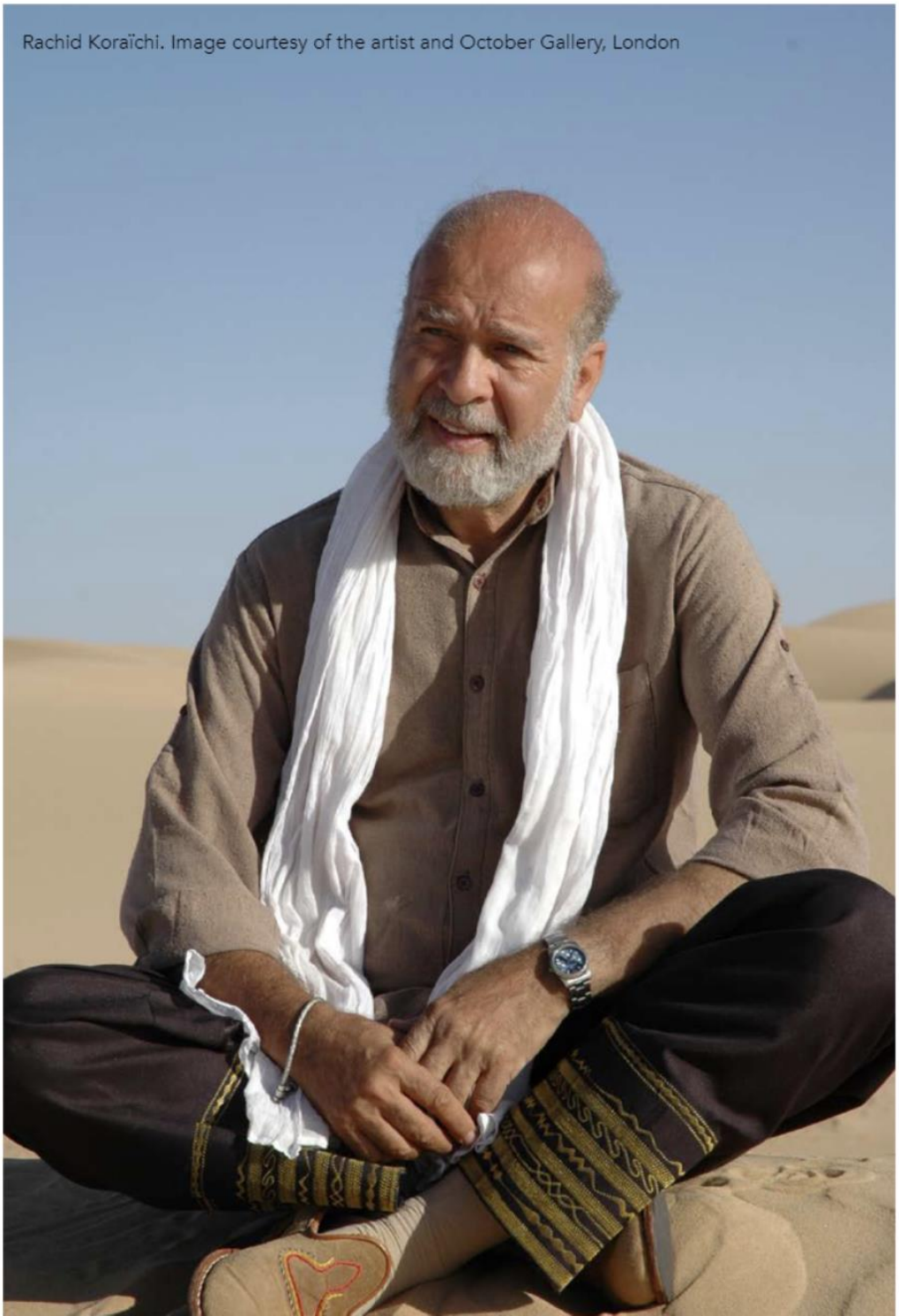
WATERS OF HOPE

For Algerian artist **Rachid Koraïchi**, art has the power to enact change, and his paradisical cemetery for migrants who drowned while crossing the Mediterranean is a shining beacon of hope.

Words by Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle



Rachid Koraïchi. Image courtesy of the artist and October Gallery, London

Rachid Koraïchi. *Lachrymatoires Bleues – Blue Lachrymatory Vases* series. 2020. Ceramic with cobalt oxide underglaze. 51 x 32 x 32 cm each. Image courtesy of the artist and October Gallery, London

Imagine Heaven on Earth. A Garden of Eden for the living and the dead where fragrant African and Persian jasmine and night-blooming jessamine grow, mingling with bright red bougainvillea representing the blood of Christ and orange trees recalling the bitterness of death and the sweetness of the afterlife – all guarded by a 130-year-old olive tree, symbolising peace. Five olive trees represent the five pillars of Islam, while 12 vines reflect the 12 apostles of Jesus. Pomegranate trees have been planted to signify that a single seed is fragile, like one person, but the whole fruit enveloped in its husk is strong, like humanity united.

This is no ordinary garden. Designed entirely by Rachid Koraïchi in 2019 and inaugurated in June, *The Garden of Africa* is the project of a lifetime. It's the world's only private, non-denominational cemetery and memorial, which the Algerian artist funded personally to provide a dignified final resting place for hundreds of refugees, regardless of age, nationality or religion, who perished crossing the Mediterranean Sea and whose bodies then washed up on the shores of Zarzis in southeastern Tunisia. For years, mountains of cadavers were dumped on the rubbish heap, as locals refused to bury them in their own cemeteries. Witnessing such atrocities, Koraïchi vowed to give them proper burials, marking each gravestone with details of the date and location of the shipwreck and identifying signs (age, sex and clothes), after each body had undergone a DNA test.

Visitors enter via a 17th-century yellow door representing the desert sun into a walled garden sanctuary, where geometrically arranged rows of white tombs are shaded by trees, flowers and scented herbs. Dividing paths are carpeted in hand-painted ceramic tiles ornamented with talismanic glyphs, hearts and other auspicious signs echoing those in 17th-century Tunisian palaces. There are marble benches and tables, an interfaith prayer hall, a morgue and DNA database to identify the dead and notify relatives. Praying figures – representing family and friends in distant lands and patrons and visitors paying respects – keep watch over the dead. Koraïchi views this great human tragedy as the legacy of a Western colonialism that has impacted the entire African continent, at a time when many, especially in Europe, continue to look away from a humanitarian disaster of their own making. "For me, it's fundamental because when I was a child, I had a 16-year-old brother, who disappeared in the Mediterranean and his body was never found," he states. "When I read that there were corpses of Christians, Muslims, animists and Buddhists washed up by the sea because they were leaving Libya clandestinely in rotting boats given to them by gangsters, I decided with great anger not only to give them an honourable burial, but also to build a cemetery for them imagined as a palace and garden of paradise, so they don't end up in the public landfill eaten by dogs."

Born in 1947 in Aïn Beïda in north-eastern Algeria, Koraïchi studied at the School of Fine Arts in Algiers, then at the School