plaque to a tombstone; the yellow-green bowl on the grave is meant to catch rainwater and attract birds, Le Jardin d'Afrique, Zarzis, Tunisia. Photograph © Rachid Koraïchi.

54

Diop, "The Depths of Our Humanity."

55

Rachid Koraïchi, "Le Jardin d'Afrique, Zarzis," *E-Architect* (July 9, 2022). Available online: <https://www.e-architect.com/tunisia/le-jardin-dafrique-zarzis>. Accessed on October 15, 2022.

56

Diop, "The Depths of Our Humanity."

57

Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

58

Ditmars, "Jardin d'Afrique."

59

Ditmars, "Jardin d'Afrique."

their religio-cultural symbols.

In order to preserve memory and promote sustainable development, Koraïchi has taken care to build on the pre-existing architectural context and provide site-specific responses in terms of ecology, climate and materials. For instance, the yellow and green bowls on the graves are designed to collect rainwater and attract birds (Fig. 3).⁵⁴ The focus was on local resources and their aesthetic qualities, as well as climatic aspects given the harsh, sweltering climate. In the the Garden of Africa all walls, domes, vaults, tombstones, and paving stones – even the locks of the doors and the nail work on the doors – were made entirely by hand by local artists and craftsmen.⁵⁵

The artist designed the mortuary monument around the idea of 'the cemetery as a primordial garden' – a recurring theme across different religious traditions – filled with the scent of fragrant flowers and the soothing sounds of fresh water: a carefully laid out Garden of Eden for the dead and the living.⁵⁶ Symbols play a part in the production of that meaning.⁵⁷ Access to the walled Garden of Africa is via a 17th-century gate painted bright yellow, said by the artist to symbolize the blazing desert sun (Fig. 4).⁵⁸ The entrance is intentionally kept low so that when crossing the threshold visitors need to stoop to pass through, a gesture of respect for the souls of the deceased within.

Set in an olive grove, the six hundred tombs are shaded by fruit-bearing trees, a large variety of flowering plants such as sweet and fragrant jasmine from North Africa, Persian jasmine with a spicier smell, night-blooming jasmine, or "night musk," bitter orange trees, night-blooming cacti, bougainvillea, as well as medicinal herbs such as agave, aloe vera, and marigold. The stench of the corpses which often arrive in an advanced state of decomposition is such that it helps to imbue the air with the fresh, sweet scent of fragrant plants.

In this symbolic landscape many plants bear important meanings: the bright red bougainvilleas, represent "the blood of Christ" and "the oxygen of life."⁵⁹ Bitter orange trees symbolize both the harshness of death and



Fig. 4. The yellow 17th-century gate of Le Jardin d'Afrique, Zarzis, Tunisia. Photograph © Rachid Koraïchi.

the sweetness of life after death.⁶⁰ Pomegranates were planted for their potent Sufi symbolism, as “rubies encased in each other.” “The lone seed is fragile,” says Koraïchi, citing an old proverb, “but together, the fruit is hard. A single person is vulnerable, but humanity is strong if we stand together in unity.”⁶¹ The tombs are surrounded by five olive trees, representing the five pillars of Islam (the profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage) as well as by twelve huge vines signifying the twelve apostles, the first disciples of Jesus.⁶² Two huge alabaster stelae, one on each side of the gate, serve as “symbolic, talismanic guardians of those who pray for the dead,” states Koraïchi, referring to the families and friends of the deceased (Fig. 2).⁶³

Inscribed with a diversity of religions, rows of white tombstones are set amid rows of hand-painted tiles (Figs. 2 and 7). On the main axis, the tiles consist of 17th-century Tunisian ceramics and, on the side paths, the tiles are covered with Koraïchi’s talismanic and apotropaic glyphs, alluding to the shelter provided by the garden. All tombstones are alike, eliding the friction between religious, social and gender distinctions and instead speaking to a common humanity.

Another 17th-century gate opens on to the large multi-faith prayer room, “to give it the feeling of a palace,” explains the artist. The light-filled space offers a place of refuge, worship and retreat for all (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). The complex also contains a morgue with facilities for preservation and identification of the often badly decomposed corpses, as well as a doctor’s office. Especially in summer, many bodies often arrive at the same time and need to be cooled. Although these facilities are in place, the Garden

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Ditmars, “Jardin d’Afrique.”

