

Interviews

Interview with Mohammed Guiga. *Mon dessin contre ce qui se dessine*

Maria Elena Morató. Journalist and art critic

Mohammed Guiga (Tunis, 1957),¹ Tunisian painter and designer, and current director of the Tunis Institute of Fine Arts,² is an artist who works away from media spotlights. Through his creations and his work as a university professor, he focuses on discovering and revealing the contradictions and injustices of our societies, aware that art cannot shy away from social commitment. Tunisia currently stands at a very complex crossroads, and the world of culture plays a fundamental role as an actor on the frontline of the battle for the intellectual development of future generations. In this interview, we get an insight not only into his personal work but also the challenges that have affected Tunisian art in recent decades.

Maria Elena Morató: Let's start by unpacking the meaning of your assertion "Mon dessin contre ce qui se dessine". Why do you present all your work, which you often share on social media, under this rubric?

Mohammed Guiga: Mon dessin contre ce qui se dessine³ emerged following the Tunisian revolution (17 December 2010 / 14 January 2011). It is a "play" of words and graphics that means setting the act of drawing against what

is plotted socially, politically and humanly. The emphasis here is on the negative connotation of plotting, so that drawing becomes an act of resistance.

M. E. M.: Ten years of resistance... As a citizen and artist, how do you see the evolution of this resistance?

M. G.: I would say that resistance encompasses the fact of facing up to mediocrity,

1. <https://www.mohamedguiga.com/>

2. Institut Supérieur des Beaux-Arts de Tunis (<http://www.isbat.mu.tn/>)

3. Literally, drawing against what is being drawn. (Translator's note.)

the ugliness of actions and words, the crisis of values, but it also shouts loud and clear to denounce injustices in such an unjust world.

M. E. M.: Is that perhaps why your creations are always presented in black and white?

M. G.: The power of black on white or white on black allows me to stay close to what I feel, without frills; it dictates what I should write graphically to convey the dynamics of pain and joy. They are so powerful that, for me, they truly encompass the entire colour palette. Years ago I worked on visual and graphic projects in which I did use colour, especially when the subject demanded it.

M. E. M.: Let's go back a bit... you come from a family of intellectuals. Your father was a writer and the head of the Dar Sebastien International Centre in Hammamet in its golden age. What influence did he have on your career?

M. G.: My father, Tahar Guiga, may he rest in peace, was a writer in two languages, Arabic and French, but also a lover of Greek and Latin. He was the head of the Dar Sebastien International Centre in Hammamet from 1967 to 1977. He was an intellectual humanist, a man of letters and a man of action, a silent activist in the independence of Tunisia and Algeria and one of the first to define the main lines of politics, education and culture in those two countries. He is still present because he left young people the essential values to face life through his books and writings; always attentive, pushing for reflection, dialogue and action. My space for freedom, expression and action was in my father's house. I talked about everything with my father and he was always there in the development of my career, from the art schools in Tunisia and Paris to my doctorate. He was the first to buy me art books (I remember one on a painter I really like, Paul

Cézanne), he gave me my first canvas and my first box of oil paints. And he is still present in the memory and history of this country despite the scorched-earth policy, that policy determined to destroy everything to erase any trace of the existence of a people and their history, of influential people because of their ideas, writings, social projects or struggle for a better world, people who are a danger to power.

M. E. M.: How did the youth of the seventies experience the development of all those international meetings in your country?

M. G.: I lived through the seventies and eighties as an adolescent and young man, with the luck of discovering in Dar Sebastien the so-called world of art and culture, the world of writers, poets, screenwriters, theatre men... artists from all forms of expression. This is how I immersed myself in a radiating space thanks to a cultural policy project drawn up by my father to give Dar Sebastien a cultural splendour with a Mediterranean character that respected the different specificities, at the service of a cultural meeting without borders. I was fortunate to be able to see world references in music (Mikis Theodorakis, François Chatelet, Roger Planchon, Lucero Tena, Los Incas, Sabah Fakhri ...), theatre (Jean-Marie Serrault, Moncef Souissi...) and dance (the Ballets Bolshoi, Caracalla, Alvin Ailey...), among many others.

M. E. M.: How do you see, in perspective, the transformation (if there has been one) of that spirit of the seventies, both from the point of view of the artists and managers?

M. G.: I believe that the spirit of the seventies and eighties cannot be separated from the economic, political, cultural and social situation of the country, which is also indebted to the external influences of such a vast world.



Mohammed Guiga.

But before that, the transformation emanates from ourselves, from our doubts, from our questions, from the discovery of our role within the family, social and citizen unit to be able to react to and shape what seems good to us for our “society space”. I always carry with me the important influence of those years, marked by an explosion of demands, liberation and social justice, freedom of expression, the fight for rights and just causes, such as the right of peoples to independence. Starting with the

Palestinian people’s cause against the Zionist occupation, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the struggle against imperialism of all kinds, and ending with the movements of the societies that have marked that period: May 68 in France and the uprising for another model of society, with students, workers of all kinds... the social struggle movements in Tunisia with the first general strike of 26 January 1978 and the very violent reaction of power at that time (with deaths, injuries and arrests)...

