TEMPLON

ABDELKADER BENCHAMMA

DAPPER DAN, November, 2026

ABDELKADER BENCHAMMA

talks to
KIM LAIDLAW

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAXIME VERRET

Creating sprawling, abstracted forms, French artist Abdelkader Benchamma immerses the viewer in a shifting, cosmic landscape. His chosen medium is drawing, but this often exceeds the limits of the frame to extend over exhibition walls or become large-scale installations.

Across his oeuvre, Benchamma references age-old human preoccupations: how we interpret the skies, seek meaning in what we observe and question our place within the universe. His poetic works resonate in both physical and psychological terms, unsettling perception through illusion, ambiguity and pareidolia.

Movement is central to these dynamic pieces—from the process, which Benchamma describes as action painting, to the way the viewer navigates through them. Indeed, the viewer's journey is key to monumental frescoes such as that created for Event Horizon, his solo exhibition at the Espai d'Art Contemporani de Castelló in Spain, which was on show at the time of our conversation, as well as to Grotte Céleste, the mural for a Grand Paris Express train station due to be unveiled this winter. And the works themselves seem to oscillate like living matter, or a night sky filled with scintillating stars in the case of Stella Terrae, painted on the ceiling of the Payne Whitney Mansion ballroom in New York as part of Benchamma's autumn 2026 residency at the Villa Albertine.

To discuss these themes, we visited the artist in his high-ceilinged studio in Montpellier's old town, a space stretching over several connecting areas. Benchamma works on multiple pieces at a time here, moving from one desk to another, from one wall to the next, constantly flowing between ideas. Images from medieval manuscripts are pinned alongside Photoshopped screenshots and torn fragments of his drawings, and his work extends beyond the paper onto the studio walls, just as it does in his exhibitions.



KIM LAIDLAW: How would you describe yourself and your practice?

ABDELKADER BENCHAMMA: I am an artist who has been drawing for several years and who is interested in the possibilities that drawing offers by taking it towards other fields. I think drawing is meant to be in dialogue with other media, to make videos, installations, sometimes even writing. It's still drawing, but it can become a mural, a painting, an animated film, or remain a work on paper, in a small, traditional format.

KL: So how do we define drawing? At what point does it stop being a drawing and become a painting?

AB: Drawing is often defined by its support: it's on paper or on a wall, and by the fact that the background is left blank. But that's not always true, because with watercolour, for example, you can create a background—and perhaps that's at the heart of the medium: it's so fluid that it can move in all sorts of different directions.

KL: And you make drawings on very different scales—from small works on paper to monumental murals.

AB: A lot of people think I only make large-scale works, that I only do murals, and when I make smaller works, they say, "Oh, that's for the galleries, to be sold". But I need both and I love doing both. Installation has become more important, but I also need the studio practice. It has a different temporality: drawings can stay on the wall for months while I experiment. For installations, there's an urgency—we had 16 days to do everything in Spain [for the exhibition at Espai d'Art Contemporani de Castelló]. Whereas the studio is a special place for me, [where I am] surrounded by objects and sources of inspiration.

KL: How has your practice changed over the years? For example, you have recently introduced colour into your work, whereas previously it was predominantly black and white.

AB: I'd been trying to bring colour into my work for years, but I couldn't achieve anything as abstract or as powerful as black and white, because in terms of contrast you can't get more radical than that. I like the abstraction of black and white. The brain immediately associates colour with recognisable things—blue becomes water, brown becomes a tree, green becomes vegetation.

In the exhibition Signs and Wonders [at Templon in Paris, 2026], the large wall at the back looked like a flow of black and white from a distance. It was only when you got closer that you noticed the purple. So, the colour began to animate the work in small touches, and I liked that because it introduced a kind of uncertainty into one's perception. You had to come closer for it to reveal itself.

