

NATAAL

FASHION CULTURE

MUSIC GALLERY

MAGAZINE ABOUT

SEARCH

NEW MARRAKECH ENCOUNTERS

Photography Elina Simonen

BEST OF ISSUE ONE:
Nataal's art and fashion odyssey through Morocco's ochre city

“It’s addictive. The atmosphere, the light, the culture — I feel very at home here,” says young Belgian designer Laurence Leenaert of her motivations for forsaking Ghent for Marrakech. “The people are open and take the time to know you. And you wake up each morning to see the palm trees and the colours of the walls. Everything fits together in my world here.” She is one of the latest in an incalculably long line of artists who have found their way to this ancient city, and sitting in her big, airy studio as bright, late afternoon sun slices across the floor, it’s easy to see why.

Since relocating here in 2015, Leenaert has collaborated with artisans throughout Marrakech to develop her brand LRNCE, which now includes hand-painted ceramics, leather sandals, canvas bags and woven rugs, often covered in abstract faces. “If you know one good artisan they introduce you to the next. I show them ideas and they are happy to give me knowledge. It’s about mutual respect,” she says of her go-slow production process. “I like to be in the moment, find new materials and be free to create things. Let’s see what life brings.”

As the geographical and spiritual crossroads between Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and the Magreb, Morocco’s fourth-largest city has an irresistible allure. Nomads from every corner of the world have succumbed to its spell since Berber royalty established it in the eleventh century. Marrakech is where the Orient meets the Occident. It’s where the old medina — with its labyrinthine souks, many mosques and imposing Jemaa el-Fnaa Square alive with snake charmers, henna girls and overwhelmed tourists — gives way to the modern cityscape cascading out all around it. And it’s where now, more

than ever, creative minds, spaces and initiatives are shaping a new cultural life.

Marrakech's most famous adopted son was Yves Saint Laurent. The Algerian-born French designer first visited in 1966 with his partner Pierre Bergé — and was instantly enamoured. They bought a home here and proceeded to visit twice a year so that Saint Laurent could design his couture collections. In 1983 the designer famously said: "In Morocco, I realised that the range of colours I use was that of the zelliges, zouacs, djellabas and caftans. The boldness seen since then in my work, I owe to this country, to its forceful harmonies, to its audacious combinations, to the fervour of its creativity."

His legacy here was honoured by the opening of Musée Yves Saint Laurent Marrakech (mYSLm) in October last year. Found on Rue Yves Saint Laurent, the building was designed by architects Studio KO (which has offices in Marrakech, Paris and London), using local materials. Its curving, lace-like exterior brickwork takes inspiration from the delicate lines of Saint Laurent's designs, and the weft and warp of fine fabrics. Meanwhile the interior exudes an intimate, warm mystery in keeping with his relationship to the city. It's impressive but not imposing, its human scale sympathetic to its surroundings. mYSLm is the sister to the Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris, and the two share the vast archive of Fondation Pierre Bergé — Yves Saint Laurent, which conserves and exhibits the brand's heritage.

On my arrival I'm greeted by museum director Björn Dahlström, who leads me into the main exhibition hall. It's an all-black space filled with 50 iconic looks

— the Mondrian dress (1965), le smoking tuxedo (1966), the safari jacket (1967) — among an immersive installation incorporating photography, illustrations, music and film, and themed around Saint Laurent's creative process and main obsessions: masculine-feminine, Africa, art, imaginary voyages and gardens.

"Here we propose not a retrospective but more of a sensorial anthology, we want to drown visitors in a poetic and abstract atmosphere that gives back to the spirit of Yves Saint Laurent," Dahlström says.

"Discovering Morocco was an epiphany for Yves, and it changed his production forever. Marrakech became his inspiration and Paris was his creation," he adds, pointing out the 1989 Bougainvillea cape with its embroideries directly referencing the exotic blooms of the famous Le Jardin Majorelle (acquired by Saint Laurent and Bergé in 1980). "Marrakech combines so many cultures that participate to make it very rich in terms of influences, plus you are close to the desert and the mountains. The costumes, the art — Yves absorbed it all."

