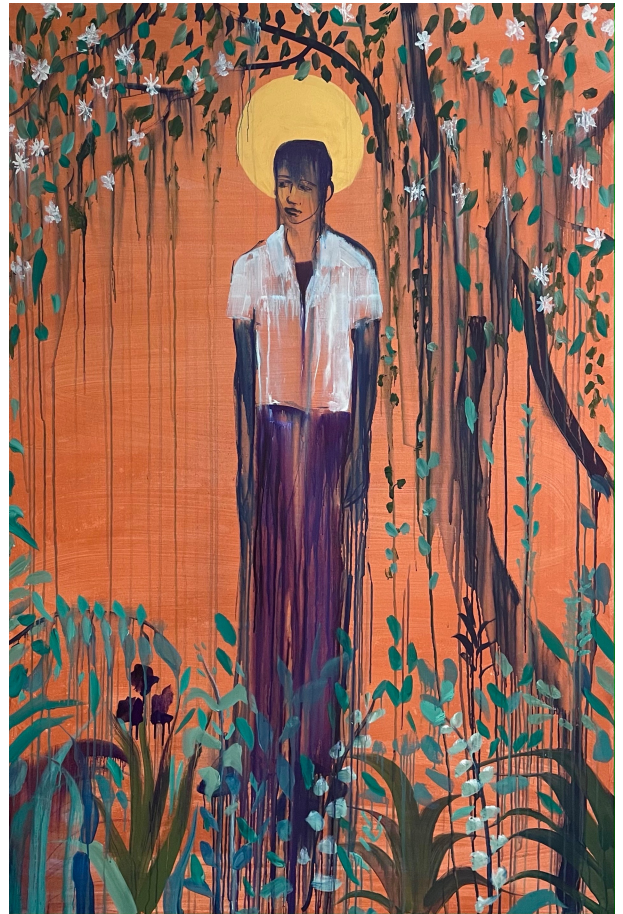


## AFIKARIS GALLERY SWAYS VISITORS THROUGH THE IMAGINARY LANDS OF MOROCCAN ARTIST OMAR MAHFOUDI'S *EL DORADO*

*Mahfoudi's first major solo exhibition in France, El Dorado brings together the latest works from his sold-out Golden painting series, first unveiled last October at 1-54 London. On view from December 11, 2021–January 11, 2022, the dozen new works will be presented as a site-specific installation pursuing the nostalgic rêverie perceptible throughout his work.*

December 11, 2021–January 11, 2022



Left. Omar Mahfoudi, *Can't Remember Anything at All*, 2021. Acrylic and ink on canvas, 180 x 150 cm. Courtesy of AFIKARIS gallery. Right. Omar Mahfoudi, *Nowhere to Rest With Nowhere to Land*, 2021. Acrylic and ink on canvas, 120 x 180 cm. Courtesy of AFIKARIS gallery.

December 8, 2021 (Paris, France) – Marking the last of a series of exhibitions this year dedicated to the emerging African art scene, **Paris-based AFIKARIS Gallery** unveils rising Moroccan artist **Omar Mahfoudi's** very first personal exhibition at the gallery and first major solo show in France. Echoing the gallery's inaugural show *Quitter la Ville* (January 9–February 10, 2021), a dialogue between Mahfoudi and Cameroonian painter Moustapha Baidi Oumarou, *El Dorado* bears witness to the conceptual and thematic evolution in the Paris-based artist's work. From December 11, 2021–January 11, 2022, the selection of a dozen unseen canvases from his acclaimed *Golden Oasis* series once again invites his viewers to immerse in his dreamy imaginary – a journey to nowhere, in search of utopia.

The legend of *El Dorado* has changed and morphed over time. That which once was a quest for a golden empire is now synonym to a search for a utopia – a metaphor for not only immense wealth, but also boundless love, thunderous success, a heaven that sits somewhere, eternally out of reach. The object of desire – this

heaven forever out of reach – has never materialized; instead, the quest for it has inspired the legend. Whether manifested in the physical or spiritual world, or held within oneself, Omar Mahfoudi (b. 1981, Tangier, Morocco)'s work poses the question – what are *you* searching for?