Then there was the series of tree drawings I showed, which were inspired by a Photoshopped image I found online. Someone had taken a photograph of a forest and manipulated the trees so that they appeared to spell out, "There is only one God, and Allah is God". I found it fascinating because it connected with traditions of magical or sacred trees across religions and belief systems, whilst also speaking to the way the internet—just like the Middle Ages—can produce false images, miracles and beliefs. It was also a critique of this underlying idea of "my religion is stronger than yours".

That brought me to calligraphy, something I'd always avoided because it's not a tradition I know. My references were comics, writing or action painting. My work has always been fairly universal: I could be German or Swedish; it doesn't necessarily point back to my origins or my own history. So it was a way of telling myself that I could make work about calligraphy without being pigeonholed, because I've made enough work for people to know that's not all my practice is.

KL: And your art has never been particularly autobiographical.

AB: No, and it's not connected to the politics of my own background—colonialism or things like that. Those subjects interest me enormously but there are already artists who work on those issues extremely well.

I'm drawn to other things—things that resonate with me. I also think an exhibition should resonate with the viewers; it should unsettle them. I'm more interested in opening up other states of consciousness that lead to different kinds of reflection, rather than making something political. That said, there can still be political inflections within the work.

KL: Your drawings move beyond the frame, becoming murals on exhibition walls. We can see the speed and physicality of your gestures. How do you choreograph these movements?

AB: There's a physical dimension: it's the body, about finding ways for the line to become a gesture, and for the gesture to become a line. There's a recurring idea in my work of flow, movement, matter—something that's constantly shifting. Everything is moving, the different layers are moving, even if they appear static. I really like the idea of the work as a





living organism: something multiform that's always in motion, where something is always happening. There is a very strong action painting dimension to it, and something quite performative as well.

KL: And do you ever approach the process as a performance?

AB: No, when I work like that, it's really for technical reasons. The question is: how do you create a sense of movement across a very large space? It's incredibly difficult. You can create a dynamic on a sheet that's a metre wide, but on a three-metre wall it's much more complicated. You have to find a way of working with your body and your gestures to make that happen.

I had that in Spain [for the exhibition at Espai d'Art Contemporani de Castelló]. I'm really pleased with that project because the wall was enormous—30 metres long. I'd draw something, step back thinking I'd made this huge gesture, and realise it was almost nothing. So I told myself: *you have to draw lines that are three metres long.* That was a real challenge.

KL: Do you enter a particular state once you start working?

AB: The difficult thing is that the installation process can be very fragmented. For example, in Castelló, I was working with six people every day, so I was constantly being interrupted. So I access very small moments of letting go, of energy, sometimes even a kind of ecstasy, but also moments of stress and exhaustion. They happen in short bursts, maybe 20 minutes at a time. I put my headphones on and listen to music.

KL: And what role does music play in your process? Because there is a musicality to your work.

AB: I work a lot with music. It helps me to get my body into a rhythm, to work with a pulse. I listen to a lot of classical music or repetitive music: Philip Glass is perfect, because his work is built around repeating loops that evolve. There is this question of movement and repetition: he takes a musical cycle and repeats it, then introduces a variation, and it continues to repeat while a new instrument appears. I think that also puts me into a kind of slight trance.

KL: And does music ever appear in the actual work?

AB: In Castelló, I worked with a musician, and we created sound for the exhibition. I was very happy with the result. The challenge was to create a sound environment that, like the drawings, played with the idea of appearance and perception. You're not sure if you can see the drawing—is there colour? You're not sure if you can hear something—is there sound, or is it just the ventilation system running? And just as you notice it, it stops. And then suddenly you hear something lyrical, with violins appearing in the space. So, at that point you realise there is music. Then it stops, and something else begins.

KL: When you were interviewed on Radio France in 2022, you said that you worked with a thermodynamic vocabulary. Can you tell us more about this idea?

AB: At that time—less so today, although it's still the same in many ways—I was thinking about drawing in a way where I'm not thinking about forms, but movement. Something that evaporates, disappearing into the air; something that solidifies and becomes layers; becomes magma; something that flows like water; that becomes hard, develops concretions, divides. I wanted things to feel solid, dense, as if the material was tightening. I was thinking in terms of forces like that.