Dahlström hails from Casablanca, studied at École du Louvre and worked at Musée d'art moderne du Luxembourg before being seduced back to Morocco by Bergé to oversee the opening of the Berber Museum in the grounds of Le Jardin Majorelle, and since 2015 he's been dedicated to shaping this new space. "There is a moment happening here now with our museum, the first major fashion museum in Africa, and other dedicated cultural spaces opening up. This past year the city has never welcomed so many visitors. It's going to be interesting to see how it evolves. I hope mYSLm becomes a cultural centre rooted in Morocco that develops a local audience as well as an international one."

To that end, mYSLm also houses an auditorium, pho-

tography gallery and temporary exhibition space programmed with Moroccan culture in mind, and it recently invited one of the city's most acclaimed fashion designers, Nouredine Amir, to reprise his 2016 Paris exhibition at Fondation Pierre Bergé — Yves Saint Laurent, The Sculptural Dresses of Nouredine Amir. The exquisite display explores his creation process, which begins with natural materials such as wool, raffia, canvas and silk, which he then manipulates to form new textures, or dyes with henna, indigo or pomegranate peel, and then moulds into one-of-a-kind pieces reminiscent of Amazigh architecture.



Born in Rabat, Amir started his career in the late

1990s as a costumier for films, most notably working with Iranian director Shirin Neshat. After a stint in New York, he moved to Marrakech in 2001 where he was arguably the first designer to shape his own contemporary take on Moroccan fashion — and has found international acclaim by doing so. In 2018 he's been invited to participate in Haute Couture Fashion Week in Paris.



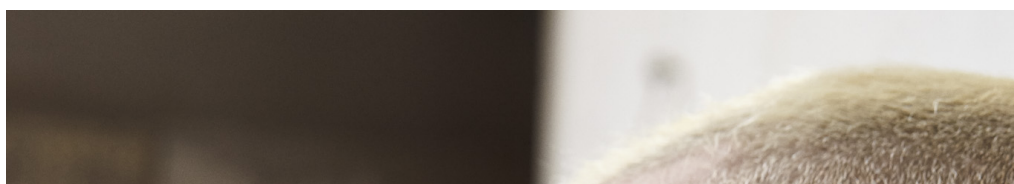
Amir's studio is a short ride from mYSLm — an inviting villa surrounded by orange trees. Dark grey walls provide the backdrop to an impressive art collection, and his own wooden sculptures nestle among many plants. As we talk, Amir and his friend, the actor, director and lecturer Hamid Fardjad, share red wine

and cigarettes while a black cat slinks around our feet. It's a languid, unhurried atmosphere befitting someone who clearly takes time over his work. Eventually a delicious lunch of tagine is served.

"I am very attached to the south of Morocco, and this city has a lot of opportunities," Amir says, putting out one cigarette and lighting another. "The international crowd has been coming through Marrakech since Yves Saint Laurent put it on the map, and these days, one way or another, they end up in this house. One morning the doorbell rang and Paul Smith was there, asking, 'Can I come in?'"

Lunch over, Amir takes me through to see some of his pieces being made. "I was never interested in trends. My work is not attached to the notion of seasons. When I first met Pierre, he said 'I can tell you do not look at fashion magazines; you do not imitate anybody'. For me the fabric dictates what I do with it, and then the form follows. I also listen to a lot of world music while I work. Often it's the same song over and over again for hours. It's almost like a trance."

Fardjad pays short shrift to those who have criticised Amir over the years for not embracing more recognisable Moroccan styles. "People say, if it's not folkloric, it's not Moroccan. But Nouredine's work is 100 per cent Moroccan. It is made in Morocco, by Moroccans, using local fabric. Why should we be closed to one style of dress?" he asks. "Traditional caftans, like those made by Tamy Tazi, are beautiful just as they are and they should be respected for their voluptuous cut and handcraftsmanship. So when designers try to modernise them it just doesn't work. My advice to young designers is to leave them alone."