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Ditmars, “Jardin d’Afrique.”

62

Ditmars, “Jardin d’Afrique.”

63

Juliet Highet, “Sea of Tears, Garden of Memory,” *AramcoWorld* (January/February 2022). Available online: <https://www.aramcoworld.com/Articles/January-2022/Sea-of-Tears-Garden-of-Memory>.

Accessed on October 5, 2022.



Fig. 5. The multi-faith prayer room, Le Jardin d'Afrique, Zarzis, Tunisia. Photograph © Rachid Koraïchi.

64

Anonymous, "Tunisia: Drowned Migrants Get Burial in 'Africa's Garden' Cemetery," short documentary film (3:10 mins.), *Ruptly. Migrant Situation 2021* (June 20, 2021). Available online: <https://www.ruptly.tv/en/videos/20210619-059-Tunisia-Drowned-migrants-get-burial-in-Africa-s-Garden-cemetery-DIS-TRESSING-CONTENT->. Accessed on October 15, 2022.

65

Ditmars, "Jardin d'Afrique."

66

Pauline Boss, "Ambiguous Loss Research, Theory, and Practice: Reflections After 9/11," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66 (2004): 551–66, here 554, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-2445.2004.00037.x>.

67

Receiving the body would allow relatives to 'honour' the dead and bury him or her locally, delineating the boundary between the living and the dead and creating a culturally appropriate collective space for mourning. Adam Rosenblatt, *Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science after Atrocity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 180.

68

Rosenblatt, *Digging for the Disappeared*, 165.

69

Koraïchi, telephone interview with author on November 10, 2022.

of Africa is still waiting for authorization from the city of Zarzis to carry out the DNA analyses on site. In the meantime, these are still carried out at the Gabès hospital, 140 km away, which means that the bodies have to be transported from there to the Garden of Africa.⁶⁴ There mortuary care includes the systematic collection of various types of post-mortem data from the corpse (identifying characteristics such as age, sex and the type of clothing worn by the deceased, material items such as SIM cards and wallets, date and place of shipwreck, witness statements and DNA data). The data is noted on each headstone in the hope that this will enable future identification.⁶⁵ The complex also contains a small residence for the guardian and caretaker, Nour el-Din el-Soway, while marble benches and tables invite visitors to take a rest and reflect. When leaving the complex, visitors are, once again, greeted by a 130-year-old olive tree (Fig. 7), a symbol of peace.

For the families of the dead and missing in the refugees' countries of origin, it is extremely difficult to obtain information about the fate of their relatives or to obtain any information at all. Without bodies or news about the missing, families cannot perform funeral rites – they live an "ambiguous loss."⁶⁶ The fact that even identified refugees are "beyond the reach of care" (given the geographical distance, and the bureaucratic obstacles and costs associated with visiting a grave in another country or repatriating a body)⁶⁷ is, as Adam Rosenblatt puts it, an additional "violation of the dead."⁶⁸ To date only few relatives have come to the Garden of Africa in search of their loved ones. Among these was a Libyan father who came to visit the grave of his son, identified by fellow travelers. When he was offered to take the body home, he replied, "God has abandoned Libya. This is not a cemetery; this is a paradise. My son will be more beautiful here. I entrust him to you," recalls Koraïchi.⁶⁹ By building such a serene and aesthetically congruent garden cemetery, the artist wants to give grieving relatives the assurance that their loved ones are resting in a dignified final resting place, and also to help them find "closure."



Fig. 6. Interior of the multi-faith prayer room, Le Jardin d'Afrique, Zarzis, Tunisia. Photograph © Rachid Koraichi.