These examples could not go unnoticed, first as a young man who dreamed of a fairer world; secondly, as an artist with a commitment to change the world and, thirdly, as a citizen and human being who must react.

M. E. M.: Can we speak, in terms of Tunisian art, of pre- and post-revolution views, in itself and in the context of the Mediterranean sphere?

M. G.: The protest movements, struggles or uprisings cannot only be limited to the national sphere because we are in a world of interaction and interconnection. Given its geographical position and long history, Tunisia has been and will be a country of passage and meeting of different civilisations. It is at the end of our African continent, opening naturally to Europe and the world, and the Mediterranean Sea is a blessing for the relationship and indispensable exchanges between peoples. Since 2010 and 2011, the country has experienced a major social and popular movement that I call an uprising against the drift of the regime in power for so many years; I have not used the word “revolution” as used in most national and international media because, if that is the case, it is still ongoing and takes a long time. What we have been experiencing for ten years, despite the regime change, is a current of change and a counter-current that favours a disastrous economic situation. Nevertheless, this movement has further liberated artistic action in all its forms and has given more space to protest action. Freedom of expression has managed to free speech and gestures to the point that it will take time to closely study what happens, for example, in street or digital protest art. On this I wrote “L’art engagé a-t-il sa place dans le paysage des Arts Plastiques en Tunisie?”, presented in the framework of the international conference “Les arts plastiques en Tunisie. Parcours de générations et enjeux

esthétiques et culturels”, held in Tunis Science City in October 2019. What we experienced in Tunisia between 2010 and 2011 and the violent arrival of this global pandemic, for the artist in the broadest sense, is a powerful, difficult and disturbing period (individually and collectively) that seems to me to be a source of “creativity”. My modest graphic and visual writing, *Mon dessin contre ce qui se dessine*, is an example.

M. E. M.: In your text “L’art engagé a-t-il sa place dans le paysage des Arts Plastiques en Tunisie?” you talk about the social role of so-called “committed art”, which is not something that concerns art but sensitivity towards the events and dreams of society. You also talk of the need to immortalise through photos (which you and many others took during the 2011 revolution) the interventions on the walls of Tunisia so that they remain as a witness to an era. To what extent do you think that visual memory can help the development of current events for the change of the future?

M. G.: I think that visual memory is largely a result of our personal and collective history. This visual memory is bombarded every day by real images and virtual images that convey innumerable messages and great power. We have long experienced, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, a single model phase, a greedy and materialistic world in which image and visual communication, in the broadest sense, have the full power to persuade, influence, guide and shape the target audience at all levels. We only have to look at the vibrant advertising sector and the breadth of strategies it uses to establish the infernal model of success through capital, only capital to the detriment of citizenship, work, solidarity, sharing, especially in times of crisis. The power of the advertising image continues to wreak havoc that we and future generations will pay dearly for it. Fortunately,

other kinds of images have survived time and can still tell us about life in a different way, and defend other values and modes of thinking about “society”. The cinematographic image is the perfect example, since it can enter our visual memory and act and interact every time the story of the film reminds us of precise situations of our experience and our daily lives. The graphic and artistic image endures beyond time and accompanies our visual memory from the moment we get involved in writing it to defend a cause or convey a message.

The fact of deciding to immortalise the moments of protest through the image in the different corners of the city during the people’s uprising in Tunisia is, in itself, a work of memory with the end of rereading the images and trying to decipher them after a certain time to better grasp the protest actions and be able to convey them.

M. E. M.: You have also spoken of the opportunism of certain artists who adopt the label of “committed art” to be fashionable. Do you think that this way of working detracts from those who do it sincerely? Does commitment have the same power today as it had ten years ago?

M. G.: When I speak of opportunism, I mean that disease that eats away and spreads like a virus and reaches more than a few sectors of social life, and unfortunately the world of culture and the arts does not escape it. In that text, written in October 2019 and concerning the issue of whether committed art has a place in the visual arts landscape in Tunisia, I end with open questions that can be the subject of an upcoming personal reflection or a call to all those who want to reflect on this ever topical issue. My goal was to evoke what the Tunisian uprising has been able to awaken in those who experienced it from near or far:

“Artists from everywhere, in all forms of visual and graphic expression, had a need to

act, to react, at the same time or afterwards to participate in the movement of change. These examples are part of the writing of an important phase in the history of Tunisia that is still experiencing this change, in an Arab world in upheaval [...]. Freedom of expression is a citizen achievement, regardless of what artists think. The important thing is the attitude they have adopted and their commitment, whatever it may be, in the action. Perhaps some of these works are spontaneous, the fruit of the moment, which will eventually be forgotten. But we may wonder if some of the artists have seized the opportunity in their (calculated?) commitment by using the theme of uprising as a ‘saleable’ topic.”

