

Press Review  
Hyperallergic, Sarah Souli, June 2020

## HYPERALLERGIC

### The Unapologetically Gay, Erotic Drawings of Soufiane Ababri



Soufiane Ababri, *Bedwork* (2019-2020), color pencils on paper, 24 x 32 cm (all images courtesy the artist)

Soufiane Ababri is a Moroccan artist. It is important to stress this point of origin, firstly because he has been wrongly mislabeled as a French-Moroccan artist, and secondly, because Ababri's identity as a gay, North African immigrant man living in France and grappling with themes of colonialism and oppression is central to his work. "This gives me a way of seeing the world from an exclusionary position that doesn't want to join the center," Ababri told Hyperallergic over email. "And so I reject the rules of the center." That French media or individuals, accidentally or not, refer to him as French is just one more darkly absurd way in which questions of cultural ownership proliferate in a post-colonial world.



Soufiane Ababri, from *I Am Not Just a Faggot* (2019-2020), color pencils on paper, 24 x 32 cm

Born in Rabat but based in Paris for the last 14 years, Ababri's work is both unapologetically gay and masculine, but does not couch itself in a purely Western interpretation of either identity. His primary medium is drawing, but has also worked with performance, film and sculpture, always scrutinizing preconceived notions of race, gender, and sexual identity. In his series *I Am Not Just a Faggot*, Ababri has reconstructed a sort of encyclopedic "family tree" of gay men in the artistic and intellectual milieu.

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Inspired by the literary work of Jean Genet, a leading figure in the French avant-garde theater, Ababri has reappropriated the word “faggot” from a slur “into beauty, into a song.” “I am not just a faggot”, each work proclaims, but one like Allen Ginsberg, Ricky Martin, Marlon Riggs, Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Wentworth Miller, Xavier Dolan, Mark Bradford, Larry Kramer. The roots of his queer family tree run deep.

One of Ababri’s better known projects is *Bedwork*, a series of drawings made with colored pencils from his bed at home. One’s first thought of a bed is a place of relaxation and sleep, but in the face of COVID-19 and the lockdown in France, it also becomes a particularly useful place to situate one’s studio. But Ababri points out that the bed “can be a place of solitude and punishment, like in the prison environment, or a place of work for sex workers, and also a place of death, for the dead.”

*Bedwork* primarily (but not exclusively) portrays men, together or alone: a Black man stands behind an American flag wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with ‘BAD NEWS’; a man dressed in a superman costume reclines in a sensual pose in the middle of the street; a pair of Moroccan youth in sweatpants sit at a cafe, a favorite pastime, two posters behind them read “GOODBYE MOROCCO.” The works are alternately funny, melancholic, erotic, and political, but always observational and compassionate.



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One of my favorite pieces in *Bedworks* depicts a couple of muscular, youthful Black and brown men engaged in a series of gymnastic sex moves, blissfully enjoying themselves. They fuck on the grass, nude save for a pair of white athletic socks. It contains such tender details — grass is already soft, and who keeps their socks on during sex? — that prod at the underlying desired fragility of masculinity and intimacy. With these gestures, Ababri is also referencing the colonial commodity of cotton and the impossibility of separating it from the legacies of enslavement and exploitation of Black and brown people.

Growing up in Morocco, Ababri was confronted with a sense of “exacerbated masculinity...a masculinity that is responsible for a part of society’s misfortune but which strangely, I continue to desire from an unbearable eroticism.” One of his signature techniques is to paint the cheeks of these virile figures with rouge, as though they are blushing — whether “from shyness or pleasure, that’s not important,” he notes.

In early May, it was announced that dozens of Moroccan men had been outed by having their photos spread online. “The campaign of “outing” emerged in Morocco on April 13, when many individuals created fake accounts on same-sex dating applications and then circulated on social media photos of men who used those applications, captioning the photos with insults and threats against the men based on their perceived sexual orientation,” [notes Human Rights Watch](#). The real results have been devastating, as men have been beaten, imprisoned, and kicked out of their homes.



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The treatment of gay men is central to Ababri's work, but he does not refer exclusively to homophobia in North Africa. There is a terribly long legacy of brutality against North African men in Europe, gay or otherwise. "These are questions that I have been working [through] for years already ... with regard to police violence against our community and the legacy of colonial eroticism in gay sexuality in France," Ababri explains. In one recent drawing, two brown men are pinned against the hood of a police car by two blue-sleeved white hands. The men are looking at each other with a mix of resignation and defiance. Their cheeks are tinged pink, not out of shyness or pleasure this time, but burning with anger. If injustice were a color, it would be this blush.