An effort is made to include the death customs of different religions and to address their ritual and symbolic meaning. The funeral rites at the gravesite follow mixed religious burial practices. If the ethnicity of a corpse can be determined, a resident of the same ethnicity from the nearby refugee shelter run by the Organisation internationale pour les migrations (OIM) is asked to say the funeral prayers in their native tongue (Fig. 8). Often Mongi Slim, Head of the Medenine branch of the Tunisian Red Crescent, is present at the Garden of Africa and assists with these rituals. In the various religions, fundamental values are revealed through death and its remembrance. In several religions, it is also believed that the way a body is prepared for burial has implications for the afterlife.⁷⁰ In Islam, drowning victims are considered martyrs (Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhari 2674), which is why their bodies do not have to be ritually washed (*ghusl*) before burial. Wrapped in waterproof body bags, the bodies are placed in the dug graves in the sandy earth which is completely dry. The caretaker covers the grave with five large concave tiles and seals the joints with cement. The east-facing tombs are all directed towards the sunrise and Mecca.

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Sajjad Rizbi, "A Muslim's Perspective on the Good Death, Resurrection, and Human Destiny," in *Death, Resurrection, and Human Destiny: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, eds. David Marshall and Lucinda Mosher (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 69.



Fig. 7. The 130-year-old olive tree at the entrance of Le Jardin d'Afrique, Zarzis, Tunisia. Photograph © Rachid Koraïchi.



Fig. 8. Residents of the nearby refugee shelter offering funeral prayers at Le Jardin d'Afrique, Zarzis, Tunisia. Photograph © Rachid Koraïchi.

Thus characterized by and encoded in sensory imagery such as light, radiance, and beauty, the Garden of Africa, a private and multi-faith hybrid of cemetery, garden and art installation, was inaugurated on June 9, 2021 by UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay. The special ceremony hosted by Tunisian President Kais Saïed was also attended by representatives of the three major historical faith traditions, the Rabbi of Djerba (of the El Ghriba Synagogue), the Catholic Archbishop of Tunis, and the local Imam, all of whom recited funeral prayers at the cemetery to celebrate the fusion of faiths in one universal vision.⁷¹

Tears That Taste of the Sea

While working on the Garden of Africa near Zarzis, Koraïchi opened the exhibition *Tears That Taste of the Sea* in London, displaying works created in various media that were produced during the 2020 global lockdowns.⁷² Like the cemetery, the exhibition also revolves around the themes of migration, memory, and mourning. These run like a thread through the artworks, which include a large blue and white etching, blue and white ceramic vases from the 'Lachrymatoires Bleues' (Blue Lachrymatory Vases) series, white acrylic on black canvas from the 'Mouchoirs d'espoir' (Handkerchiefs of Hope) series, as well as three large steel sculptures depicting vigilant guardian figures.

The central work of the exhibition is a large etching that bears the same name as the garden cemetery in Zarzis, *Le Jardin d'Afrique*, because the etching narrates a similar migratory narrative (Fig. 9). Koraïchi explains his work as follows:⁷³

Symbolically, the rectangular figures enclose elements of the real world, while the circle in the middle, representing infinity, reveals elements from another realm. The isolated figure caught in the center of the circle stands at a crossroads, suggesting a traveler arriving at that place of destiny where this earthly journey ends and another journey begins.

The sphere that encloses the nameless "traveller" in this separate reality floats on the waves of the ocean and eventually drifts ashore (Fig. 10). Many are prevented from continuing their journey and are borne away by the deep. For many of the refugees fleeing war, death by drowning is just as likely as being killed in the war itself. Koraïchi's symbolism can also be seen as an allegory of the mystical experience of the Sufi, characterized as a seeker or wanderer, who undertakes the potentially dangerous journey of travelling the spiritual path ending with God. It also reminds us of the grey area described by Giorgio Agamben, which has no space or definite geographical connotation, but is rather a condition of in-betweenness, which does not end when the Mediterranean Sea is crossed, and the rescue operations concluded.⁷⁴ On yet another level this state is reflected in the Sufi metaphysical concept of *barzakḥ* or "intermediary state,"⁷⁵ which denotes the realm located between the world of matter and spirit, the unseen in-between. The basic notion of a *barzakḥ* refers to the mysterious realm that lies between the two realms of purely physical and purely intelligible/noetic being.

