



# RETOUR

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ZOUHAIR BELLAHMAR



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Zouhair Bellahmar

curated by Barbara Pavan and Cinzia Pavan

11 March - 11 June 2023

Riad Les Ammonites

Azbezt, Derb El Cadi 51  
Marrakech







## **Riad Les Ammonites: maison d'hôtes...et d'art**

by Cinzia Pavan and Barbara Pavan

Starting from the famous Jema el Fnaa square, walking through the colourful Medina streets, you get captured by the buzz of the souk, to then enjoy the silence of the alleys leading to the Maison d'hôtes Riad Les Ammonites, close to the Marrakech Museum and the Ben Youssef Medersa.

A historical mansion that belonged to the *Slitine* family that in Arab means "small king". The mansion was completely renovated whilst maintaining the authenticity of Moroccan shapes and tradition. After crossing the ancient gate, you enter a peaceful oasis. Soft amber lights guide you through the corridor to the heart of the house: the patio.

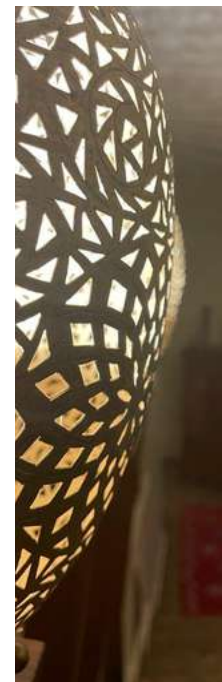
Six rooms, each with its identity, style, and soul, linked by the same theme: ammonites and belemnites that decorate the house in many spots and inspired by a trip to South Morocco. Talented crafters contributed to creating every detail: from the sinks to the fossil stone tables, to the dining room and small spa decors.



Freehand drawings became unique art pieces, starting from the chandeliers to the bedrooms where the screws of the presses used to squeeze the argan oil and the decorative supports of the caravanserais transformed into canopy beds.

Every detail is designed to offer the guest the full meaning of the term, immersed in a home environment without giving up the comforts guaranteed by the professional hospitality additionally to the architectural style of the large manor house that gives the visitor the experience of *feeling home*, never feeling like a *foreigner* but like a *traveler* rather than a simple *tourist*.

Les Ammonites DNA contains the value of the encounter – between people, communities, cultures and traditions – and the precious inheritance that leaves to everyone. Links between Italian and Moroccan design, materials that reflect the surroundings – like the black Erfoud stone – and that marry tradition and modernity. Like in the Menzeh room, with its ancient wooden ceiling decorated like the door of the built-in wardrobe; or like in the Berbere suite with its maichor decoration and the tadelakt cladding of the bathroom, evocating the multiple shades of the desert. And again, in the Zagora room where the echoes of ancient oil-producing activities and modern design meet in a fascinating *mélange*. Until you get to the Mali room, from which the carved wooden furniture and the wardrobe door recovered from the Dogon ancient granaries come.



This indistinguishable style is the reason to promote, starting in Spring 2023, an art exhibition that will be displayed in the Riad common spaces allowing the guests to learn as well as the history also about the contemporaneity through the artists' works that will rotate throughout the year. A tribute to the complex diversity – of gazes, stories, research, techniques, and materials – in which the many cultural shades of people and countries are declined; a precious opportunity for the visitor to broaden the horizon of places and people beyond what is immediately visible and recognizable.

The Riad becomes the perpetuation of the journey, cradled by the silent stillness guarded by its walls, it accompanies us to the discovery of every single artwork and allows us to regain possession of the slow meditation time and to elaborate the abundance of stimuli that our eyes encountered, finally opening us to listen to new narratives.







# RETOUR

by Barbara Pavan

I Zouhair Bellahmar's *return* looks more like a journey discovering his own other half rather than a *return*, being orphan of a coincident starting point. It is a story about acceptance, a reconciliation with that long-denied Arabic root, betrayed by name and surname - considered a weight far beyond adolescence. A journey that has little to do with Ulysses' *nostos*, a home *nostalgia* that, unlike the Greek hero, he never wanted to know. Bellahmar is rather similar to a *prodigal son* whose approaching maturity urges one to search for one's place in the world and therefore, inevitably, leads to exploring the horizon towards which to project oneself no less than the one from which one comes. And just like a *prodigal son* Morocco welcomes him, like an unacknowledged and loving father it opens its doors - really and metaphorically - enveloping him in an embrace that definitively reconciles the two souls of the artist - the European and the Arab one. No longer a foreigner in his homeland, Bellahmar discovers his land, and conquers and internalises its landscape, culture, people, on a journey that is primarily in his soul. Freed from the invisible chains of having to choose to whom to belong, he can finally draw from the vastness of two millennial cultures that are part of him.

**RETOUR** is one of the possible, essential, photographic syntheses of this path (also existential) in which the observer participates. It is not a photographic reportage, but rather the restitution of a mosaic composed through the gaze of the exile who reclaims the place and all that it contains, its depth, every detail, even the most insignificant; a methodical and meticulous process, one tile at a time, fearing to lose again the right to feel part of it.

