

# This Madagascan Artist Blurs The Lines Separating Art And Craft In A Moroccan Museum Exhibition

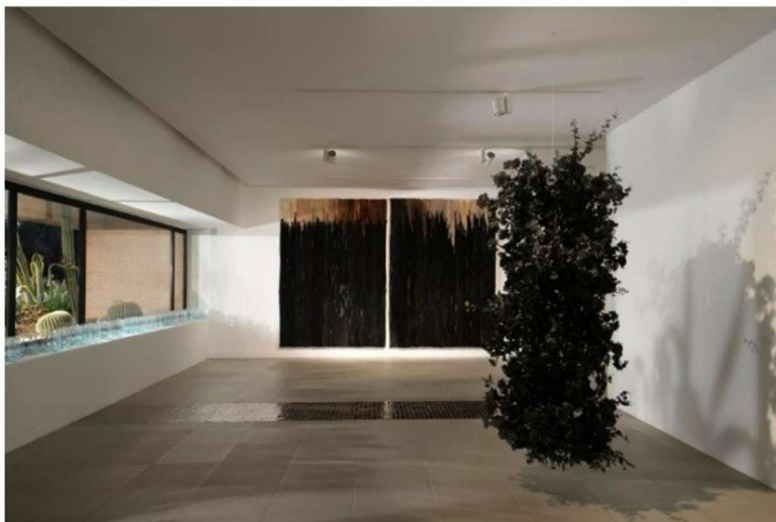
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*I write about luxury, art and culture.*

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Apr 25, 2023, 04:36pm EDT

The principle of collaboration and dialog nurtures Joël Andrianomearisoa's entire artistic practice – spanning sculpture, installation, textile and the written word – which finds its apotheosis in his exhibition “Our Land Just Like a Dream” at the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden (MACAAL) in Marrakesh. One of the few private contemporary art museums in Africa, it is the brainchild of Moroccan architect Othman Lazraq, who's also the director of Casablanca-based Fondation Alliances, a non-profit organization for cultural development in Morocco. Running until July 16, 2023, the museum's very first solo show dedicated to a contemporary artist is a declaration of love to the land and to the hand, signalling the importance of local production in his host country.



Installation shot of "Our Land Just Like a Dream" at MACAAL. PHOTO OMAR

Presenting Andrianomearisoa's interpretation of traditional Moroccan savoir-faire, the exhibition resonates with the territory of Marrakesh by highlighting the diversity of its artisanal techniques through a new body of work created in-situ and in conversation with a selection of pieces from MACAAL's permanent collection. The hand – his own but also those of master glassmakers, ceramists, tile craftsmen, metal workers, basketry artisans, jewelers, embroiders and weavers with whom he has partnered – appears as a main theme to which he dedicates an opus that's at once intimate yet open to all, a sensory and poetic experience that reverberates within each one of us. Breaking the boundaries that separate art and craft, he encouraged these artisans to offer their personal interpretations of his creative concepts.

A piece that stands out is "Hymn to Roses" that plunges viewers into darkness and takes them on a multi-sensory journey engaging their senses of sight, hearing and smell. Inside a room that may be imagined as either a jewelry box or a funerary space, 43 hammered, wrought iron roses – a universal symbol of romance and an emblem of Marrakesh – fabricated by blacksmith Miloud Bouarfa and coppersmith Azzedine Toufikalah adorn the black walls. At the same time, the haunting feline voice of Moroccan singer Hindi Zahra spills out across the space interpreting a text composed by Andrianomearisoa, which mixes the French, English and Amazigh languages in a sound piece that's part hymn, part elegy, while the scent of the woody Burkan fragrance created by The Moroccans fills the air with notes of leather, rock rose, cedar, smoky oud, red thyme and incense, evoking a fiery volcano.

