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canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

THE CUTTING EDGE ISSUE II

JANANNE AL-ANI SHOJA AZARI ZOULIKHA BOUABDELLAH LATIFA ECHKACH MOUNIR FATMI

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TAKING *A STAND*

ZOULIKHA BOUABDELLAH

PROFILE

Over the past five years Zoulikha Bouabdellah has developed into a truly multimedia artist, working with photography, video, sculpture, drawings and installations and delving deep into herself to find subjects close to her heart. **Claudia Barbieri Childs** meets the artist whose works revisit gender issues and questions of race and identity.



hat Zoulikha Bouabdellah strives for, she says, is to continuously seek the common thread in humanity that links people across divides of religion, gender and culture. She taps into history and universal experiences, inviting her audiences to engage with an art that rejects intellectualism and can be appreciated on many levels. Sometimes the result is not what she had originally intended, but, she maintains, “Paradoxically, through my transgressions, I try to tie the bonds again.”

Her second participation at the Pompidou Centre through the *Airs de Paris* exhibition in 2007 was a seminal moment. “It was the 30th anniversary of the Pompidou Centre and my 30th birthday and the stars were all aligned in my favour. It was a turning point in my career,” she smiles. Indeed, *Airs de Paris* led to an invitation to take up a three-month residency at Amherst College in Massachusetts, one of the most prestigious liberal arts schools in the USA. There, thrust into a campus bubbling with the intellectual and political frustrations of the Bush era, Bouabdellah was exposed to some of her most revelatory and formative experiences. Amazed by the multicultural mix and exchange of ideas, she experienced firsthand the impact that the Afghanistan and Iraq wars had – and are still having – on American society. Two videos resulted – *Black and White 1* and *Black and White 2*. The first featured footage downloaded from an American military website and taken from a helicopter, along with recordings of bombings in Iraq. In the background, male voices discuss the choice of a target. Over these, a lullaby plays. Bouabdellah also superimposed two boxed films, side by side, of hands playing a piano. There is an explosion. The target has been hit. The whole thing has an unreal, videogame quality to it. But, she says, “It’s not a videogame. People are getting killed.”

In the second video, a beautiful unveiled Arab woman hesitatingly sings the American anthem in heavily accented English while moving her hands in the ritualistic motions of Islamic prayer mode. In the background, aerial maps from Google Earth, on close inspection, show various areas in Iraq. The multi-layering of image, sound and gesture combine into a strong commentary on the mixing of religion, geography and culture.

Previous spread: Enluminure. 2010. Installation: 10 modified prayer mats and 10 pairs of golden shoes with three plastic heads with veils and three plastic chests with the belly dancer’s bras. 70 x 120 cm each. © Zoulikha Bouabdellah, Courtesy La B.A.N.K, Collection Nadour, Rüdiger K Weng.



The Kiss (Le Baiser). 2008–09. Sculpture with glossy white paint on wood. 350 x 120 x 30 cm. © Zoulikha Bouabdellah. Courtesy La B.A.N.K, winning project for Le Meurice Prize for Contemporary Art 2008. Collection Le Meurice.



**“Paradoxically, through
my transgressions, I try to
tie the bonds again.”**

Hobb, 2009. Installation: Peach
to black with glossy paint on
steel or Plexiglas. 10 signs
approximately 350 x 350 cm
each. © Zoulikha Bouabdellah.
Photography by Haider Yousuf.



Croisée. 2005. Video still. Five minutes. © Zoulikha Bouabdellah. Courtesy La B.A.N.K.



Ni, ni, ni. 2007. C-print. Triptych, 50 x 50 cm each. © Zoulikha Bouabdellah. Courtesy La B.A.N.K.



ENFORCED DIRECTIONS

Born in Moscow in 1977 to Algerian parents who were students of art and documentary film, Bouabdellah soon returned to Algeria where her mother became first a curator and then Director of the National Museum of Fine Arts. In 1994, amidst an increasingly violent Islamic fundamentalist insurgency which targeted the intellectual and cultural elite, the family took refuge in France and Bouabdellah has been living there ever since.

Trained at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Arts de Cergy in Paris, Bouabdellah adopted video as her primary medium, inspired by the work of French-born artist Orlan, Canadian-born Michèle Waquant and American Bill Viola. "It was an incredibly stimulating school, and very radical, but one could easily lose one's way," she laughs. "[Algerian-born French painter and graphic artist] Jean-Michel Alberola once gave a seminar and I showed him a series of paintings I had made of women in despair, a Sabine [an Italic tribe which lived in ancient Italy] women theme. He told me they looked like they had just burnt a chicken – a total failure."

Fresh out of art school in 2002, Bouabdellah hit the international circuit with an invitation to participate in the Biennale of Contemporary African Art in Dakar, Senegal. In October 2008, *La Pucelle*

(the maid), a self-portrait bust made with gold-leaf, won the inaugural Prix Meurice for Contemporary Art, a \$13,500 prize that seeks to promote young artists in France. In 2009 and in collaboration with American art historian and curator Carol Solomon, Bouabdellah was also among the three winners of the inaugural Abraaj Capital Prize, a \$200,000 award (given to each of the winning pairs) which aims to build relationships between international curators and artists from the Middle East and North Africa. Bouabdellah's installation, *Walk on the Sky, Pisces*, which showcased at the 2009 Art Dubai fair, evokes the constellation Pisces, picked out with LEDs in a three-dimensional space bound by an aluminium ceiling and a mirrored floor on which the viewer walks. The work features multiple semiotic references, from the geometric star pattern of Islamic art and the ancient Arab science of astronomy to the legendary story of King Solomon's glass floor, which the Queen of Sheba mistook for a pool of water, lifting her skirts and revealing her legs.