The sphere is surrounded by figures symbolizing what Koraïchi calls "the praying ones," the mothers, fathers, families and friends who continue to pray anxiously for the welfare of the souls already departed. Koraïchi's commitment to the refugee crisis also has its roots in a painful personal story. His brother Mohamed, one year older, drowned in the Mediterranean Sea shortly after Algeria gained its independence in 1962. His body was never found, leaving a wound that never healed.

The blue and white ceramic vases from the 'Lachrymatoires Bleues' series are also covered by Koraïchi's system of signage for which he draws on his own system of letters, numbers, and talismanic symbols inspired by different religious traditions. Intended to imbue the vessels with apotropaic and talismanic powers and to protect their future owners from harm. The blue ink of the inscriptions, representing infinity, also suggests the soothing colors of the sea and the sky.⁷⁶



Fig. 9. Rachid Koraïchi, *The Garden of Africa* *Le Jardin d'Afrique*, 2020. Edition of 70, Etching, 108.5 x 76 cm. (RK5039) © the artist.

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Rachid Koraïchi, *Tears that Taste of the Sea* (London: October Gallery, 2021).

73

Koraïchi, *Tears that Taste of the Sea*, 1, 15.

74

Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); idem, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2005).

75

Salman H. Bashier, *Ibn Arabi's Barzakḥ: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014); James Morris, "Spiritual Imagination and the 'Liminal' World: Ibn 'Arabi on the *Barzakḥ*," *POST-DATA* 15, no. 2, (1995): 42–9 and 104–9 (in Spanish).

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Koraïchi, "Virtual Tour and Talk. Tears that Taste of the Sea."

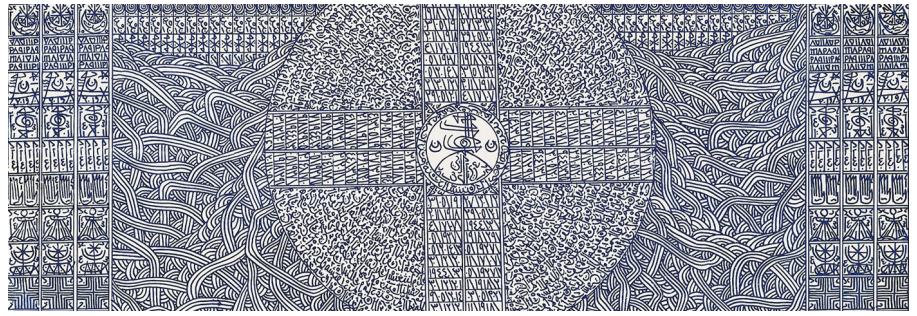


Fig. 10. Rachid Koraïchi, *The Garden of Africa - Le Jardin d'Afrique*, 2020. Edition of 70, Detail of Etching, 108.5 x 76 cm. (RK5039) © the artist.

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Koraïchi, *Tears that Taste of the Sea*, 6, 16–21.

78

Koraïchi, *Tears that Taste of the Sea*, 3.

79

Koraïchi, “Virtual Tour and Talk. Tears that Taste of the Sea.”

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Koraïchi, “Virtual Tour and Talk. Tears that Taste of the Sea.”

81

Koraïchi, *Tears that Taste of the Sea*, 7–8, 24–7.

82

Koraïchi, *Tears that Taste of the Sea*, 5.

While making the works, the artist kept thinking about the oceans of tears caused by the loss of the refugees. These are metaphorically collected in large, inscribed lachrymatory vessels (from the Latin *lacrima*, “tear”) on display in the exhibition.⁷⁷ Their creation was inspired by the tiny antique glass vials found in Roman and late Greek tombs, which Koraïchi first saw on display at the Bardo Museum in Tunis.⁷⁸ These fragile and intimate “tear gatherers” were believed to be receptacles to store the bitter tears of pain shed by a grieving relative. “I was inspired by people who had made such delicate, little glass containers, such as the ancient Phoenicians, also the Romans, the Greeks, the Iranians and later the Victorians in Britain, people in a multitude of places.” For him, it spoke of “a history of love.”⁷⁹ To reflect the scale of death in the Strait of Gibraltar and the millions of uncollected tears, Koraïchi made giant versions of the tiny vessels, each half a meter tall, with four handles that allude to the vessel being held by both a mother and a father.⁸⁰ Metaphorically speaking, one can “perform the ablution with one’s tears,” which flow so profusely that they can serve, as it were, as purifying streams of water.