We also find stacks of white ceramic plates scratched with energetic black lines sitting on a gigantic table in a domestic interior, which were made in concert with ceramist Soufiane

Tiglyene. In the final room, Moroccan artist Amina Agueznay deconstructed a pompom taken from a 1930's horse headdress and converted it into a pair of earrings called "Proscenium" crafted by weaver Malika Benmoumen and jeweler Baissat Mzaidaf. They echo a space Andrianomearisoa decorated with 850 *shousha* (traditional pompoms) in countless colors, shapes and textures that he had chanced upon or ordered from artisans, haberdashers and antique dealers in the Marrakesh medina, speaking of his boundless obsession with passementerie and collecting. I sit down with the Paris- and Antananarivo-based artist to discuss his Malagasy origins and his deep-rooted relationship with crafts.



Plates by Joël Andrianomearisoa and Soufiane Tygliene in Marrakech PHOTO OMAR TAJMOUATI. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MACAAL

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**You were born in 1977 in Antananarivo, Madagascar. Tell me about your upbringing and your studies.**

I was born to a bourgeois family in Madagascar, nothing related to art. My mother worked in a bank and my father was a teacher. My grandfather was an engineer working for the railway in Madagascar. My other grandfather was an Academician taking care of the Malagasy language. I was born and raised in Antananarivo. Everything started when I was 18, when you have to decide what to do for your future. I knew that I was going to do something in terms of creation, but I didn't know that it was going to be art. I met a lot of people in crafts in Madagascar at a workshop organized by the European Union. I decided to spend one year on this kind of exploration and trying to understand all the mediums that



you can manipulate in Madagascar. When I was 19, I moved to Paris to study architecture because there was nothing in terms of architecture in Madagascar. Meeting my teacher, the architect Odile Decq, was very important as she opened my eyes to other things. I also met some artists like Pascale Marthine Tayou and the people from *Revue Noire* magazine. Everything started when I was 21, when I met people. I insist on this idea that as an artist, your work and your statement are important, but also meeting people. Architecture is still on my mind, not as a work in itself, but as an approach or starting point because everything is about space. Space can be a body, an object, a chair, a lamp, a room, a wall, a ceiling, a beach, a mountain.

### **How do your Madagascan roots inform your artworks?**

This idea of roots and identity is something that you can't remove from yourself, your soul and your approach because it's in your blood. I don't have to affirm that I am from Madagascar, I don't have to write it because the spirit is already there. Having my studio in two locations in Antananarivo and Paris is a statement of how Madagascar is part of everything and France is also part of everything. In some pieces, when I'm working on texts, I'm writing in English, French and Malagasy. I'm putting Malagasy on the same level as English and other languages. Madagascar is in my blood and in my name. We had French colonization for more than one century, and upon our independence in 1960, and especially between 1960 and 1980, a lot of Malagasy people decided to go abroad. Even in my family, on my father's side, they decided to move to France and some of them decided to cut their names to make them more French or European. I think that's the saddest thing that you can do with your identity and your family. Maybe it's because I'm an artist, but I would never cut off my left hand on purpose because the design or the form is not good. And our names are something very important.

### **You have collaborated with master embroiderers in Antananarivo (Madagascar), weavers in Udaipur (India) and a master loom-setter in Aubusson (France). Why are you fascinated by traditional crafts?**

I think the idea of working with craftsmen started from Madagascar, when I was like 18. I think it's very clear that it's one of my passions. I know techniques, people and fabrics from Madagascar, but one of the biggest desires of my life is to open windows around the world, not just being comfortable in Paris or Madagascar working on my own thing. I'm always trying to go somewhere to try to experiment on different things. If there is an opportunity to go somewhere to create something with some craftsmen or discover another technique, I'll go for it, not only during a project or residency. It's not only in Africa, but also in Madrid or in Istanbul, where I'm working with a guy on mirror mosaics. In India, I went crazy and I discovered many things, like they are doing interesting things around hair, metal, the sari. In Tunisia, I'm trying to make a huge tapestry combining different techniques and mediums inside the work. I'm doing something in the winter with Ceramic Limoges in France. When I'm in Madagascar, we're experimenting with many things. I'm trying to figure out a new sculpture made with aluminum in Madagascar also.



