

MY DOLLS SAVED ME

Laurent Danchin raises a few questions about the shamanistic art of Michel Nedjar.



above
Michel Nedjar in his St-Martin studio, Paris. ©Walter Liedjari/Bertrand Rieger (photographer).

below left
Untitled doll, 1976/1980, cloth and mixed media, 12 x 8 x 7 ins., 30 x 20 x 22 cm.

below middle
Untitled doll, 1982/1984, cloth and mixed media, 15 x 11 x 10.5 ins., 38 x 28 x 27 cm.

below right
Untitled doll, 1982/1984, cloth and mixed media, 20 x 15 x 8 ins., 51 x 38 x 20 cm. All Collection de L'Aracine, Musée d'Art Moderne Lille Métropole, photos: Philip Bernard.

Some Outsider artists are better known than others and for various reasons they benefit from a long-term reputation in that field. This is the case with Michel Nedjar (born in 1947), whose fascinating, ritual mummy dolls and fresco-like cave drawings have appeared in almost every important museum or private collection since they were first introduced in Alain Bourbonnais' 'Art Hors les Normes' or Jean Dubuffet's 'Art Brut' in the late seventies. Nedjar featured in the landmark shows *Les Singuliers de l'Art* (Paris, 1978) and *Outsiders* (London, 1979) alongside 'classics' such as Joseph Crépin, Emile Ratier or Scottie Wilson, Madge Gill, Adolf Wölfli or Martin Ramirez, and later in dozens of other collective or one-man shows throughout Europe, Japan and the USA. During this time the market price of his work increased substantially, a somewhat rare achievement for a living artist in this category.

Nedjar was a founder member of L'Aracine, the leading French Art Brut collection housed in the

Musée d'Art Moderne Lille Métropole, as well as a successful experimental film-maker who received national recognition at the Pompidou Centre, the French temple of modern and contemporary art, in 1987 (s.). Nedjar has long been a professional artist with an international career even though, being self-taught, he never followed the mainstream and is aesthetically and as a person closer to the Art Brut creators he adores than to the big stars of the contemporary art market. Whatever the case, his enigmatic and somewhat frightening art is clearly far more sophisticated than the work of Outsiders such as, for example, Domisic or Pépé Vignes, Ted Gordon or Mose T., and he represents a type of artist that no longer corresponds to the orthodox criteria of Jean Dubuffet. So, what type of artist is Michel Nedjar, to which artistic family should he be linked, and what is his true position in today's art?

Much has been written about Nedjar since Roger Cardinal's in-depth study published in



Lausanne in 1990 (s.): of his childhood in a large Jewish family in an idyllic house with a garden in a northern suburb of Paris; of the brutal figure of his father, a Sephardi tailor reminiscent of Kafka's terrible genitor; of his Ashkenazi mother and his Polish, Yiddish-speaking grandmother, who introduced Nedjar to *schmattes*, the old rags which he later adopted as material for his handmade embryonic dolls. And of his encounter with Téó Hernandez, a Mexican experimental film-maker who became his mentor in the arts; and of their subsequent travels to Morocco, India, Mexico and elsewhere, after which he felt an urgent 'need to work in magic' and hence began his artistic production around May 1976.

One event that dates back to Nedjar's youth is often mentioned also, and is supposed to have been the original trauma that later triggered his creative output: the evening when, at the age of thirteen, he stumbled upon Alain Resnais' movie

Nuit et Brouillard on television and discovered the terrifying reality of the Nazi concentration camps. 'I had two aunts who returned from Auschwitz and they told us,' recalls Nedjar. 'But words don't have the power of the image. Resnais' movie really shook me. After the Shoah, that was it: I had left Eden.' (s.) And it is a fact that, many years later, Nedjar discovered with amazement that he handled his dolls in the same way that he had seen the soldiers in the film pile up the corpses in the pits when he was a teenager.

But a closer look at Nedjar's life and work reveals aspects that do not fall within the strict sense of 'Outsider Art'. Nedjar is clearly a child of the sixties and, like others of his generation, he is imbued with the standards of the counter-culture of the beatnik or hippie era. In addition to his lengthy, adventurous travels, which opened his mind to other cultures and gave him a nomadic, multicultural view of mankind, and to his numerous

above
Untitled doll, (1980/1985, cloth and mixed media, 43 ins., 110 cm high) in Nedjar's studio. ©Michel Nedjar/Bertrand Rieger (photographer).

below left
Untitled, September 1997, mixed media on paper, 25.6 x 19.5 ins., 65 x 49.5 cm.

below middle
Untitled, 1995, mixed media on paper, 12 x 8 ins., 29.5 x 21 cm.

below right
Untitled, August 1997, mixed media on brown paper, 25 x 18 ins., 63.5 x 45 cm. All images ©Michel Nedjar.





experiments in 'underground' cinema, Nedjar, as did many of his contemporaries, tried a few drugs while he was in Essaouira, Kathmandu and Mexico ('a dazzling experience: I was in the aquarium of the cosmos'). In India, he spent some time in an ashram and on his return to Paris he lived for a couple of months in communes where gays and non-gays tried to find a way of living together. 'It really sounds like all the clichés of that period,' says Nedjar today.