One shot after another, the observer becomes a privileged witness of stitching the edges of a wound: here the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea meet, sometimes overlap, sometimes merge. They take form in a series of ironic female portraits, in which a burka-bed sheet underlines the centrality and beauty of the individual essence, beyond the superficiality of the aesthetic figure, without reductive labeling demeaning the uniqueness of the single. They are Italian women and girls who wear coloured burqa style fabrics, showing how easy it is to be deceived by appearances and how increasingly urgent it is to overcome the external dimension of what we observe until we discover and know its substance, an essential prerequisite to develop a critical approach to reality.

In his photographs, Bellahmar gives us back *his Morocco*, cleansed of every picturesque yielding, of every superfluous indulgence; a true portrait, sometimes raw, as only those who have an authentic love can afford to make. His hybrid gaze, the ability to access closed doors and walls into the soul of Moroccan society and culture, informs a work of photographic documentation which thus takes on the contours of a work of art: it is technique, form and content, individual expression, and narration which, however, become universal, conveying layers upon layers of further and different readings and interpretations, freed from the representative dimension alone.

Fleeting apparitions immersed in the blue of Chefchaouen, a group of children diving, a woman walking on the beach, a cat looking for food: instant shots, small details of a daily routine that preserves a familiar and domestic beauty in its normality. In Bellahmar's *Morocco we feel at home*, frame after frame we acquire small fragments of intimacy with this land, we establish a relationship that is made up of unconscious subtle vibrations in harmony with its people, with its rhythms, with its colours.

In front of these shots, *we give up the tourist weapons* and cease to be 'madly in love' with a place, because this clouds the understanding of the object of our love, robs us of the ability to see beyond our prejudices, our expectations, beyond ourselves and the baggage we carry.

Participating in the same epiphany, face to face with the marvellous variety of our humanity, we recognise the ultimate truth of a single common root which finds its real nature in its different forms.



THE EXHIBITION



**BRKZL#1**

photograph  
cm. 65 x 50  
year 2020





**BRKZL#2**

photograph  
cm. 65 x 50  
year 2020





**BRKZL#3**

photograph  
cm. 70 x 50  
year 2020







**BRKZL#4**

photograph  
cm. 65 x 50  
year 2020





## **PETITE FILLE À LA PLAGE**

photograph  
cm. 50 x 40  
year 2016





## **RÊVE**

photograph  
cm. 50 x 40  
year 2016





## **ESSENZA**

photograph  
cm. 50 x 40  
year 2022







## **PLONGER DANS LE VIDE**

photograph  
cm. 50 x 40  
year 2016





## **CHAMEAU DANS L'EAU**

photograph  
cm. 80 x 60  
year 2016









## **IL VICOLO**

photograph  
cm. 60 x 40  
year 2022







## **SACRALITÉ**

photograph  
cm. 60 x 40  
year 2022





## **ESSENCE**

photograph  
cm. 60 x 40  
year 2022





## **SPIRITO**

photograph  
cm. 60 x 40  
year 2022









# BIOGRAPHY



Zouhair Bellahmar was born in Todi in 1989. Son of Arab father and Italian mother, he has always spent his life between Italy, Morocco and France: destinations that presuppose travel and experiences that feed his which his photography. Nonetheless, the reporting nature leaves room for a situationism interchangeable with irony between East and West, South and North of the world, whose apparent diversity instead reveals coincidence and similarity, sometimes made concrete thanks to the scenographic construction.

Bellahmar approached photography more than fifteen years ago as an autodidact and already in 2011 he was contacted by the university professor in Cultural Anthropology Paolo Palmeri for the creation of the cover of the volume "Lessons in anthropology of development - part 1", published by Nuova Cultura (Rome). In 2013 he took part in the group show "Contemporanea. Painting, sculpture, photography and design" at the Palazzo del Vignola in Todi (PG) during the twenty-seventh edition of the Todi Festival directed by Silvano Spada.

In 2015 he attended the course in photographic techniques held in Perugia by Andrea Adriani, a professor of whom Bellahmar was an assistant until 2018. In the following years, in 2014, he designed the cover of Dario Cassini's book "The dictionary, Woman-Italian/Italiano-Donna" (Cairo Editore), in 2015 the solo show at UNU (Unonell'unico) on the occasion of "Rights in Todi – Human Rights International Film Festival" coordinated by Antonio Biella and Francesco Cordio, and the group show "Dalla notte all'aurora" curated by the Association Il Mosaico of Perugia.

From 2017 to 2019 he lived in Paris for reasons of artistic research and on his return he organized, together with the director of the Space Mater Gallery in Todi, the solo show "From Z to A" in which for the first time he opened his incessant photographic production in a single, large and continuous series whose name coincides with the title of the exhibition.

His contribution to a new editorial project whose author is Matteo Boetti, entitled "Reverse Cow-girl", dates back to 2021. The same year he participates in the virtual group exhibition "Guerriglia Semiologica" curated by the Perugian cultural association Trascendenza.

Bellahmar's personal project in collaboration with the anthropologist Leone Palmeri "Legami d'Arte" also dates back to 2021: an expanding initiative of a documentary nature aimed at mapping all the realities and artistic personalities of the Umbria region. "Legami d'arte" consists of video interviews and a substantial photographic apparatus produced during an intense season of studio visits.







## Riad Les Ammonites

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