"Our Land Just Like a Dream" metal sculpture by Joël Andrianomearisoa COURTESY OF STUDIO JOËL ANDRIANOMEARISOA



### **What are your thoughts on the relationship between the artist and the craftsman?**

There is no difference. It's just one thing. We have to be together. For me, craftsmen are part of the process, life, everything. It's just very normal. Artists create desires and craftsmen create realities, or make them real. I'll go to see the guy who's working the metal and ask him if he can produce something, but with his own perception. For example, the roses that I have in the show "Our Land Just Like a Dream" are exactly the same idea. I gave them a fresh rose and asked them to reproduce it, but with their own perception, with all the mistakes and with their own imagination.

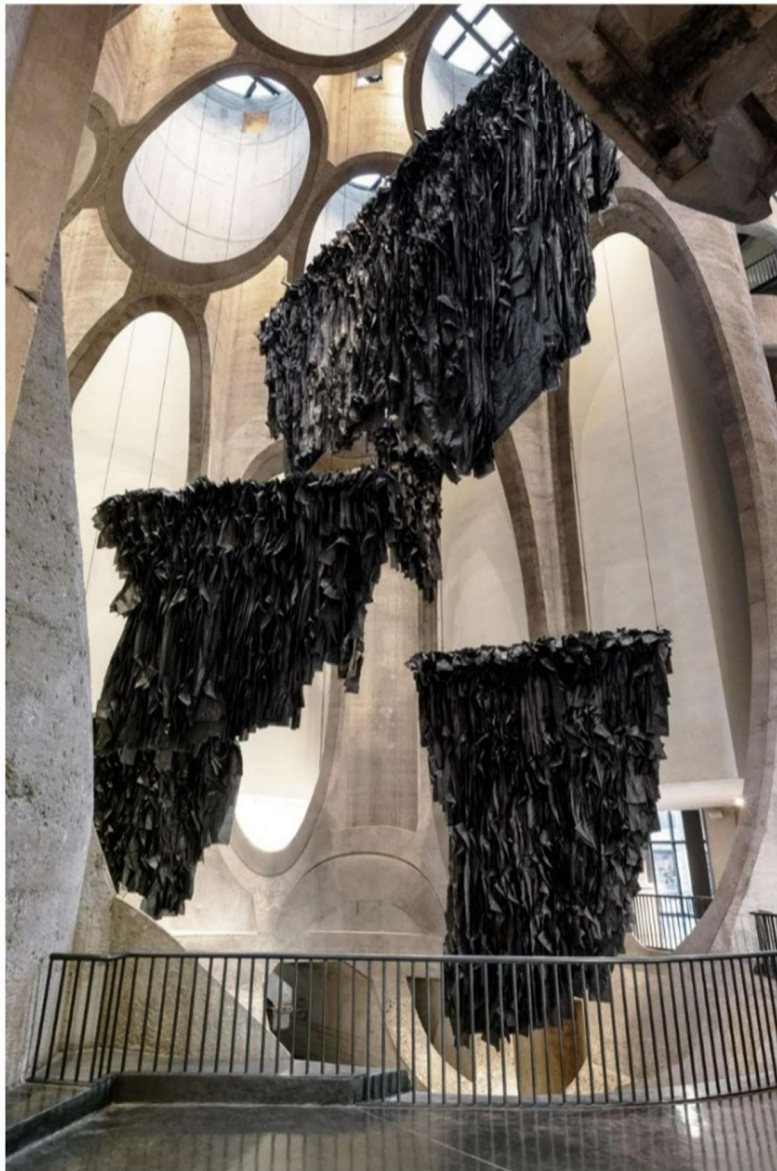
### **What does the exhibition title "Our Land Just Like a Dream" signify?**

For this kind of exhibition in a big museum where I worked during two years with craftsmen, I ended up affirming 100 % the idea of Morocco, but I'm not going to write "In Love with Marrakesh". I decided to affirm the idea of the land, so the land is actually Morocco, the land is Marrakesh and the land is the museum. And then I put "our land" because it's not mine, but I would like to be part of this patriotic voice or affirmation for the Moroccan people to be proud of their land. The land as a technique, the land as a land, the land as a people, the land as a smell, the land as an atmosphere, so everything is there. And then to make it maybe lighter or connect it with the idea of emotion, I added "just like a dream", so it's not just patriotic or affirming Morocco as the best place in the world, but affirming the dream and the emotion, and opening the discussion that this land actually is just an excuse to open the discussion to all other discussions. You see in the exhibition the diversity of the dialog that I create from very patrimonial works to contemporary artists, photography, scent and everything like that.

