

Malta Biennale

11.03. - 29.05.2026

Between Land and Sea

Jaâfar Akil
Driss Aroussi
Yassine Balbzioui
Yasmina Ben Ari
Badr El Hammami
Mohammed Laouli
Katrin Ströbel

(Entre la terre
et la mer)



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Curator: Badr El Hammami
Associate Curator: Katharina Fink



After many years of traveling as part of my exhibition projects and meeting artists from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, I felt the desire to propose a collective exhibition within the framework of the Malta Biennale. As an artist, this proposal is a natural continuation of my own artistic research, bringing together works that resonate with my reflections on movement, borders, and territories.

The artists I wish to present are friends with whom I have maintained close connections for many years. Our exchanges—shaped by time, conversations, and shared experiences—have deeply influenced our respective practices. This is therefore not a curatorial proposal in the institutional sense, but rather a space of resonance, where their perspectives on the world intersect with the way the world perceives them as artists.

Situated at the heart of the Mediterranean, Malta occupies a unique position: a territory of passage, encounters, and tensions; it is both a point of convergence and a border. In this context, mobility becomes a central issue, and borders—whether geographical, political, cultural, or symbolic—profoundly shape individual and collective trajectories.

For artists living between two countries, or even more, these borders are an integral part of their daily lives and artistic practices. They are constantly confronted with identity, linguistic, historical, and political challenges, which they translate and transform through their work.

In a world in constant flux, marked by migration, displacements, and the continuous flow of people, images, and goods, our perception of the relationship between identity, territory, and culture has been deeply disrupted. Communities of ideas, economic sovereignties without defined territorial roots, and new configurations of borders arising from contemporary conflicts contribute to a deterritorialisation of culture, weakening traditional links between practices, customs, and territories.

In this context, the very notion of the “location of culture” becomes unstable and problematic. Cultures, fragmented and defined like moving collages, generate new forms that break with established social frameworks while spreading and universalizing at an unprecedented speed.

The artists brought together in this exhibition fully inhabit this cultural geography in motion. Their works reflect perspectives shaped by hybrid identities, built between multiple places, languages, and histories. They inhabit multiple spaces, sometimes simultaneously, abandoning the idea of a fixed origin to take root elsewhere or to expand like rhizomes. They can return ‘home’ without set-

09 tling there permanently, thereby questioning the notion of homeland and the supposedly immutable nature of culture—often transformed, weakened, or redefined by globalization or conflict.

These artists maintain a constant dialogue with those who have remained ‘over there’, even in the absence of any physical presence. Their work explores questions of belonging, identity, and memory, invoking the past while making visible the transformations brought about by movement.

Their artistic practice transcends borders and conventional cultural frameworks. It challenges traditional notions of nation, territory, and culture, giving shape to the complex, often contradictory experiences of those who live between multiple worlds—between physical realities and imagined spaces.

Through this exhibition, the artists position themselves as both witnesses and actors of this contemporary reality, where notions of belonging and territoriality are constantly redefined. Their art offers a critical and sensitive space to question dominant narratives of identity and culture, opening the way to a more inclusive, nuanced intercultural dialogue deeply rooted in the realities of today’s world.

Badr El Hammami
Artist

(...)

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The Artists

and in the salt
chuckle of rocks
with their
 sea pools,

there was the sound
like a rumour
without any echo
of History, really
beginning.



Series *Unfinished Journey*, 15 photographs, digital fine art prints, laminated and mounted on Forex, Tangier, 2006–2009, 40 × 60 cm

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Jaâfar Akil

“The photographic series entitled *Unfinished Journey* resonates with several artistic projects and literary research that I have carried out in recent years around the question of collective memory.

These photographic representations embody, for me, a range of emotions as well as moments of deep reflection and attentiveness focused on a sociopolitical phenomenon that is both painful and, at times, tragic: irregular migration.

At the outset, my primary motivation was to reformulate visual combinations in order to express or photographically convey this human tragedy. Gradually, however, the idea of working on the trace of human presence and passage emerged on the surface of my images. Hence the emphasis on the relationship between the individual and the place, through bodily postures, abandoned pairs of sandals...