Inspired by the cinematography of Andrei Tarkovsky and Werner Herzog, seeped in dreamlike visual imagery and preoccupied with nature and memory, Mahfoudi takes viewers on a journey through his, and their, *El Dorado* – a trip with no destination, through endless sprawling landscapes, horizons of Japan, South America, and his native Morocco.

While the immersive installation specially conceived by the artist for the occasion – a two-meter *barque* set at the heart of the gallery space and filled with flowers – embarks visitors on the journey to this *El Dorado*, *Waiting in Merzouga* (2021) expands a mysterious and illusive landscape, emerging from the artist's few signature golden strokes. Shades of gold are coated on the canvas as a sweeping driving force – or used as tactical touches. Alongside his metallic golds are loud bursts of color, like budding flowers, and motions mirroring the forms of water or sand.

The movement of the dunes, which could also be seen as a choppy sea if not for the lone wonderer in its depths – contrasts with the stillness of the human form. Is the figure lost? Is it a ghost? Is it truly depicted, or is it imagined? Through these few visual clues, Mahfoudi, who seemingly invites his viewers into his own *rêverie*, in fact rouses them to create their own narrative, a golden desert of their own, an echo to their very own stories and approach to the world.



Omar Mahfoudi, *Waiting in Merzouga*, 2021. Acrylic and ink on canvas, 185 x 172 cm. Courtesy of AFIKARIS gallery.

A mystical ambiguity also surrounds these characters. Visually, one cannot gather race, ethnicity, nor gender, rendering them more akin to figures, sometimes shadows, than tangible individuals. Mahfoudi's evasive *somebodies* appear captured on their own quests, their ceaseless Odysseys – languidly wandering the expanses of land and water on horseback, on boat, or on foot. The *incertitude* that weaves through his work recalls that of *El Dorado*, a known utopia, shared across centuries and cultures, yet one that exists without a specific geography, people, nor meaning.

As viewers see the characters, they are brought to ponder on the where's, why's, and if's of their search. With no response to be found in Mahfoudi's boundless horizons, one cannot but wonder whether these characters truly exist, or whether they are a pure creation of the mind, a reflection of oneself in a golden oasis.

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## NOTES TO EDITORS:

### About Omar Mahfoudi:

Omar Mahfoudi (b. 1981, Tangier, Morocco) is a multidisciplinary artist who works and lives in Paris. In his art, he reinvents and rewrites the history of human beings through emotions.

Mainly working with acrylic and ink, he plays with the movement of the matter created on the surface of the canvas. His oases, timeless territories bathed in a distant light and conducive to *rêverie*, are nourished and enriched by his eclectic influences: from the *Amazônia* series by photographer Sebastião Salgado, to the prints of Katsushika Hokusai. In his most recent work, the color gold, evocative to the desert of his Moroccan heritage, impregnates his imagery with heat and mystery.

Omar Mahfoudi's work has been featured in numerous international fairs such as AKAA (Paris); 1-54 London (London); and ARCO (Madrid). *El Dorado* will be the artist's first solo exhibition in a gallery in France.

### About AFIKARIS Gallery, Paris:

Founded in 2018 by Florian Azzopardi, AFIKARIS Gallery started as an online platform and showroom specialized in the work of both emerging and established artists from African and its diaspora, before opening a dedicated Paris-based gallery space in 2021. Engaged in promoting cross cultural and disciplinary exchange, AFIKARIS acts as a platform for artists to engage with the wider public. A mirror onto and space for reflection on the contemporary African art scene, it provides artists with a space to address the topical local and international issues at the heart of their art.

AFIKARIS's curated program includes group and solo exhibitions; art fairs; publications; as well as institutional partnerships.

Omar Mahfoudi, *El Dorado* | December 11, 2021—January 11, 2022

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