This, then, is the context of the shamanistic plunge into the quasi-altered states of mind that initiated Nedjar's artistic output in the late seventies and early eighties: a phenomenon that sometimes brought the as yet inexperienced artist, who was deeply depressed at the time, close to madness. 'There comes a point', writes Cardinal, 'when his work modulates into what he calls a 'ritual of being', much like the practice of the shaman who, during the ecstatic trance, enters the transindividual state and embodies a kind of plural personality.' (4) Recalling the extraordinary day when, while making his dolls, he lost control of all human consciousness, Nedjar says: 'I had what I call a mystical feeling, when, while plunging my hands into the basin of hot water, almost a ritual bath, then soaking my doll, there was a complete loss of identity. I had become mineral, vegetable. I was in contact with something... I was very scared because I didn't have the support of any cultural structure in this. I realised something terrible and marvellous had happened. But it happened to me only once, for one second: I could never return to that state again.' He adds: 'For two years, I was engulfed by that energy, night and day, because I knew it was either that, or I had to expect an ambulance. All this I did alone; but thanks to creation, my dolls saved me.'

Almost thirty years later, considering this kind of spontaneous, semi-autistic 'rebirth' experience – a phenomenon of initiatic illumination on the path of a rather solitary hypersensitive individual – Nedjar tells with humour of his earlier psychedelic experiences while visiting Maria Sabina, a famous Mexican shaman who, as a child, had accidentally ingested hallucinogenic mushrooms. He also mentions the writings of Mircea Eliade and other anthropologists, which recount how the new shaman, often homosexual, 'has to marry another man because he is also a woman'. Nedjar's aesthetic purpose goes far beyond gender and form, to an obscure region deep within the origin of things, somewhere between life and death, definite and indefinite, burial and exhumation, where true artistic creation encounters ritual and magic. 'I prefer Cycladic art to the Greek ideal of beauty,' says Nedjar. 'I prefer all that is archaic, something that is before the finished. There is a universal invariant in the creative process.'

Nedjar's totem is the spider, a metaphor of all the mysterious links and 'objective chances' that entangle our lives (5). His favourite numbers are 3 and 7, because he was the third child in a family of seven – and his most recent dolls and drawings are signed with his date of birth, 12.10.1947 – but he seems unaware of the symbolic value of these divine numbers in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, or of the particular role of the third-born in many primitive cultures, where the third child is generally the only one allowed to assume the role of the clown or the prophet. 'I don't know much about Jewish religion, in fact,' admits Nedjar. 'After the war, my parents didn't tell me anything.'

Nevertheless, although rags and worn-out fabrics play a sacred role in many other cultures (6), Nedjar's *schmatte* dolls remind us of a typical Jewish notion: that of the *golem*, that 'unshaped matter' or 'embryonic state', 'made in secret, embroidered in the depths of the earth' (*Psalms*, 139, 15), according to its oldest biblical meaning. Quite different from



above
Untitled, 1995, mixed media on paper, 12 x 8 ins., 29.5 x 21 cm.

opposite page
Untitled doll, 2005, cloth and mixed media, 17 ins. / 43 cm high.
©Michel Nedjar/Bertrand Hugues (photographer).



Untitled doll, 2005,
cloth and mixed media,
21 ins. / 54 cm high.
©Michel Nedjar/Bertrand
Hugues (photographer).



Untitled doll, 2005,
cloth and mixed media,
14 ins. / 36 cm high.
©Michel Nedjar/Bertrand
Hugues (photographer).



above top
Untitled, 1994, mixed media on paper, 8 x 12 ins.,
21 x 29.5 cm.

above
Untitled, 1997, mixed media on cardboard, 30 x 42 ins.,
76 x 106 cm.

below
Untitled, 1994,
mixed media on
cardboard,
30 x 42 ins.,
77 x 106.5 cm.

bottom of page
Three works from a body
of 30 acquired by MAHJ
(Musée d'art et
d'histoire du Judaïsme),
Paris. ©MAHJ/Adam
Rzepka.

the later pre-Frankenstein semi-organic creature supposedly made by rabbi Yehoudah Loew of Prague in the 16th century, the Talmudic or Cabalistic use of the word seems even closer to Nedjar's inspiration, since *golem* means 'glebe' or 'the preliminary state before the creation of Adam' in the Talmud (Sanh, 38b), or 'raw matter without form or outline' in the Cabbala. 'When the museum of Jewish art asked me for the Purim dolls,' (7.) says Nedjar, 'I thought: the stray has returned, it's funny that, without seeking [this connection], it's stronger than anything. The *schmatte* is really the Jew's cuddly blanket. Fabric brought me back to the fold.'