The current crop of forward-thinking designers certainly seems to agree. Artsi Ifrach also makes unique garments inspired by the city's handcrafts, but that is where the comparison ends. His approach is to seek out vintage pieces, take them apart and transform them into brave and theatrical garments. The results might be a jumpsuit festooned with embroidered hearts, an exaggerated tulle ball gown or a coat made from Moroccan summer blankets. Finding them hanging like museum pieces in his tucked away store is a magpie's delight, and I'm overwhelmed by the urge to try on a pink working man's jacket covered in neon eyes. Ifrach joins in, choosing a white lace dress seemingly at odds with his lithe, tattoo-covered frame, and an impromptu fashion shoot ensues.

"There are two levels when it comes to design in Morocco. There is the cultural level of the caftan and

the babouche. And then there is the next level that turns artisanal skills into something you can call fashion," he says, now wearing a military blazer. "I work with women in the medina to bring something from the past into the present, and then hopefully it will survive into the future. I want to preserve those skills by taking the feeling of Morocco out into the world. It's emotional work and I'm very sensitive to it. It's about creating memories."

Ifrach was born in Israel and was a ballet dancer for 20 years before establishing himself in fashion in Amsterdam and Paris. He returned to his parents' birthplace of Marrakech eight years ago where his brand, Maison ARTC, truly clicked. He's since stocked at Dover Street Market in Tokyo ("Rei Kawakubo said my work reminded her of the beginning of Comme des Garçons," he says), and has had John Galliano pop into his store. He also collaborates with Moroccan photographers, including Laila Hida and Mous Lamrabet, to document his fantastical creations, recently publishing the photobook, *Piece of Mind* (Idea Books). "This country has given me so much that I am happy to give something back," he says. "There are amazing artists here and a great energy, but the simplicity of life in Morocco still keeps you grounded. That's its magic."





Another equally revolutionary designer is Amine Bendriouich. Dashing through the streets with him, there is no one he does not know, so central is he to the city's creative scene. Originally raised in Marrakech, he studied at ESMOD Tunis and began his career in Casablanca in 2007 as part of a collective selling T-shirts. His first catwalk show at the now-defunct FestiMode Casablanca Fashion Week caused a stir. "Instead of models, I cast punks and rappers — anyone alien or marginal — and made an anti-trends statement with a collection created in the city's slums," Amine recalls, with a twiddle of his Salvador Dali-esque moustache. He launched Amine Bendriouich Couture & Bullshit (AB-CB) in 2008, and a year later won the Goethe-Institut CreateEurope award to work and live in Berlin. Since then he's shown internationally, most recently at Fashion Forward Dubai, and has collaborated with artists including Kehinde Wiley, Keziah Jones, Skrillex and Massive Attack.

"AB-CB is an attitude in fabrics and comes from the stimulus I see on the streets. A uniform for non-conformists," Bendriouich explains. "AB-CB believes in rock & roll — the music, courage and urban heroes. Bob, Jim, Janis, James and Michael." The unisex aesthetic might mix sarouels and djellabas with wax-

print blazers and baseball caps. "My work questions identity. I'm African, Arab, Berber, Tuareg and Moroccan. I belong to people around the world and them to me. I address historical and contemporary Moroccan society, but also relate on a universal level."

The designer's latest move is a more formal return to Marrakech where he's opening a concept store in the medina, and establishing his atelier in a kasbah in his grandmother's village just outside of the city. He hopes to eventually develop it into an artists' residency and art school for rural people. "It's about teaching young people the different possibilities that exist and that art can make money. Once you open the door and show them what's behind it, you don't need to ask them to walk through," he says. "Now everyone is realising that Marrakech is a global city. That's why the galleries and museums are coming and that's why so many artists are moving here. But there's still a lack of collective vision. Everyone's aim is the same so we need to go together. You are stronger the more people you belong to."







present their strength and variety of looks that express an unexpected side of Morocco. They're all proudly Moroccan and each has their own journey. I'm taking the caravane of Morocco to the world."