The inscribed handkerchiefs, the ‘Handkerchiefs of Hope,’ their color black symbolizing mourning, are likewise seen as repositories of tearful memories and, in Koraïchi’s words, “chronicles of intense emotions,” conveying “signs of love and joy as well as tears of loss that are inextricably linked.”⁸¹ Each rectangle encapsulates a single intimate palimpsest of an untold story. Not only does the artwork possess talismanic powers – it also acts as a sensory vessel. The delicate material of the handkerchiefs, for instance, is soft to the touch; its use implicates the olfactory sense; its inscribed signs and glyphs appeal to the sense of sight.

The watchful and protective presence of the tall black openwork sculptural forms in Corten steel, named ‘Les Vigilants’ (The Watchers) references both calligraphy and bodies in motion, while also guarding the graves in the Garden of Africa in Tunisia.⁸² Their forms evoking both sorrow and compassion, the presence of these guardians ensures peace and stability at the shared sacred site.

Koraïchi was awarded the 2011 Jameel Prize for contemporary Islamic art from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London for his series ‘Maîtres Invisibles’ (Invisible Masters), embroidered cloth banners on which he explored the lives and legacies of fourteen great Sufi shaykhs. His Garden of Africa in Zarzis has been shortlisted for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 2022. Promoting religious tolerance through emotional empathy and compassion but also commemorating the dead, Koraïchi’s project makes a real difference in the face of terrible suffering. Attracting visitors from far and wide since its opening in June 2021, the multi-faith memorial garden cemetery has been gaining more and more momentum.

Concluding thoughts

Spaces for the dead reflect the changing conditions of the living, as well as shifting meanings and discourses about life in our often dehumanizing and fragmented globalized world. For these spaces possess cultural and symbolic significance for the living, and represent microcosms of the society within which they are established. In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag says, “Remembering is an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself. Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead.”⁸³ Koraïchi’s intimate engagement with death, mourning and commemoration is expressed in his idyllic garden cemetery, imbued with deep symbolic meaning.

The artist’s activism makes the lifeless bodies of refugees visible to a wider audience. The dehumanization of refugees, and thus their less lamentable and more disposable status, is evident in the EU’s migration “necropolitics.”⁸⁴ Acknowledging the grievability of refugee bodies, Koraïchi addresses what Mieke Bal calls “an aspect that hovers between ontology and epistemology”⁸⁵ – also in the context of the “collateral victims of globalization.”⁸⁶ Bal asks:⁸⁷

Can we see faces, can we look someone in the face? The second aspect, coming to terms, harbors a socio-political agenda of migratory culture; it makes us aware how often we fail to do this: facing what people go through, their losses and sacrifices. This question is of a political and ethical order.

Koraïchi’s private initiative to create the Garden of Africa is to be understood as an ‘aesth-ethic’ and political project that not only commemorates the deceased refugees, but also promotes global awareness of their deaths and makes them accessible to a wider public. In the future it will also contribute to the transnational structures required to manage data about missing refugees that can help the lives of thousands of families in the refugees’ countries of origin who live without knowing the fate of their loved ones. In this way, Koraïchi’s project speaks to the deeply embodied ways in which personal pain, emotional suffering, trauma of migration, sacrifice, loss and grief are articulated.

The Garden of Africa plays a fundamental role in the way aesthetic practice is constituted through migration. With this, it underscores the crucial connection between aesthetics, politics and human survival. Replete with symbolic markers of peace and mutual respect between peoples, the multi-faith garden cemetery also renders visible a culturally sensitive aesthetic that illuminates the peaceful coexistence of different communities in life as well as in death.

Addendum

Shortly after this article was written, tragedy struck when citizens from Zarzis vandalized the Garden of Africa and desecrated the dead, with the local police being complicit. How did this happen?

Migration not only through but increasingly *from* Tunisia is surging. Tens of thousands of Tunisian and foreign migrants have set off from Tunisia’s shores to reach Europe. Today, more Tunisians are believed to sail to Europe than all other Sub-Saharan African and other refugees together.⁸⁸ Many do not survive. On September 21, 2022, a makeshift boat

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König, “The Multicultural Graveyard.”

