

Talismanic Calligraphy Made Contemporary in Marrakech

- by [Vivek Gupta](#) on April 22, 2016



Rachid Koraïchi, 'La prière des absents' (photo by Hrag Vartanian for Hyperallergic)

La prière des absents (Prayer for those absent) by Algerian artist Rachid Koraïchi has captured the attention of visitors to the [Marrakech Biennale 6: Not New Now](#). Seven largescale blue and white ceramic vases raised on platforms are shown in a reflective pool at the ruined 16th century palace known as the Palais elBadi (Qasr alBadi'). La prière des absents was made from 2013 to 2015 in Essouira, to pay homage to the lives of the artist's parents, Rahima and Abdelaziz Koraïchi.

In Marrakech, one cannot read the words adorning the surfaces of Koraïchi's vessels, nor decipher other talismanic symbols and glyphs, no matter how close one gets to the pool. From a distance, it is only possible to appreciate the luster of vases and their reflections in the water, and to follow sight lines from the pool to the center of the palace to the shimmering work of El Anatsui draped over the interior facade.

Concurrent with the display of La prière des absents in Marrakech, in New York the artist recently had a solo exhibition at Aicon Gallery, [Love Side by Side with the Soul](#), where one could come closer to the surface of his vases and view them with other works, such as a series of banners called The Invisible

Masters. Yet in spite of the ability to almost touch the ceramics in New York, one still cannot easily read all the words. Standing close to one vase from *La prière*, one could just make out the name of the artist's mother, Rahima, repeating in reverse, and force oneself to read other words backward.



Koraïchi, 'Love Side by Side with the Soul' (image courtesy of Aicon Gallery)

The words on Koraïchi's *La prière* are executed with a form of writing known as "mirrored calligraphy," which often bears talismanic qualities. It derives from a long genealogy in Islamic art that flourished in early Ottoman, Timurid, and Deccani realms and often appears in Sufi contexts. Across Koraïchi's practice are serious engagements with premodern artistic forms of knowledge, including the adaptation of mirrored scripts, or *hurufiyyah*/letterism. This attests to the way a contemporary artist can refocus the view of premodern traditions. Unlike many of Koraïchi's contemporaries, who seek to abstract calligraphic forms, he not only nods at tradition, but, as an artist of Sufi lineage himself, he inscribes his work within it.

Calligraphy inscribed with the level of control evidenced in *La prière* inspires one to imagine the artist's hand moving across the contours of the vase, writing — or, rather, uttering — the name of his deceased mother and father in meditative prayer. The intimacy of the relationship between the artist and his lost loved ones becomes even more potent, as it is the names of his parents that become the very talisman that protect him.

The Marrakech installation exemplifies Koraïchi's "alphabet of memory," particularly in works that memorialize figures significant to the artist, whether the legendary Sufi mystic Ibn al'Arabi (1165–1240) or the contemporary writer Mohammed Dib (1920–2003). The artist's own alphabet is adapted from symbols and glyphs not exclusively from Arabic, but also drawn from Sumerian, Hebrew, Chinese, and

Tifinagh, marking his personal method of creating a specific code and logic for expressing the past. But to expect any viewer of *La prière* to decode Koraïchi's language is a tall order, even for connoisseurs. By installing the Marrakech work in a way that makes the calligraphy on the vases is far away to read, the works' coded inscrutability is realized. This also, perhaps, also acknowledging the ineffability of Koraïchi's prayer for his parents.



Koraïchi, 'La prière des absents' (photo by Hrag Vartanian for Hyperallergic)

La prière's display in Marrakech also fits within the artist's overall visual language, whether it is its use of water ("*Talisman*," 1995), or evocation of a lush garden ("*Gardens of Paradise*," 1998). The visitor to the biennale does not need to see the calligraphy mirrored as the vases reflect in the pool in which they stand. This picturesque way of naturally mirroring is what invites the visitor's gaze, and the water reflects the talismans on the surfaces of the vases. The vases become staged as seven hollow heads of imaginary fountains in the pool, where instead of flowing water, they emit the words and images inscribed on their surfaces. In their reflections, the vases go below the water's surface, and from some angles they seem as if they are buried below as much as standing above.

The relative visibility and legibility (or lack thereof) regarding *La prière* is posed as a question to the viewer in their display in *Not New Now*. Are we ever to decode Koraïchi's alphabet? Or are we left to view the reflections and imagine the memories they represent? In spite of *La prière's* innovations at the biennale, this work elegantly shows how contemporary art can indeed be not new now.

[The Marrakech Biennale 6: Not New Now](#) continues at sites around Marrakech through May 8.