



# Two Steps at a Time

# Hamid Zénati

## 25.05 – 08.09 2024

The late Algerian-German artist, Hamid Zénati, was a self-taught artist working compulsively across media and surfaces, from textiles, walls, found objects and ceramics to photography, fashion and wearable sculpture. Born in Constantine in 1944 into an Algeria still under French colonial rule, the artist's family moved to Algiers. There they built a home on the heights in Belcourt, with a rooftop overlooking the sea that nourished the artist's imagination. At the time, Belcourt was a working-class neighbourhood whose streets reflected a microcosm of Algeria's mixed society, and it became a key political centre in the Algerian struggle for independence. Zénati came of age alongside Algerian independence in 1962.

For a time Zénati worked as a teacher before leaving Algeria in pursuit of a greater sense of freedom and autonomy. Zénati ended up in Munich where he settled in the mid-1960s and it was here his artistic practice emerged. Whilst working as a translator, spending hours and days waiting by the phone for jobs, he began drawing and painting instinctively on whatever materials were available to him, an approach that would go on to define his signature 'all-over' style.

The limitless energy Zénati applied to his creative practice is perhaps best captured by the stories of his summer visits to Algiers, recounted by his niece Wassila Bedjaoui in her essay *Absolute Everything – Memories of Hamid Zénati*. When the artist was summoned with a call for dinner he would descend "two or three steps at a time" to perch "himself as if on half a butt cheek, so eager is he to eat and get back up to his room to continue his work".

The exhibition begins in Gallery 3 with tones that pay homage to the Algerian Sahara, a space of fascination and tranquillity which Zénati returned to throughout his life, and whose natural landscapes he believed gave rise to the most perfect patterns. The desert, along with the Amazigh aesthetic motifs, signs and cultural traditions of its indigenous inhabitants such as the Tuareg, Sahrawi, Bedouin and Fulani, directly inspired his work. Dispersed across the plinths are pre-made objects, instruments, vases and vessels whose surfaces were painted and transformed by Zénati's abstract language.

Gallery 4 opens into Zénati's 'all-over' world, moving through a landscape and architecture composed of his painted textiles, suspended from the ceiling, and mapped against the invisible lines of the streets of Algiers. Although trained in photography, Zénati switched to painting on clothes and textiles as his preferred medium, offering his work the flexibility to be versatile, performative and in constant motion.

Zénati produced his textile paintings using stencils hand made by cutting directly into paper, self-adhesive plastic film or tape with scissors or blade. Using the stencils as a guide, he would apply a very thin layer of paint onto the fabric surface, leaving it to dry before ironing the reverse to set the colour. Often, Zénati would display, sell, or perform with his textile works in pop-up exhibitions, street market stalls, draped over banisters, suspended on washing lines, or activated in the sea.

Taking influence from the more domestic 'majlis' or 'sitting rooms' of Algeria, the area by the Weekday Cross window provides a space for a more intimate understanding of Zénati's life. With music from his CD compilations playing on a radio, personal photographs charting his travels across Indonesia and India and examples of books from his library citing revolutionary poets, politicians and anti-colonial thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, Leopold Sédar Senghor and Habib Tengour.

During his life, Zénati received little institutional recognition, yet remained unperturbed and uncompromisingly dedicated to his practice. By the end of his life he had produced over 1000 works, a testimony to his unbroken vitality and the creative impulse, intuition and imagination that he embodied. The work of Hamid Zénati has always been self-determining. Drawing from multiple worlds, languages, cultures, literatures, music and memories – from his homes and his travels – and translating them all into Zénati's own all-over world of colour and pattern. In the words of Duro Olowu, perhaps Zénati's "real success was the creative freedom that he maintained throughout his life".

### RELATED EVENTS

#### Exhibition Walkthroughs

Wed 5 June, 12pm

#### Welcome Walkthrough

Explore the exhibition with our team and community partners Ubuntu, followed by refreshments and conversation in the café.

Wed 12 June, 12pm

#### Curator's Walkthrough

Join Nottingham Contemporary's curators for a tour of our summer exhibitions.

Wed 24 July, 1pm

With Sheyda Aisha Khaymaz, artist, curator and art historian.

Wed 4 September, 1pm

With Tom Godfrey, Director of Bonington Gallery and TG Gallery.

#### 12.30 Talks

12.30pm every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, starting 4 June

Join one of our friendly Gallery Assistants for a short exploration of one of our exhibitions.

#### Summer Solstice Party

Sat 22 June

Join us to celebrate the summer solstice and our fifteenth birthday with a day of events, performance and activities.

#### Film Screening & Performance

Thurs 18 July, 6pm

Film screening organised in partnership with The Mosaic Rooms, London, followed by a devotional vocal performance with Assia Ghendir.

#### The Screen at Contemporary

Our strand of arthouse, cult and classic cinema continues in August and September.

#### FREE FAMILY ACTIVITIES

Spring Half-Term: 28 – 30 May

Summer Holidays: 30 July – 22 Aug

Explore the themes in the exhibitions through making and play.

For more information about the exhibition, related events and learning programmes, visit [nottinghamcontemporary.org](http://nottinghamcontemporary.org) or scan here:



Hamid Zénati: *Two Steps at a Time* is generously supported by the Hamid Zénati Exhibition Circle: Barjeel Art Foundation, Rafik & Najoua Foundation, Maria Sukkar, Mercedes Vilardell, Sara Tayeb, Selim and Houda Bouafsoun and those who wish to remain anonymous.

The exhibition is curated by Salma Tuqan with support from Katie Simpson and Niall Farrelly.

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The archival materials and texts in the Algeria display have been selected and written by Sheyda Aisha Khaymaz in collaboration with Nottingham Contemporary.

Exhibition design by Msoma Ltd.

Exhibition graphics by Studio Marie Lusa.

All works courtesy Hamid Zénati Estate and Private Collection.

Cover image courtesy Hamid Zénati Estate.

If you would like a quiet space to reflect during your visit, please visit Gallery 0 (room adjacent to Gallery 1).

If you would like to use any alternative forms of interpretation, we have a range of accessible versions on our Access Wall beside Reception.

Environmental: Nottingham Contemporary is committed to advancing sustainability within the organisation and aims to explore and embed sustainable working practices and habits within our workplace and across the sector. This includes standardising environmental considerations at all stages of decision making.

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