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Mareike Gebhardt, “To Make Live and Let Die: On Sovereignty and Vulnerability in the EU Migration Regime,” in *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 23, no. 2 (2020): 120–37, here 135.

85

Mieke Bal, “Heterochronotopia,” *Thamyris/Intersecting* 19 (2008): 35–56, here 53, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401206068_003.

86

Joly, “Tous Refugees?”

87

Bal, “Heterochronotopia,” 53.

88

Anonymous, “How Tunisia’s Kais Saïed Uses Irregular Migrants for Political Gain,” *The New Arab* (September 13, 2022). Available online: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/features/how-kais-saied-uses-irregular-migration-political-gain>. Accessed on November 11, 2022.

Anonymous, "Communiqué Conjoint. Encore une tragédie au large de Zarzis: À la recherche de la vérité et de la justice," *Avocats Sans Frontières* (October 15, 2022). Available online: https://asf.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Communiqué-conjoint_FR.pdf. Accessed on November 11, 2022.

Koraïchi, telephone interview with author on November 10, 2022.

In a telephone interview on November 10, 2022, Koraïchi confirmed that only *three* bodies were exhumed and transferred. See also Anonymous, "How Tunisia's Kais Saïed Uses Irregular Migrants." Some media reports however speak of four or even five bodies.

Tarek Amara, "Tunisian Fishermen Retrieve Bodies of Eight Migrants," *Reuters* (October 10, 2022). Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisian-fishermen-retrieve-bodies-eight-migrants-2022-10-10/>. Accessed on November 11, 2022.

Anonymous, "Tunisia: Zarzis Protesters Condemn Govt's Inaction in Locating Missing Migrants After Shipwreck," short documentary film (3:25 mins.), *Ruptly. Sociedad* (November 5, 2022). Available online: <https://www.ruptly.tv/es/videos/20221104-059>. Accessed on November 11, 2022.

Anonymous, "Tunisia: Civil Organisations Express Solidarity with Drowning Victims' Families, Residents Expel Government Officials," *Middle East Monitor* (October 15, 2022). Available online: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221015-tunisia-civil-organisations-express-solidarity-with-drowning-victims-families-residents-expel-government-officials/>. Accessed on November 11, 2022.

Tarak Guizani, "In Tunisia, Tragic Migration Attempt Spurs Outrage and Mourning," *Deutsche Welle* (October 27, 2022). Available online: <https://www.dw.com/en/in-tunisia-tragic-migration-attempt-spurs-outrage-and-mourning/a-63576089>. Accessed on November 10, 2022.

Guizani, "In Tunisia, Tragic Migration Attempt Spurs Outrage."

Anonymous, "Anger and Grief in Tunisian Coastal Town after Failed Migration Attempt," *The Arab Weekly* (October 13, 2022). Available online: <https://thearabweekly.com/anger-and-grief-tunisia-coastal-town-after-failed-migration-attempt>. Accessed on November 11, 2022.

Robert M. Hayden and Timothy D. Walker, "Intersecting Religioscapes: A Comparative Approach to Trajectories of Change, Scale, and Competitive Sharing of Religious Spaces," *Journal of the American*

sank after departing Zarzis. The 18 migrants on board, all Tunisians from Zarzis, were trying to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa, less than 130 kilometers offshore.

With no news from them, two days after their departure the families of the migrants alerted the Tunisian, Italian and Maltese authorities, as well as civilian search and rescue boats. Faced with the lacklustre response of the national authorities to their requests to launch search operations, the local Fishermen's Association undertook four autonomous search operations at sea. The Tunisian League for Human Rights later castigated "the inability of the authorities to mobilize the necessary means to carry out search and rescue operations with speed."⁸⁹