Indeed, fourteen months after that text and a few days before the tenth anniversary of the Tunisian uprising, things changed due to the force of the movement and of history; the revolutionary movement faced the counterrevolution that hid at the beginning and later became organised and today, after the last elections, operates openly.

The world of culture and art “becomes militant” to survive the disastrous economic consequences added to the global pandemic. This cannot stop the few people who, for so many years, have chosen the path of action for a better, fairer and more humane world. A world where people are no longer the centre of everything, transformed into an object of consumption where everything is bought and everything is sold. And with an image, through the media at the service of a manipulative model, as effective and dangerous as it is unfair, against which some professionals (in the field, for example, of the cinematographic and digital image) continue to exercise their militancy. These constitute a problem that must be fought in every way possible... The examples are numerous, but I will name one that at this moment touches my soul: the cartoonist Najji Ali, who denounced the practices of the occupa-

tion of Palestine and ended up being murdered, although his drawings endure and continue to be the bearers of his cause.

M. E. M.: You were the director of the Tunis Institute of Fine Arts between 2002 and 2005 and have recently returned to the post. What were your priorities and programme in that period and what is your programme today?

M. G.: That's right, in November 2020 my colleagues again elected me as director for a three-year term. It is a job at the school where I did my studies and where I've been teaching graphic design and communication for many years. During the first period, I tried to put into practice the best work and motivation strategy for the group of colleagues that make up the institution (teachers, students, administrative and educational management and workers), each one in their role and with the same objective: teaching, training and research for the designers and visual artists of tomorrow. This cannot only be done in a closed space but in relation to the national political, economic, cultural and social reality... but also taking into account the international reality and working to establish the necessary exchanges with different foreign schools and partners. Eighteen years later, even though everything has evolved, the essential priorities are still in place. For me, the direction lies between what I call internal management and external management for a world of art without borders, in continuous movement, renewal and questioning. Today, seeing the difficult national and international situation, I believe that after every profound crisis there is a new source that will eventually emerge. The difficulty of the moment is motivation for rethinking everything.

M. E. M.: Have you found any differences between the interests and needs of students in the two periods?

M. G.: The needs of students, as for all of us, depend on the national and international situation. For me, students have always been a seed of movement and dynamism because they are at the learning phase. However, they are also the product of an age. In 2002 they were dominated by the tight reins of a long-lasting totalitarian regime and power, with its ups and downs. Today, after the uprising of 2010 and 2011, we are immersed in the project of a parliamentary regime in a long and painful construction phase.

Between those two periods, I believe that students, who in my opinion did not enjoy freedom of action and expression, have consolidated that right to expression, to proposals and decisions in a more open way. I have always believed that the Tunis Institute of Fine Arts is the representation of the shifting state of Tunisia; with its questions, doubts, struggles and actions. This is based on my many years of teaching, as well as the response received from the students each time I have proposed different topics without any kind of censorship or taboo. These students have been, and continue to be, a source of ideas despite the generally hostile environment, which does not believe very much in the need for these art and design studies out of fear of artistic expression of all kinds. Those students are the force for change, today and tomorrow. We have to believe in them and give them confidence so we can pass on the torch to them, but, above all, trust in their abilities to change the rules of the game. That reminds me of something I say to each new class of graphic designers at the beginning of the university course: "We are image designers in the broadest sense; we are called upon to change the world."

M. E. M.: As a creative artist, what are your expectations and work projects?

M. G.: In terms of my artistic practice, I borrow a line from Jean Cocteau that I think

sums up how I feel: “You have to understand that art only exists if it prolongs a cry, a laugh or a lament.”

A cry, a laugh or a lament: that has been the justification for my personal work for so many years. It is also the only weapon against the absurdity of this world that is so cruel, so crazy, in which individualism and hatred are increasingly imbedded. Is this not the consequence of a strategy that destroys in the name of justice, equality or freedom, instead of building on the values of solidarity, cooperation and love?

I feel like a citizen of the world and, therefore, I must take a stance on the events that occur. Taking a stance and sharing is what I have always done, responding to requests

for group exhibitions. I have never felt the need to do a solo exhibition, in Tunisia or elsewhere, despite having the opportunity. On the contrary, since the people’s uprising of 2010, I have preferred to express myself through social media, which gives me the possibility of acting and reacting spontaneously, almost impulsively, addressing an extremely wide audience and without any geographical restriction. This way of proceeding allows me to “exhibit” my personal works as often as I wish, in line with their creation and without any material impediment.

The beautiful graphic journey that I call *Mon dessin contre ce qui se dessine*, however, is taking shape as an exhibition/publication.



Nurit Kedar.