CHANGING SCENES

I meet Bouabdellah in her studio, a loft in a historic former warehouse on the waterfront of the Bassin de la Villette, a canal dock in northeast Paris that has been converted into artist studios. Once a gritty industrial suburb, the area has gone the gentrified way of New York's Greenwich Village.

Just down the road is the hip new Centre 104, a city-hall-sponsored cultural and exhibition space converted from the former municipal undertakers' service and coffin factory.

Bouabdellah's diary is more than full, but for three hours we plunge into her creative universe, and it's hard to keep up. Solicited on all sides, she spent a month in Ramallah completing ArtSchool Palestine's 2009/09 residency programme, organised in cooperation with the Al-Hoash Gallery. "I would have loved to have stayed longer in Ramallah," she says, "it's difficult to imagine how people live on a daily basis given what they have to put up with. When I first arrived there I was shocked and all I could do was cry." The programme culminated in *The Other Shadow of the City*, an exhibition at Jerusalem's Arab Bank in October 2009. Deriving inspiration from the city's shifting urban structure, the exhibition showcased newly commissioned works by 26 international Contemporary artists working in varied media.

Palestinian Stars used original film posters dating from the heyday of Egyptian cinema in the 1940s and 1950s, Bouabdellah kept movie titles such as *Forbidden Love*, *Stop Crying* and *Passion and Vengeance* but reworked the posters. She replaced the actors with ordinary Palestinians and gave the credits to Jerusalem; in doing so, she allowed for entirely different implications. "These films represent the golden age of Egyptian cinema which



"I wanted to trigger nostalgia [through *Palestinian Stars*] for a sense of pride that was once prompted by these films and which has now been lost."

Assez Couler des Larmes (left) and Amour et Vengeance (right). Both from the Palestinian Stars series. 2009. Posters. Production Art School Palestine. © Zoulikha Bouabdellah. Courtesy La B.A.N.K.

allowed the Arab world to shine," she says, "I wanted to trigger nostalgia for a sense of pride that was once prompted by these films and which has now been lost. These film titles are transposed into a Palestinian context and instead of being love stories, they become about war, conflict and destruction."

Bouabdellah is concerned with issues that have a political dimension, but her work goes beyond the political. Her research has led her to texts concerning Bayt Al-Hikmah, (House of Wisdom), the university founded in the ninth century in Baghdad by the Caliph Harun Al-Rashid. It was a time, Bouabdellah says, when "people would come and exchange knowledge and there would be a process of mutual enrichment." For her video, *Croisée*, she was inspired by *Kitab Al-l'tibar* (the Book of Learning by Example), the 12th-century autobiography of the Syrian prince and diplomat Usamah Ibn-Munqidh. The book addresses the structure of Islamic society in the 12th century and the Muslim stance towards the Christian crusaders who had come to the Middle East. Struck by Ibn-Munqidh's forbearance and understanding, Bouabdellah went to Syria and visited the areas in which Ibn-Munqidh had witnessed events, in an attempt to achieve a greater understanding of his experiences.

In *Croisée*, a young woman (Bouabdellah), wearing a white veil, lies on an immaculate white pillow and looks at the camera. Slowly, deliberately, she lowers the veil and, grimacing in pain, extracts beads from her mouth one by one, fol-

lowed at last, by a cross hanging from a rosary. With many layers of possible interpretation and multiple religious crossovers, *Croisée* is provocative, graceful and wryly ironic. And it is on this register that Bouabdellah's work is at its most powerful. *Croisée* was the second video she showed in Paris, and in every way was a substantial follow-up to her first, *Dansons*, a wonderfully provocative belly-dance, veiled in a coin-spangled tricolour, to the slow, sensuous strains of the *Marseillaise*, part of the *Africa Remix* show at the Pompidou Centre in 2005. "I am more interested in communicating an idea as opposed to the technique and process," she says, "I am not particular about the 'perfect' image. For me the most interesting part of the creative process is the conception – I love to find ideas, think, reflect, read and research, but I detest the execution! Still, ideas have to be concretised – that's the task of the artist."

FINDING LOVE

In between, there was Bouabdellah's second month-long show, *Hobb* (Arabic for love) at her Paris gallery, La B.A.N.K, in September 2009. Love is a theme that she explores repeatedly, in numerous ways and on many levels. In October 2009, Bouabdellah showed her sculpture *Le Baiser* (the kiss) in La Cour Carrée of the Louvre, as part of the FIAC Contemporary art fair. Later that month and during November, she participated in *Mechanisms of Love*, a group show at The Fondation Guerlain

on the Champs Élysée, with *Cherie* – multiple variations of red lacquer on paper featuring the Arabic word for beloved – what Bouabdellah describes as anti-calligraphy.

In *Hobb*, large molten lava canvases, red dribbles of abstracted calligraphy on black coruscated surfaces, conceived and executed during the Amherst residence, take up a large part of the ground floor. In the basement, a video revisits the *Kama Sutra*, with calligraphic couplings of *Hobb* gracefully entwined in varied positions and movements of sexual acts. Elsewhere, a set of Plexiglas jigsaw puzzles render homage to white female tourists, who, dressed in incongruous red bikinis, offer aid to exhausted black refugees washed up on a Canary Island beach. The flatness and blankness speak volumes. "In the context of what's going on in the world now, the crisis, the concerns about the planet," she says seriously, "I am taking refuge in the world of love, which is the only true value that unites people and doesn't come from a selfish point of view." 🇵🇸

For more information visit www.bankgalerie.com Zoulikha Bouabdellah will have a solo show in Dubai's Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde from 14 June–15 August. For more information visit www.ivde.net