



Abdallah Benanteur, **Pour Monet**, Giverny, 1983
Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm
Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

Born in 1931 in Mostaghanem, Abdallah Benanteur was brought up in an Algerian family and cultural environment, specifically enthralled by writing and illuminated manuscripts, by mystic Muslim poetry, by Andalusian music and songs. He settled in Paris in 1953.

The River and the Volcano

By Claude Lemand

Solitude and Creativity.

Benanteur is not a media-savvy, worldly or intellectual artist, clever at handling concepts and elaborating sophisticated theories, adapted to various means of communication. Nature and History fashioned him thus : solitary, independent, anxious, proud and hardworking. If he works so hard, if his graphic production is volcanic, that is his temperament : he cannot escape it, he cannot do otherwise. Strong willed, earthy, positive and optimistic, nothing can prevent him from working at what he believes to be his duty as a man and a painter, the task he must accomplish. Work is also his natural way of subduing his anguish and his anxieties, of responding to life's tragic forms and, for him as for so many other men, of responding to history's tragedy. His solitude is creative, his work is life saving, and his output is a source of hope : if Humankind is capable of beauty, it shall be capable of justice and of peace.>



Light and Light.

Lacking his native Mediterranean light, Benanteur did not seek out, unlike so many other painters, a similar, physical quality of light, in the South, in Spain or Greece ; rather, he sought out a different light, a complementary one, that of painting, of his painting. The natural ideal of his previous life environment, a ceaseless object of nostalgia, was replaced by an environment suited to his creations : he spent his summer holidays in Brittany and not in the warm and sunny climes of the South. When he paints, engraves or creates books, he isolates himself within a filtered light, whether in his painting studio or in his graphic arts workshop. When he spent four successive months of August in Italy, his eyes perceived the country's light but his vision was entranced by the light in ancient Italian paintings, which enhanced his palette from 1981 onwards.

Poetry and Artist's books.

A brilliant typographer, designer and engraver, he designed and produced his books entirely by himself, as much the work on the paper itself, as the printing of all the proofs on his hand press. Between 1961 and 1994, he created a hundred bibliophile books, on ancient and contemporary poems, from the East and the West : Muslim and Christian mystics, poems from Persia, Japan, Europe, France or Algeria : Attar, Djami, Gréban, Al-Hallaj, Misri, Rumi, Khayyam, Nezami, Saadi, Issa, Dickinson, Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Yourcenar, ... Etching became his privileged technique, on slate, lead and linoleum, then on copper and zinc. From 1994 onwards, Benanteur mostly created an exceptional and impressive group of over 900 books in a single copy, based on the texts of more than 300 poets world-wide : poems in their original language, or translated in French, or in bilingual editions (French + German, English, Chinese, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Persian or Russian, ...). He unendingly varied the sizes, layout, paper, texts (composed, incrustated, manuscript) and the illustrative techniques (watercolours, sketches, drawings, gouaches, wash drawings, embossings, original imprints different for each book, ...). These thousand and one books revealed his exceptional qualities as a book artist : his overwhelming creativity and his absolute virtuosity in the orchestration of the various components provided each work with an original reading rhythm. No twentieth century artist, nor in any other century, nor any civilization, has proved to have so much energy and imagination in the creation of so many admirable and unique books, in such a short span of time. A truly great master!>

Abdallah Benanteur, **Les larmoyants**, 2002
Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm
Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

Abdallah Benanteur, Portrait in his Library, 2007
Photo © Dahmane
Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris





BENANTEUR. **Montjoie**, 1984
Oil on canvas, 114 x 146 cm
Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

Ideology and Creativity.

The social and historical concept that Benanteur's social self has of the world and of mankind is simple, manichean and conflictual, reflecting the irreducible antagonism and warfare between two entities antithetical by their very nature : good / evil, the rich / the poor, the exploiters / the exploited, the colonizers / the colonized, the aggressors / the aggressed, the criminals / the victims, ... This concept, overly marked by a certain period's ideology, led automatically, in his paintings and in his graphic works, to sharply contrasting compositions and colours, to diptychs and polyptychs where each panel was the opposite of the other. In the facts, and from the very beginning, this worldview had very little impact on his creative self : on the contrary, the paintings and watercolours, the etchings and the imprints, the diptychs and the polyptychs are articulated in perfect harmony, like complementary images, similar and different, mirror images, indefinitely. In actual fact, his work is rather more the reflection of an idealist, humanist, and universalist vision, born of two conceptions of the world that influenced him successively, and whose categories informed him powerfully, for they correspond to his human, aesthetic and social ideal : the Sufi movement he knew as a child and as an adolescent in Algeria (poems, songs, processions, calligraphy and illuminated books) and the utopian communist movement that influenced him in the fifties in France, both of them close to that Far Eastern Buddhism, whose poets and painters he knows and admires so much (wisdom, poetry and painting : ideal landscapes and man's modest and harmonious place within nature). Benanteur would have liked to live and work in a country and during a time where that human, aesthetic and social ideal still endured: e.g. the late Middle Ages in Europe or the pinnacle of Arab-Andalusian civilization.♦♦♦

Translated from French by Ann Cremin

BENANTEUR. **L'aube**, 1997
Oil on canvas, 140 x 140 cm
Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

