

Mehdi-Georges Lahlou

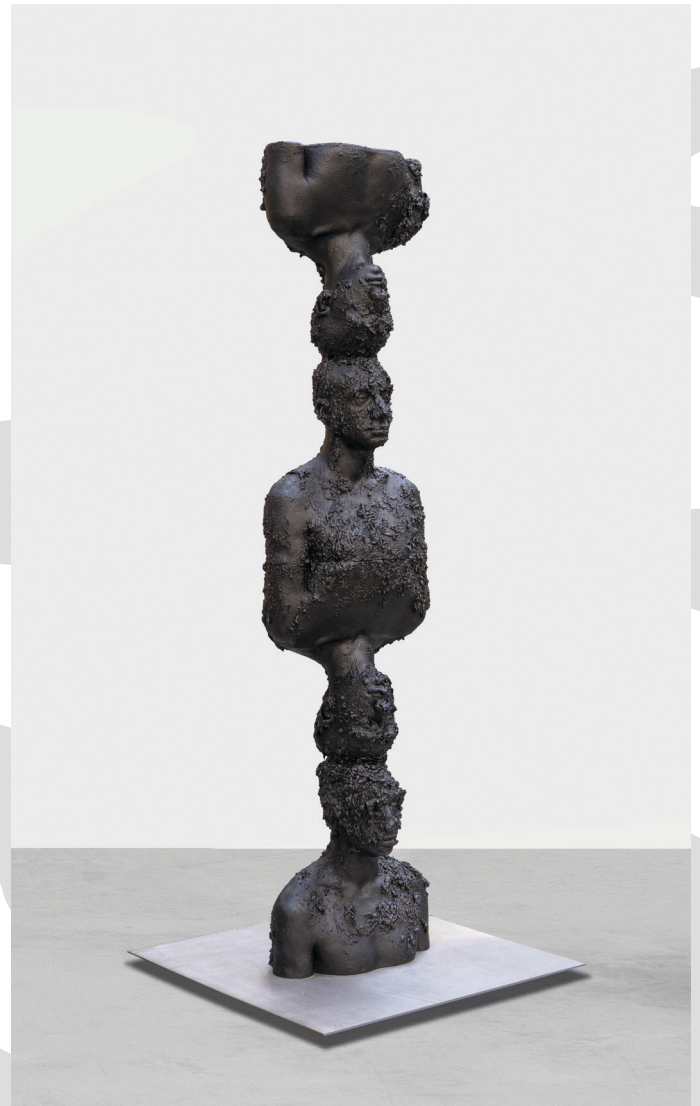
In the Palm Trees' Shade, a Botanical Conversation

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Mehdi-Georges Lahlou long put his own body under the strain of intense performances. These days, the artist manifests his sentiments in sculptural work. For a variety of sculptures, the artist lends it his features, amplifying the anthropomorphic traits and the degree of empathy that we initially bring to bear on palm trees¹. While his face represents a powerful visual commentary, it supplements the host of signifiers gathered into each one of the artist's works. Encountering the works of Mehdi-Georges Lahlou requires patience. Sometimes, it is a straightforward biological matter: the gaze must grow used to the blacks of the charcoal in order to detect the dead North African bodies, victims of the first use of mustard gas (*Of Confused Memory*). It is sometimes also a matter of attitude when a glimpse further than the tree hiding the forest is required (*De la Palmeraie des mémoires - Of the memories' palm grove*). Working on regimes of visibility, as much as on the symbols' various meanings, keeps up the ambiguity. Recently, the artist has been noticing the fluctuating effects of memory in reception of his own work². By making use of the currency of contemporary debates on queer, decolonial or ecological topics while laying claim to the timelessness of myths or secular narratives, Mehdi-Georges Lahlou makes life difficult for commentators in a hurry.

The factory of History is at the heart of an oeuvre which endlessly seeks to broaden points of view and initiate conversations. The *Conférence des oiseaux - Conference of the birds*, a fable by Persian poet Farid al-Din Attar, is a major source of inspiration. In the artist's works, palm trees replace winged creatures in an attempt to open a collective debate on the links between colonisation, migration and ecology.

Conversation botanique conceptualises the similar colonial exploitation of environmental resources and human beings. The backdrop for this ensemble of four videos is the botanic garden of Cleveland, the American Midwest city where the artist spent



De la Palmeraie des mémoires, detail, 2025.

200 x 80 x 80 cm, plaster, gazol, polymer foam, various materials.

Courtesy of the artist. Production : Centre Wallonie Bruxelles. Photo : Nicolas Brasseur

a few months in a residency. The artist takes an interest in this recreated colonial heritage space where nature is confined and literally placed under a bell jar. The botanic garden becomes the theatre of bodies ordinarily excluded from public representations. Mehdi-Georges Lahlou thus depicts the queer artists and performers Diwe Augustin-Glave, Dr Lady J and CHIMI Nature by lending them the memory of the palms. They tell the tale of an ecological and human disaster with multiple ramifications all while upsetting the usual nature/culture dichotomy. The intentions carried by the words and the bodies add up, transforming the work into a site of plural statement. The omnipresent sound dimension provides semantic density to a piece that abolishes all boundaries.

The spoken words of *Conversation botanique* have been translated multiple times (into English, French, Arabic, etc) and continue to be interpreted by different people, sowing – like seeds scattered by the wind – further fertilising narratives.

In the exhibition space, a microscope image of the *Washingtonia Robusta*, a native species of Mexico and Southern California, is painted straight onto the wall. During his residency, the artist had brought along a dead specimen found in Cannes, a symbol way of recalling the mobility of the plant world and evoking a shared history of uprooting and forced relocations.

With this exhibition, the artist invites us to take a different look at our relationship to this species of grass. Following the example of the philosopher Seloua Luste Boulbina, he prompts us to “become plants³” so that we can “enter into communication”. We are therefore able to take part in this botanic conversation and listen – at last – to what palm trees have to tell us.

Isabelle de Longrée

1 And which the artist is quick to counter with the piece *Nature morte (still life)*, which evokes a fact of racism.

2 Depending on the times, the artist's oeuvre is deemed too political, or not political enough.

3 Seloua Luste Boulbina, *Sortir de terre: une philosophie du végétal*, Zulma, Paris, 2025



A *Botanical Conversation*, 2024. Multi-screen installation and painting, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Art Dimanche - Guided visit in the presence of Mehdi-Georges Lahlou (to be confirmed)
- Sunday 4th of January, from 10h30 to 12h30 (french).