

Marrakech Biennale 6: Various Venues

BY JENS HOFFMAN APRIL 9, 2016



Al Loving, *Untitled*, c. 1975, mixed media on canvas, 96 x 96 inches

Nothing is older than our longing for the new. It's a paradox that modernism has wrestled with ever since Ezra Pound famously declared: 'Make it new'—signalling the dawn of an era guided by ideals of infinite intellectual progress, constant artistic innovation and limitless technological expansion. Yet, we have also learned that history is made by those who oppose its trajectory. Ruptures are necessary to reorient ourselves in a world guided less by truth than by speculation, anxiety or the unknown. Now, in the age of the Anthropocene, we might need to rethink our relationship with the new and the next. The Marrakech Biennial 6, entitled 'Not New Now', proposes just this kind of re-evaluation of our faith in perpetual progress.

The Marrakech Biennial began in 2004 as a small arts festival and has steadily become one of the most significant exhibitions outside the North American and Western European axes, connecting and representing an often-overlooked territory between sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world. The sixth edition, organized by Guggenheim Abu Dhabi curator Reem Fadda, revolves around a set of fairly open-ended themes, including but not limited to: abstraction, civic responsibility, resistance, decolonization and defeat. Ten historical sites are used to present a variety of works by artists mostly from the Arab world, Africa and their diasporas, thus leaving out many of the regions more commonly presented in other global biennials.

The two main exhibition venues—the El Badii Palace, built in the 16th century as a home for Sultan Ahmad ai-Mansur, and the stunning 19th-century El Bahia Palace, with its vast courtyards and gardens—offer a dynamic display of artworks, from large, site-specific installations to intimate historical displays. The Ghana-born and Nigeria-based artist El Anatsui created a monumental metallic tapestry (*Kindred Viewpoints*, 2016) to cover one of El Badii Palace's facades, poetically reflecting the urban plan of the host city. In another site-specific intervention at El Badii, Moroccan artist Fatiha Zemmouri wedged a gigantic polystyrene and plaster meteorite (*Sheltered...from Nothing*, 2016) between two of the palace's outdoor walls, as if it had fallen from the sky.

In contrast to El Badii's large-scale works, the smaller presentations at El Bahia feel more intimate, highlighted by a sequence of rooms that set up a conversation among the intensely colourful paintings of the Moroccan artists Farid Belkhaia, Mohammed Chabaa and Mohammed Melehi (part of a larger display of the radical Casablanca School of Fine Arts, mostly active in the 1960s and '70s) and a group of African American artists exploring politics and abstraction via colour and textiles, such as Tupelo native Sam Gilliam and the Detroit-born Al Loving. One of the most intriguing moments is an exhibition-within-the-exhibition curated by Omar Berrada, which focuses on the life and work of the acclaimed filmmaker, writer and cartoonist Ahmed Bouanani, one of the most important artists to emerge after Morocco attained its independence from France, who recently passed away. The display successfully unites material from Bouanani's archive and library, including several original drawings, with a number of videos, photographs and tapestries by artists such as Yto Barrada, Touda Bouanani, Ali Essafi, Mohssin Harraki, Sara Ouhaddou and Juan Asfs Palao to speak about the remembrance and reverence of culture.

Another significant discovery is the work of Moroccan artist Khalil El Ghrib, whose fragile, ephemeral and beautiful objects, made mostly of dirt, rocks and string, function as meditations on death and obsolescence in a commoditized society. Equally remarkable and unexpected is the presentation by Jeddah-based artist Dana Awartani, whose work explores the geometrical principles of Arabic arts and crafts to reveal their highly developed philosophical meanings. Awartani's work consists of a series of octahedrons, dodecahedrons and icosahedrons made in Moroccan artisanal wood veneer at workshops in Marrakech by the artists with support from local woodworkers. Awartani has suspended them within large glass cases, to make it look as if they are hovering in the gallery space.

The Marrakech Biennial 6 maintains a timely, strong, yet not overbearing curatorial premise, though it's one that could have been a bit tighter or more thoroughly elaborated at times (no curatorial essay or catalogue accompanied the exhibition). But the show does afford the discovery of a number of artists lesser-known to Western audiences in a careful and multi-layered installation that allows for meaningful dialogues between the works, creating a space for both reflection and surprise—something that has become increasingly rare in an art world more accustomed to quick consumption. Located within one of the most liberal, diverse and open-minded countries in the Arab world, the biennial stands as a testament to the possibility for co-existence between various cultures, religions, ethnicities and histories.