

Decoding those barely audible groans

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9

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Zoulikha Bouabdellah uses various mediums to investigate social norms, taboos and expectations, especially in relation to women

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Visitors to Zoulikha Bouabdellah's latest exhibition in Dubai are greeted by a large illuminated billboard that says *Any Resemblance to Actual Persons, Living or Dead, is Purely Coincidental*. By using this disclaimer, borrowed from the film world, as the title of her show, the artist invites viewers to enter a fictional world that she has created, while also acknowledging that the stories she is telling reflect the realities. By blurring the lines between truth, reality and fiction in her works, Bouabdellah examines the schisms that exist between our public and private selves and between what is said and what remains unspoken.

The artist was born in Algeria, moved to Paris in her teens and is now based in Morocco. Her art bears the cross-cultural influences in her life and the tensions between her Western upbringing and her North African and Islamic heritage. She is an Abraaj Art prizewinner and works with various media. In her latest show, she has used film, sculpture, installation, collage and drawing on paper to investigate social norms, taboos and expectations, especially in relation to women, and to voice her feelings about the changing socio-political scenario in the Arab world.

The irony of the show's title becomes evident with the first set of works called *Grimace*. This is a series of 14 self-portraits done on black paper. Because her face is distorted by a grimace, the drawings look like masks. Glittering red fabric oozing out of cuts in the paper adds to the drama. The reference here is to the dual connotations of grimace. It is a spontaneous way of expressing something for which we have no words; but "grimace" is also the French for mask, which means to hide and is used by actors to convey fictional emotions.

"The recent revolutions in the Arab world filled us with hope. But that hope has not been fulfilled. As a woman I feel frustrated and fearful about the future and do not know how to react. So, this grimace is a deep and spontaneous expression of my innermost feelings. Making a face or wearing a mask are different ways to tell a story. And this work merges the reality that comes from deep within with the façade we show to the world," the artist says.

The grimace gets amplified into a scream in another work, which is inspired by Edward Munch's famous painting *The Scream*. This is a collage of 15 drawings on paper, done with bleeding strokes of red nail polish. Each drawing features a portion of Bouabdellah's face, mimicking the famous pose, and the scrambled arrangement of the panels represents an explosion of pent-up emotions. "Munch's painting conveyed the fear and anxiety he sensed all around him during the build-up to the First World War. My re-interpretation expresses the profound anxiety and frustration that women feel about what is happening today, and our apprehensions about the future. By inviting viewers to recompose the picture in their mind, I want to involve them in the process of creating this scream," Bouabdellah says.

Her diptych, titled *The Wheel of Fortune*, is also about the status of women in society. Here, she has used the decorative aspect of Arabian culture to highlight the neglect, objectification and suppression of women. The circular Plexiglas *mushrabiyyas* in this work are inspired by the ornamental lattices used in traditional Arabian architecture to protect the privacy of women. But behind these *mushrabiyyas*, Bouabdellah has placed a collage of intimate pictures of women. This voyeuristic twist plays with the idea of concealing and revealing, suppression and expression, abstract decoration and real substance. "*The Wheel of Fortune* is a warning about how society is playing with the situation of women. Our future can be good only if women are educated and treated as equals. But if we contin-



Pop Mosque, 2012, serigraphy, ink on arches paper



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ue to suppress and exploit them, we are gambling dangerously with our future,” the artist says.

Bouabdellah's installation of several doorways, titled *Doors to Heaven*, juxtaposes the situation of women in the real world with an idealised fictional world, where they will get respect, justice and equal treatment. It is designed to make people think about their actions and their consequences. The doors represent the eight gates to paradise, and curtains made from crystals and rubies separate the real and imaginary world on either side of the doors. But once again, the artist has added her own feminine twist by placing a pair of red high-heeled shoes inside the doorways, as well as plaques with lines such as "I always feared you"; "I always respected you"; "I always pleased you"; and "I always stood by you".

"These are words that you would say to God. They are also words that a woman could say to her husband. But how many men would be able to say them to the women in their lives?" the artist asks. "Nobody has seen paradise, but the detailed description that we have makes it impossible not to believe in it. This work says that everybody is equal in the eyes of God, and that reality and fiction are both constructed and hence can be changed," she adds.

Bouabdellah also has on display new



Grimace, 2012, collage and mixed media on paper

works from her *Pop Mosque* series, featuring colourful serigraphs of the contours of mosques from various countries such as Burkina Faso, Lebanon, Istanbul and Germany. "Besides representing a certain ideology, a mosque is also a place for the community to get together. So, this is an attempt to remove the fantasy, ideology and restrictive preconceptions from the structures and look at them aesthetically to celebrate their individuality and their role as popular community meeting places," the artist says.

The show also includes a video of a Yemeni woman dancing at a festival. Cynically titled *Perfection Takes Time*, it captures the woman in a moment of free-

dom and uninhibited self-expression. But the words in the background tarnish the beauty of the moment by raising questions about her conduct and character. The work thus highlights the conflict between individual expression and social expectations and between personal perspectives and public preconceptions. True to the warning on the billboard, Bouabdellah's artworks tread the fine line between reality and fiction and seek to find the truth in both.

Any Resemblance to Actual Persons, Living or Dead, is Purely Coincidental will run at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde until December 6.