Joining Comptoir des Mines Galerie and mYSLm in this new cultural landscape is Musée d'Art Contemporain Africain Al Maaden (MACAAL) in Sidi Youssef Ben Ali, which officially opened in February. The independent, not-for-profit museum is the brainchild of Alami Lazraq and Othman Lazraq, and their

charitable association Fondation Alliances (funded by the family's real estate venture Alliances Group). The father and son duo have an extensive collection of modern and contemporary African art that they now present at MACAAL. It joins their other artistic initiatives including the Parcde Sculptures Al Maaden and bi-annual photography award La Chambre Claire.

Once past MACAAL's sandstone façade and mighty glass doors, two floors of well-paced galleries feature work that are an impressive mix of mediums and artists. Moroccan masters such as Hassan El Glaoui and Chaïbia Talal share the limelight with a video by Algeria's Zoulikha Bouabdellah and the figurative sculptures of Tanzania's George Lilanga. The current photography exhibition, Africa Is No Island, features Ivorian Joana Choumali, Swiss-Guinean Nansa Leuba and Malian Fatoumata Diabaté, among others.

"It was a natural move to open the museum. Loving art means sharing the passion in Morocco, where there are very few public museums," says MACAAL's project manager, Zayneb Kadiri. We're sipping espressos in the building's idyllic gardens. This is somewhere you could while away many hours. "We are opening the window on the African continent with a playful approach to curation, and have a strong educational aspect, too."





Also among the permanent collection is mischievous Moroccan artist Yassine Balbzioui, who I meet in a roadside café for yet more coffee. He's friendly, energetic and talks a mile a minute, swapping topics with every breath, from his street canvas at Dak'Art (Twin Freaks, 2012) to his 2016 solo show, *Porcelanographie: Future Traces*, at Iwalewahaus in Germany. This exuberant recounting of some recent projects is as dizzying as his practice itself. Encompassing oil painting, photography, music, sculpture, film and interventionist performances, it all comes together through his consistent use of masks in myriad forms to create different characters and creatures. This affords him chameleon-like and disconcerting powers to parody, question and confront socio-political norms. In *Grosse Tête* (2014), for example, he smothers his head in paint, feathers, cardboard boxes and other debris to reach the brink of suffocation, thereby causing distress in onlookers. "I like to destroy the line between the art and the city, like a movie that exists. I like to put myself in dangerous places," Balbzioui tells me. "I like to provoke situ-

ations, take photos of them, and then make paintings. I like the game of art, of playing with what you show.”

Balbzioui trained at Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca, Art College of Bordeaux and at the University of Berkeley, and now divides his time between France, Germany and Morocco. On this visit to Marrakech, he’s here to create a new body of work about the circus. Although he and many of the friends in his artwork have found acclaim, he bemoans the onslaught of change here. “Morocco has become like a madhouse in the past five years. It seems that modernity came very fast and people weren’t ready to take it all in. As an artist, I can see it. When I’m in a taxi I speak to the drivers, they are the sponges of society. I take note of their stories. With this I smell that society has become lost. This makes it a ripe place to do art because there are so many contradictions.”

MACAAL, mYSLm, Riad Yima and Comptoir des Mines Galerie all partnered with the inaugural edition of 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair Marrakech this February. Founded by Touria El Glaoui (daughter of Hassan El Glaoui) in London in 2013, and having since expanded to New York, this homecoming was the first on African soil. Presenting 17 galleries, including Marrakech’s Voice Gallery, at La Mamounia hotel, plus special projects around the city with the recently opened Art Space Montresso* and cultural riad Le 18, 1-54 attracted over 4,000 local and international visitors. If the success of the first annual outing is anything to go by, 1-54 and its sphere of people and places are well on the way to cementing the city’s resurgent position at the heart of North Africa’s creative pulse.

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