

Review: Marrakech Biennale

BY JENNIFER PIEJKO MAY 7, 2016

It seemed inhospitable at first for a contemporary exhibition: Marrakech, after all, is a hot-blooded territory belonging to—at points politically, culturally, colonially—the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean. Sheltered within red walls, the city's sixth biennial—"Quoi De Neuf Là," casual French for "What's up?" and here interpreted as "Not New Now"—took place inside oases of olive groves (the Menara Pavilion); exquisite quarters (El Bahia Palace); elegant ruins (El Badii Palace); archaeological gems housed inside the historical Dar Si Saïd Museum, tucked away deep inside the byzantine medina; and the vaults of the Koutoubia Mosque.

Curator Reem Fadda assembles a rich tangle of political materialisms, dispersed African modernisms, and curiosities made of nation building, a concept that's either antiquated or an inevitable 21st century conclusion. Sites are within walking distance of each other, though one could hitch a ride by camel, motorbike, pink 1960s public bus, or patchwork taxi in disrepair, all sharing the same loosely defined road.

Rooted in foundations of Islamic art, the Casablanca School produced Maghreb modernism, a style privileging nonrepresentation and graphic geometry. Principals of the 1966 Casablanca Group are reunited in the extravagantly ornamented alcoves on the courtyard of El Bahia. Farid Belkahia, a lifelong resident of Marrakech (1934–2014), led the School of Fine Art in Casablanca. Postcolonial aesthetics, the result of both his education in Paris and his established family's extensive collection of traditional Moroccan artisanry, are bent into his bold organic abstractions, molded in copper, wax, and the region's richly tanned leathers. Mohammed Melehi, still painting in Marrakech and Tangier, presents a series of sunny canvases in a candy palette, fizzy expressionist panels and color-blocked rainbows similar in feeling to the nearby work of Mohammed Chabâa, whose traditional canvases host brazen forms, with conceptual underpinnings drawn from Frantz Fanon and Henri de Saint-Simon. Though established by French authorities in 1945, the Casablanca School was remodeled by its artists in 1964 to reflect their newfound autonomy—both political and aesthetic. Yto Barrada's *Appliqué Majdoub Flag*, 2016, uses lines written by 16th-century Maghreb poet Abderrahman al-Majdoub in flags pastiched from bourgeois Moroccan settings.

The visual history of the African diaspora is annotated through the inclusion of three African-American artists, two of whom were born in the 1930s: Mississippi-raised Color Field painter Sam Gilliam shows vast draped canvases saturated in a gradient of color washes. And the late Al Loving, who also translated painting into sculpture, challenged Minimalism's exclusions of his racial and sociopolitical categorization. His heavily textured, loosely woven hanging works appear like canvases ravaged by the poverty and violence that the dominant aesthetics of the latter half of the 20th century dismissed. David Hammons, born a decade later than Gilliam and Loving, includes his politically altered version of the American flag, in which its traditional colors are replaced with the Pan-African trio of red, green, and black.

Without white exhibition walls to fortress them, the works in "Quoi de Neuf Là" confront their intricate historical sites. The Otolith Group's neatly condensed film *In the Year of the Quiet Sun*, 2013, considers the chronicle of the postage stamp as a map of postcolonial image compression. Lebanese artist Khalil Rabah's looping, emotive conceptual videos, shown on box monitors among the relics inside the near fossilized Dar Si Said, exercise the tools that construct nationalism and social identity, proposing objects to write these narratives as seemingly arbitrary as the taxonomy we already use. Screened in the catacombs underneath the massive Koutoubia Mosque, *KWASSA KWASSA*, 2015, a poetic documentary by SUPERFLEX, traces the depleted political history of Mayotte, a small island off Madagascar that wistfully returned itself to France as a colony in 2014 and is now part of the EU.

What does it mean to participate in a modern state, and what does the state owe to its own artistic culture, its evolving forms of citizenship, and those participating in its society outside of its own borders? The exhibition was dedicated to Leila Alaoui, a Moroccan photographer and activist who died from wounds sustained in a terrorist attack in Burkina Faso earlier this year. A tragedy's binds keep art alive a little longer.