The situation appears ambiguous, strange, silent, and calm, yet at the same time the photograph confronts the viewer through its composition and off-frame space, suggesting ideas of waiting, suspense, emptiness, the omnipresence of the sea, the thirst for the unknown, and above all the fantasy of elsewhere.

In these images, simple elements point to this drama: the notion of emptiness, the various gazes cast toward the sea—or rather toward the other shore...

Is not Tangier, the city of the strait and a former international zone, perceived in our collective imagination as a ‘passage toward a better life’ rather than as the stage of a human tragedy?”

Jaâfar Akil was born in Meknes in 1966. He lives and works in Rabat, Morocco. He is a professor of higher education in photojournalism and image analysis at the Higher Institute of Information and Communication (ISIC). He holds a PhD obtained in 2004 in image semiotics, entitled *The Communicational Process in Television Advertising in Morocco – A Semi-otic Approach*. In 2012, he defended a habilitation project focusing on the uses of photography in Morocco.

Since 1990, he has developed a photographic practice in Morocco and internationally (Canada, Chile, Spain, France, the Canary Islands, Mali, Syria, Ukraine, among others). His artistic approach focuses primarily on memory in its personal and collective, real and imaginary, intimate and public dimensions. His photography explores trace, detail, and the hybridity of everyday life, sometimes making absence itself a marker of visual memory.

A major figure in the Moroccan photographic scene, Jaâfar Akil is President of the Moroccan Association of Photographic Art, Director of the *Carnets de Photographes Marocains* collection, and Artistic Director of the Rabat Photographic Encounters. He has also curated numerous exhibitions in Morocco and abroad, notably at the Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles (Off, 2025), the Bamako Encounters (African Biennale of Photography, 2024), in Seville (2018), and in Rabat (2017).

He is the author of the photographic album *Casa – Paris: Wanderings* (2014), as well as several theoretical essays on photography published in 2015 and 2023. A monograph is currently in preparation. He is represented by the NegPos Gallery in Nîmes, France.



Series *Unfinished Journey*, 15 photographs, digital fine art prints, laminated and mounted on Forex, Tangier, 2006–2009, 40 x 60 cm



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Driss Aroussi

Driss Aroussi is an artist based in Marseille, France. Above all, it is his taste for experimentation that guides his projects. As he explains, for him it is about “understanding the devices, trying to move beyond the program (of the machine), and discovering new spaces for proposing artistic forms.” Working between Marseille and southern Morocco, Driss Aroussi has explored various techniques over the past fifteen years, including analog photography, digital processes, post-production, and video.

Through each of these mediums, his approach—located at the intersection of documentary and fiction—plays with time, embracing a claimed slowness, that of the real world, before shifting toward the magic of appearance.

The question of labor intersects with the notion of time—of latency. In Driss Aroussi's work, the two become inseparable. This is evident in the 2009 video *The Stones of the Oued*, produced in his family's village in southern Morocco, a semi-desert area. For seven minutes, in this silent film, two men dig and load a truck with sand and stones. Without embellishment, the viewer experiences the duration and harshness of this action.

This first video foreshadows *Sisyphé*, which he created in 2017. Video then became a powerful language element in Driss Aroussi's practice. It is not simply documentary, but plays with the codes of fiction. He surrounds himself with a small team of film professionals—a director of photography, a sound engineer, and an editor—while he takes charge of writing and directing.

Filmed in his family's village in southern Morocco, *Sisyphé* tells the story of a man breaking apart a rocky mass in an open quarry to extract stone for construction. In his daily labor, he meditates on life and death. Created as a mythological fable, the video addresses both humanity and the relationship to life and the elements. The main character's body appears fragile in the face of this mineral mass. Like a modern-day enslaved person, he carries out a titanic and anachronistic task.



Sisyphé, Film, 2017–2018, 12 min 47 sec.



Untitled (I-V), ink on paper, 65 × 50 cm, 2025.