KL: We still see these flows and movements, which continue to evolve, in your recent works. And in your mural for the Grand Paris Express, the public themselves will move through the work as they travel through the train station. Did you approach things differently with that in mind?

AB: Yes, very much, because that's also what is great about in situ works: I make sketches beforehand, but the work is created completely within the space itself. And it has to work from every perspective. We really thought about how people would arrive and experience the work. At the first escalator, there is a very large wall. So we designed that from the bottom all the way to the top, so that as people arrive and go down, they discover a drawing that rises above them, creating a kind of vertigo through the scale of the work. And you think: *what is this?*

KL: So people will encounter a sublime experience on their daily commute.

AB: I hope people will experience it like that—as though they're taking a fantastic journey into a kind of cave. And actually, for this work, I was very connected to prehistoric art and cave paintings.

KL: To continue with this idea of the viewer's experience, and what they feel, I'm wondering if you are communicating something pessimistic,

optimistic, or something in between? I'm also thinking of the apocalyptic quality present in some of your works, and your participation in the Apocalypse exhibition at the BnF in Paris in 2025.

AB: That's an interesting question. I know that some people might see something quite apocalyptic in the train station—as if something has been destroyed, as if the fresco itself has been damaged. There are also things that are quite violent, precisely because there is this action painting aspect.

I was surprised by the amount of freedom I had for a permanent artwork that will become part of a station. The freedom of the gesture. In some places, there are almost just marks, splashes of paint and colour; in others, it becomes much more detailed. But there is something quite strange about it, while at the same time it's also quite sublime and contemplative.

I would like the visitor to feel happy discovering this station but also unsettled by encountering something they can't easily categorise. We live in a time when we're overwhelmed by images. We have the impression we've seen everything, that we know everything. It's difficult to be surprised. I would like people to think: *What is this? Where am I? I don't even know if I like it.* And not knowing whether you like something is fine.

If there are a few people—children or others—who take the time to sit down just to look at it, I would be happy, because I would have given them something. I didn't go to exhibitions as a child, and I think I would have loved to experience something like this. So people who might not otherwise encounter art can still have that experience. That means a lot to me.

KL: Your project *Stella Terrae* is a monumental ceiling painting in the ballroom at the Villa Albertine in New York. The idea of reading the stars is something that runs through a lot of your work—and I believe it is present here too?

AB: Yes, absolutely. That's really what it's about. I'm drawing on the tradition of celestial map frescoes. But rather than creating a new celestial map—a Zodiac map or a map of today's galaxy—it's more a kind of exploration, not exactly a reinterpretation, but a journey through the history of celestial maps that have existed across the world and throughout different eras.

It's also a way of moving beyond our very Western, very urban representation of the cosmos, because there are Chinese maps dating back to 400 BC, Egyptian maps, and so on. It's a kind of journey through what we could call the collective memory of humanity, through this history.

There's also a contemporary dimension today with the colonisation of the sky—with the way the heavens are becoming a new frontier to conquer and are also becoming saturated and polluted: there are satellites everywhere, for example. And then there are the new narratives that have emerged around the sky—for example, the UFO footage that Trump declassified…

KL: So there is a contemporary, political dimension, too?

AB: Yes, a bit. But it's also about a very human question: are we alone or not? When we look up at the sky, are we hallucinating? Humans have always projected things onto the heavens. In the past, people saw comets, monsters, dragons…

KL: And what role does movement play in this ceiling piece or in your murals?

AB: They're murals, but they're also matter in motion. Over time, through trying to describe and write about the work, I arrived at the word "organism". It's the best way I have found of describing my installations. They're like a kind of organism.

I like that word because an organism is something you recognise but can't quite identify. It's geological, vegetal, it's something else entirely. It's movement; it's cosmic. It's an organism because it also carries the idea of being alive in the sense that it's constantly growing—I never know how far I will go. Even when I begin an installation, I love the fact that I don't know where it will end. At a certain point, it's the drawing itself that tells me it's finished.