### **How did you work closely with Moroccan artisans and artists on this exhibition?**

I invited master craftsmen to collaborate with me in different mediums, from metal to textile and ceramics, like with Soufiane Tyglienne, and some artist friends like Amina Benbouchta and Amina Agueznay. I'm talking about the land

and the hand, my hands and the hands of the other artists or craftsmen. I decided to start making lines, like a map that you can find maybe in the show. Those lines, you will find them again, sometimes on plates, sometimes on the wall. But it's the energy of the show. For the diptych, you have two canvases because I think duality is also important, when talking about this idea of the land and identity. It's also a kind of metaphor between Amina and I or between Soufiane and I.



Joël Andrianomearisoa, "The Five Continents of All Our Desires", 2022, site-specific commission for ... [+] PHOTO DILLON MARSH

### **You pushed ceramist Soufiane Tyglienne further than he had ever gone...**

The way he worked was always that he received a drawing and then he reproduced 10,000 plates. When I saw him, I told him, "I need the plates to have the sensation of your hands, with all the mistakes. I'm not looking for perfection.



I'm trying to reveal that each plate has something to say, has something in it to feel. I'm not going to send you drawings; I'm going to spend time with you in your atelier and make the drawings in front of you." For him, it was crazy because he had to rearrange his entire atelier and he didn't understand why and how an artist could actually spend time there. It was really complicated. But in the end, he understood that the spirit of the hands are the best thing that you have to keep when you are a craftsman. The same thing also with the embroiderers. I decided to spend one day together with them. Let's put the fabric on the floor. Let me negotiate my lines with your lines. I made drawings and they asked me to stop a little bit so they could add something. That's the magical part of working with craftsmen and that's my approach.

**Tell me about your site-specific commission "The Five Continents of All Our Desires" for the Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town on display until June 25, 2023, which speaks about migration and language.**

I've known Koyo Kouoh, the director, and Storm Janse van Rensburg, the curator, for many years, and they asked me several years ago, after Venice, if I could think of something. Then we had COVID-19 and finally, we ended up with the idea that I would be the atrium artist of last year and this year. They asked me for an artwork using paper to have the contradiction between the fragility of the medium and the radical architecture of the building. South Africa is an amazing country, but it's still very complicated, so I decided to put on the table this problem. I decided to work on the idea of the continent. It's actually six floating pieces, which are a representation of the five continents, and the sixth imaginary continent is the continent of fantasy or desire. The idea again is to affirm the idea of being all together, and you can see this idea of "our" in most of my texts. I never write, "I am here." I say "you". I play a lot but between the "you" and "us".

**Why is it important to you to explore emotions like love, longing, desire, passion, hope, despair, melancholy and nostalgia through your art?**

I'm from Madagascar, but I'm trying to have a little discussion with all the world. It's very complicated to say,



“This is an international artwork.” I’m trying to figure out this idea of worldwide elements that everybody can touch. For example, the idea of sadness and tears. We all have a little part of sadness in us, we all have cried. So when I’m talking about emotion, I’m really talking about this idea of all of us together, “*nous*” in French. That’s the main idea. Then I think emotion has something to do with the idea of the hands, the craftsmen, the handmade, architecture also. I think they’re all connected. Sometimes I’m really trying to go beyond basic emotion. That’s the big exercise because when you’re talking about emotion, as most people think that everything is always about sadness and tears, but no. Sometimes I try to make joyful pieces, sometimes aggressive pieces. For me, emotions are the best tool to talk about eroticism, politics or social situations without any specific agenda, direction or judgments.