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Yassine Balbzioui

Do embroidered fish dream of the ghost ocean?

Realised in Lucknow in 2024, the tapestry *Twin Bubbles* is more than yet another canvas for the cosmology of Yassine Balbzioui. The work is the outcome of a residency in India, in which Yassine Balbzioui spent three months with master embroiderers at Kalkath Institute, allowing his creations to find form in a new, flamboyant language. The hand-stitched work bursts in colour. Dandyish sea creatures speak in shiny bubbles, or enjoy the buzzing altered state of matter.

Like everything in Yassine Balbzioui's oeuvre, this work attracts and confuses. It blurs the boundaries between life and death, between land and water, between light and dark. "Invisible fish swim this ghost ocean now described by waves of sand, by water-worn rock. Soon the fish will learn to walk.", poet Joy Harjo writes.

In his signature style of birthing images in his anarchic melange of melancholia and light, Yassine Balbzioui's fish have long been walking. They ask, bubbling: Which worlds are dying, when we truly transform; which ones are being born? Which ones do I let go, foretasting the polka-dotted walk in fresh skin? Which ones will we mourn, like the afterimage of a dazzling creature fleeting past? Will they sparkle?

Yassine Balbzioui is the trickster of contemporary art. Born in 1972, he graduated from the Ecole des Beaux-arts both in Casablanca and Bordeaux. Essentially a painter and drawing artist, Yassine Balbzioui has developed, in a neo-expressionist vein, a body of works of great formal and semantic richness, in which the representation of human animality, most often in the guise of a mask, intersects with the notions of derision, idiocy and grotesque. Yassine Balbzioui has exhibited his work all over the world: Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, Spain (*Moroccan Trilogy*); 13th Dakar Biennial, Dakar, Senegal; Manifesta 13 in Marseille, France, Iwalewaha in Bayreuth, Germany; MACAAL Marrakech, Morocco.

Currently, he is realising a sixty meter canvas-on-wall at HKW (House of World Cultures), Berlin, Germany for the exhibition "Tirailleurs: Trials and Tribulations" opening on the 20th of March, 2026.

www.yassinebalbzioui.com
[Instagram.com/yassine.balbzioui](https://www.instagram.com/yassine.balbzioui)



Twin Bubbles, Embroidery, 2024, 218 × 173 cm, Lucknow/India



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Yasmina Ben Ari

Yasmina Ben Ari's *Pain and Other Things* is a multimedia installation that engages with pain as a bodily and emotional experience shaped by displacement. The work departs from a moment of physical pain triggered by an emotional shock linked to exile, where the body becomes the first site of rupture and memory.

Here, pain is not only a sensation but a language: a way in which exile is inscribed in the body, producing fractures between places, temporalities, and identities. The installation explores pain as a persistent state — physical, symbolic, and affective — closely connected to longing.

Pain operates as a shared yet incommunicable experience, bridging physical sensation and symbolic loss across geographical and emotional distances.

Rather than representing exile, the work inhabits it, allowing pain to circulate between the visible and the invisible, the individual and the collective, the intimate and the political.

Yasmina Ben Ari is an artist researcher whose practice combines video, photography, sound, text and documentary cinema. Her installations explore the relationship between bodies, memory and territory with a particular focus on collective rituals, political uprisings and Mediterranean identities.

Drawing on long term research and archival materials, notably from Egypt where she lived several years, she creates immersive environments that blur the boundaries between documentary and fiction, individual and collective experience.

Yasmina Ben Ari graduated from Le Fresnoy, Contemporary Arts. She holds a PhD in Arts and an MA in Political Sciences.



Pain and Other Things, multimedia installation (video, photography, sculpture).



FATA MORGANA, installation (burned and painted postcards, Super 8 projector, candles), 2012–2026.

This work brings together a collection of tourist postcards. Displayed exclusively on their front side, they initially present seductive and idealised landscapes, shaped by the familiar codes of the tourist imaginary. These images evoke places of leisure, rest, and escape, where the landscape appears frozen in a state of perfection, free of conflict.