In the same way that archaic symbolism from his origins re-emerges in his work, an earlier trauma than the discovery of the Shoah recently returned to Nedjar's memory when he tried to

understand why he so often represented birds and horned animals in his drawings. 'When I was a kid, I had a couple of turtle doves, but I was so scared of my father that I didn't dare to ask him for money to buy seed for my birds. So they died, and I felt terribly guilty because they were mine. I had nightmares for years, and even now I have this feeling: I open cages and I take out thousands of piled-up dead birds.' Reactivated by the second, the first trauma yields a blend of images where the Shoah is mixed up with earlier childhood anguish and guilt. A similar story concerns a goat his father had brought home for his children to play with, but one day they found it 'in pieces in the fridge!'

Nedjar's work, like that of many other artists today, self-taught or otherwise, reveals multiple influences from all over the world, some linked to his particular cultural background, others

to his personal interests, nurtured by his travels and his various encounters. 'It's all mixed up,' he says: 'the Shoah doll, the Mexican doll, dolls from here and there.' But because his practice stands out in contrast to the brightly lit, profanely oriented and highly conceptual art of the mainstream market – he is in a sense the exact opposite of, for example, the French installation artist Christian Boltanski – for many years Nedjar's art could find a home only in the family of Art Brut (or Outsider Art), amongst those who create or promote the obscure, modest and hidden side of contemporary art. And Nedjar proudly points out that, long before he co-founded the Aracine, his first artistic revelation was a picture by Aloïse, and that he still carries this image with him, like an icon, wherever he goes. (8.)

Today Michel Nedjar is a fully fledged artist and an accomplished man. Through his

creativity he has overcome his natural frailty and is at last able to accept every aspect of himself without contradiction. Once considered the black sheep of his family, and later influenced by a collective artistic involvement for many years, he now no longer needs the protective shield of Art Brut – and Art Brut no longer needs his active support. 'I'm fed up with tribes,' he says. 'I'm my own tribe myself now.' And so his idiosyncratic neotribal universe is now free to join artists such as Burland, Kurhájec, Sefoloshá, Syroka and many others who regress to the roots of figuration and, struggling with pseudo-archaic matter, instinctively mimic the art of primitive cultures in an effort to provide a new mythology, new rituals and a new sense of the sacred to a hypermodern state of civilisation disembodied by the digital triumph of new technologies.

below left
Untitled, 1988,
mixed media on
'tousours' paper bag,
26 x 39 ins.,
65.5 x 49 cm.

below right
Untitled, 1990,
mixed media on
cardboard,
42 x 30 ins.,
106.5 x 77 cm.

bottom
Untitled, 1997,
mixed media on
cardboard,
22 x 21 ins.,
56 x 53 cm.



1. Initiated into alternative cinema by his friend Téo Hernandez (1939–92), Nedjar has made about thirty films (see Michel Nedjar, *dix ans de cinéma, 1977–1987*, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, October 21–25, 1987. Catalogue with text by Dominique Noguez. The retrospective was later held at the Filmatoka Polska in Warsaw). A great number of his dolls were also donated to Beaubourg by Daniel Cordier and appeared in *Made in France: 1947–1997, 50 ans de création en France*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1997.

2. See *L'Art Brut*, n° 16, Lausanne, Collection de l'Art Brut, 1990 (based on interviews in May 1980 and August 1986). For a more recent approach, Michel Nedjar: *Enveloppes*, by Françoise Monnin, Iconofolio, Paris, 2006.

3. All Nedjar's quotations are from an interview at his studio on April 30, 2007.

4. *L'Art Brut*, op. cit. p. 96.

5. See Nedjar's film *What is the Spider's Dream?* (with Téo Hernandez, 1980–2). The concept of 'objective chance' (*hasard objectif*), a fundamental concept of Surrealism, comes in fact from Hegel's writings.

6. See *Shmatés, la Mémoire par le rebut*, symposium at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme, Paris, March 29–31, 2004 (<http://jaf23.free.fr/pageMasson.html>).

7. See *Poupées pourim*, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme, Paris, April 1–May 29, 2005.

8. Aloïse, *Joséphine lance des roses-rotés à Napoléon*, Museum Im Lagerhaus, St. Gallen, Switzerland. 'This work was like a guide to me,' says Nedjar, 'and completely changed the course of my life.'

Laurent Danchin is an author, art critic, art historian and curator. His most recently published book is *Art brut, l'instinct créateur*, Gallimard, Découvertes, Paris, 2006.

The exhibition *Michel Nedjar: Animals* runs from May 30, 2008 until February 22, 2009 at Gugging Art Brut Center, Austria.