In early October the shipwreck was confirmed: the body of one of the women was found on a beach in Djerba. Photos of other bodies that had washed up on the Tunisian coast began to circulate on social media. The bodies of three young men washed up close to Zarzis harbour. According to Koraïchi, when the bodies of the drowned were recovered by National Guards, they were decomposed and covered with a dark substance (probably shipping oil), so the local authorities believed them to be Sub-Saharan refugees. After performing autopsies and issuing death certificates, the authorities mistakenly sent the bodies in waterproof body bags directly to the multi-faith Garden of Africa for burial (only the National Guard is allowed to touch the bodies), instead of conducting genetic tests at the Gabès hospital.⁹⁰ When local residents learned of these burials, they called for an investigation to determine if their relatives were buried in the Garden of Africa. During the exhumation of the three decomposed bodies, one mother recognized the shorts of her son. The bodies were genetically analyzed, the DNA samples matched, and the three bodies⁹¹ were transferred to another cemetery as designated by the families.

Subsequently the bodies of eight further Tunisian migrants were recovered from the sea.⁹² But the families of the other missing Tunisian migrants, in the belief that their relatives might be buried in the Garden of Africa, demanded further investigation. When this was not immediately undertaken, thousands of outraged people protested in Zarzis.⁹³ In many neighborhoods, tires were set on fire and streets were blocked to demand that authorities fulfill their "duties to their citizens"⁹⁴ and intensify the search for the missing Tunisian migrants. Many thought the way the corpses of the Tunisian nationals were treated was "dishonorable."⁹⁵ They did not want their relatives to be buried "like strangers."⁹⁶ "They buried our sons in a cemetery for foreigners, they should be ashamed of themselves," said a rights activist.⁹⁷ A key marker of majoritarian political identity is thus that of "Tunisian citizen," demarcating the local population from the "strangers," the "foreign refugees/migrants."⁹⁸ In this way, non-Tunisian refugees/migrants are degraded to "non-persons" (a term coined by Alessandro Dal Lago in reference to Hannah Arendt), and for a local citizen to be buried next to such a non-person is anathema.⁹⁹

Yielding to "national outrage," the local prosecutor's office ordered the temporary shutdown of the cemetery while DNA-testing was done on all the remains that were recently buried to confirm identities.¹⁰⁰ Twenty-eight graves were selected for the procedure. After DNA test results came back negative, scores of people, including the families of the missing Tunisian migrants, climbed over the cemetery wall and began digging up the graves themselves, allegedly to identify

bodies, according to videos shared on social media.¹⁰¹ In the presence of local police, about forty graves were opened, the dead desecrated, grave-stones vandalized and smashed, graffiti sprayed on the graves, the newly planted trees, plants and seedlings trampled and torn out.¹⁰² This violation of graves and subversion of the universal notion of peace in death and respect for the dead is profoundly disturbing.

Despite the fact that the Garden of Africa is probably the most beautiful cemetery in Tunisia, it is considered the cemetery of “strangers,” migrants and asylum seekers (the number of which in Tunisia, with its nearly twelve million inhabitants, is probably well over one million).¹⁰³ Those who arrive alive in Tunisia are subjected to “brutal racism.”¹⁰⁴ The darker the skin color, the lower the status of marginalized refugees¹⁰⁵ and the more blatant the racism.¹⁰⁶

It has to be remembered that the multi-faith garden cemetery, privately owned by Koraïchi, was trespassed by both locals and police. That the shared sacred site has been created by a non-Tunisian of international repute has been a thorn in the side for many Zarzis residents, as they do not want a “stranger” interfering in their affairs. The French-Algerian artist has repeatedly stated that as a non-Tunisian launching a humanitarian project in Tunisia, he is antagonized by the local population. He is subjected to slander and now even receives death threats.¹⁰⁷ This antagonistic attitude coheres with contemporary attitudes towards human rights, which increasingly assume that rights derive in part from group membership,¹⁰⁸ in this case Tunisian citizenship. Although the religious site is located outside the town and next to a refugee shelter, it has a high profile both nationally and internationally.¹⁰⁹ Koraïchi philosophically says he will wait for things to settle down before restoring the damaged graves in the sacred site and replanting the garden. Then the gates of the site, which has symbolic significance far beyond Tunisia’s borders, will open again. It is hoped that Koraïchi’s important humanitarian initiative will serve as a shining example to be emulated in many other countries.

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