Upon closer inspection, a disturbing detail emerges: a flame appears on each postcard. This recurring motif introduces a rupture within the image, revealing an anomaly at the heart of this smooth representation. The postcards have been painted and burned by the artist, transforming an object of memory into a surface of intervention.

Through this gesture, the work questions the construction of the tourist landscape and the promise of a single, consensual reality. The postcard—normally intended to be sent, shared, and reproduced—becomes here a site of tension between appearance and destruction. The burned image does not disappear entirely; it retains the traces of fire, visible as a form of memory.

FATA MORGANA thus challenges the circulation of images, their power of seduction, and their ability to conceal the complexities of reality. Between illusion and alteration, these burned postcards shift the viewer's gaze and invite a reconsideration of what the landscape shows—and what it chooses to silence.

Badr El Hammami born in 1979 in Morocco, is a contemporary artist who lives and works in Marseille, France. His artistic practice addresses themes such as otherness, migration, borders, and memory. He develops site-specific projects in collaboration with the people around him, whether they are street vendors (*Côte à côte*), primary school children (*Jeux d'enfants*), or other artists (*Offre spéciale*).

Through simple yet symbolic gestures, such as burning postcards or splitting a chess set with a wall, he questions the notions of movement and the circulation of speech, which he considers a vital necessity.

A graduate of the École Nationale Supérieure d'Arts de Paris Cergy in 2017 and the École Régionale des Beaux-Arts de Valence, France in 2009, he has participated in numerous exhibitions across Europe and Africa. Notable exhibitions include Moroccan Trilogy at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, Spain (2021), *Ce qui s'oublie et ce qui reste* at the National Museum of Immigration History in Paris, France (2021), and MANIFESTA 13 in Marseille, France (2020).

In 2019, he took part in the 12th edition of the Rencontres de Bamako, the African photography biennale in Mali, and the Casablanca International Biennale. He has also created performances and installations such as *ANKHRIÁ* (2020) at the Magasin des Horizons in Grenoble.

His work, which weaves a link between personal and collective history, is recognized for its ability to generate deep intercultural dialogues, where exchange and co-construction play a central role.



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FATA MORGANA, installation (burned and painted postcards, Super 8 projector, candles), 2012–2026.



Katrin Ströbel and Mohammed Laouli's work has appeared in a range of media and formats, from videos and drawings to site-specific installations, photographs, and written scripts, shifting through seamless transitions between fiction and reality.

For the project *frontières fluides (fluid boundaries)*, both artists have started an investigation that attempts to depart from specific stories and contexts in order to draw a larger narrative framework. Their artistic project is based on situations and recordings taking shape in various locations, such as the Bouregreg River (which separates the cities of Rabat and Salé and flows into the Atlantic Ocean), Playa Blanca in the north of Morocco, and Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

These places have a topographical relation to the image of the boat and to the notion of drift. They use the fragmented narrative structure of various stories to lend shape to their ideas, an approach that is quite popular among artists today. But unlike many contemporary works that consist of telling little individual histories, the meaning here extends beyond, with the stories appearing to have a symbolic and/or metaphoric quality related to the position of the artist in society.

The works staged involve humorous, playful commentaries on situations in which artists or citizens can find themselves. This way of raising the work far above the merely personal allows them to escape from any purely documentary approach, while indirectly investigating the geography of the origins of the different characters in relation to the present. Thus, the internal structure of the work responds to external conditions through a fragmented and complex network of references and situations, often describing strange moments and unresolved questions through different effects. In a way, this hall of mirrors allows the artists to highlight a social situation that forces us to crack the wall of our indifference, to resolve the rift between a personal experience and the chaos of a larger public world.

(extract of Karima Boudou's text "in search of the continuous" on the project of Katrin Ströbel and Mohammed Laouli)

Mohammed Laouli was born and raised in Salé, Morocco, and lives and works between Marseille, Stuttgart, and his native Salé. His artistic practice explores social dynamics through interventions in public space. Introspective and critical, he examines mechanisms of power, including social and cultural structures, while questioning dominant representations. Working across video, sculpture, photography, drawing, and painting, Laouli reveals the tensions between individual and collective experiences, with a focus on experiences related to exile and social exclusion. Laouli's work has been exhibited in numerous art centers, museums, and biennials, notably at the Bamako Biennale, the Marrakech Biennale, the Dakar Biennale, the Cube Independent Art Room (Rabat), the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, the Zeppelin Museum (Germany), the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum (Cologne), Tate Modern (England), the Arab World Institute, and l'Institut des Cultures d'Islam de Paris, among others.



Son of the Sea, Installation



Katrin Ströbel

Katrin Ströbel (b. 1975) lives and works in Marseille, Stuttgart, and Rabat.

Her practice includes drawing, site-specific works, and space-related installations, grounded in a critical examination of the social, cultural, and geopolitical conditions that shape everyday life. Ströbel's work explores cultural codes and (visual) languages, addressing issues such as colonialism, migration, and displacement, while highlighting the connections between geopolitics and gender politics. With a critically ironic perspective, she deconstructs gender relations and female stereotypes across her drawings and collages. Since 2021, she has been engaged in a research project exploring drawing as a subversive and emancipatory practice. Katrin Ströbel studied visual arts and literature and holds a PhD in art history. She is also a mother.

Since 2004, she has worked and exhibited regularly in Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Peru, Australia, and the United States. Her work has been shown in renowned institutions including MAMAC, Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain (Nice, France), MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo (Rome, Italy), Kunstmuseum Siegen (Germany), Savvy Contemporary (Berlin, Germany), Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst (Aachen, Germany), The Elemental (Palm Springs, California, USA), La Kunsthalle (Mulhouse, France), Musée d'Art Contemporain Africain Al Maaden (Marrakech, Morocco), Casablanca Biennale, (Morocco), Triangle – Astérides (Marseille, France), and FRAC Lorraine (Metz, France).

Her work is included in numerous public and private collections, including the Federal Collection of Contemporary Art (Kunstsammlung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, Germany), Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Kunstsammlung des Landes Baden-Württemberg (Germany), Kunstmuseum Stuttgart (Germany), Kunstmuseum Mülheim (Germany), FRAC Sud (Marseille, France), FRAC Artothèque Nouvelle Aquitaine (Limoges, France), FRAC Lorraine (Metz, France), and Fond Communal (Marseille, France).

From 2013 to 2023, Ströbel was a professor at Villa Arson, École Nationale Supérieure d'Art in Nice, France. In spring 2023, she was appointed professor at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Stuttgart, Germany.



Île de Gorée, Installation, 2011

Salt cleanses.

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Water mirrors
what we intend
to hide.

Small rocks,
sharp-edged,
cut soft skin.

Land, sea and the star-studded infinity that spreads out above our heads are connected by the tides. Tides are thresholds; moments and movements that condense, dissolve, open and close. Building on Badr El Hammami's curatorial vision, *Entre la terre et la mer*, the works in this pavilion pay tribute to the tides that shape us. To the waves breaking on the rocks. To feeling the "invisible fish of the ghost ocean", as poet Joy Harjo wrote.

Because the ocean holds no easy things, particularly in a space like this. The sea carries memories, hopes, wrecked ideas. Visions of grandeur. Violence. It carries bodies, dead, alive, and between. It lets dreams sink. It spits illusions on the sand. It lifts what allows itself to be lifted. It lazily touches what decided to become shore. It respects the tides of mortality. The sea will be there. We will all go. Salt cleanses. Water mirrors what we intend to hide. Small rocks, sharp-edged, cut soft skin.

The constellation of works by artists, friends and comrades in this exhibition speaks of tidal movements, which offer the freedom to swim together, sometimes close, sometimes afar. It honours collaborating in rigid,

sometimes pathetic settings. It celebrates the complicated offerings of salt, water and land: survival, floating, separation, the unstable lines marking a here and a there, altering states of matter - and the joy , never despair, of thriving in between all of them.

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