

# HERO

**THEIR MOUTHS WERE FULL OF BUMBLEBEES**

## Soufiane Ababri on his personal and political exhibition at the Barbican



By [Barry Pierce](#) | Art | 9 April 2024

Above: *Bedwork, Chemical conviviality, 2023*

For the Moroccan artist Soufiane Ababri, the personal is the political. His bright canvases, which depict gay men dancing, reading, sleeping, and partying, are electrifying protests against the homophobia that is still rampant in Moroccan society. If you stand closely to Ababri's work, you'll see his medium of choice is colouring pencils – a brash rejection of the long tradition of oil on canvas and something he does to “distance [himself] as much as possible from the academic aspect of a practice and a medium.”

Press Review

HERO, Barry Pierce, February April 2024

*Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated* is Ababri's first exhibition at a major UK institution, currently at the Curve in the Barbican. When Ababri saw the shape of the Curve, he instantly saw the curve of the Arabic letter Zayn: a derogatory term for gay men deriving from Zamil, meaning close or intimate friend. In the Maghreb, the buzzing of this consonant is used insidiously, insinuating the slur without explicitly voicing it. As such, the curve of the Curve informed everything about the show.

As the show opened, we asked Ababri about the new works and the meanings



Soufiane Ababri, pic by Noel Quintela

**Barry Pierce: The show has a fascinating title, *Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated*, where did the title come from and what does it mean to you?**

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Soufiane Ababri: The title comes as a textual and sound extension to the exhibition. It was the repeated Zayn letter sound (zzzzzz) that made me think of bumblebees. The bumblebee transports the pollen to hatch another form of life. It is this idea that even if the insult is problematised, it can be a tool of emancipation and self-writing. I have just learned that a “Bourdon” (bumblebee in French) in publishing is the fact of forgetting a letter in a text... for this exhibition I forgot everything else and I focused on a letter.

**BP: You used colouring pencils to make all of the works in the show, which is a medium you rarely see in gallery shows, why do you use this unconventional medium?**

SA: It's one of the rules, among many others, that I imposed on myself when I started drawing. The idea was to try to distance myself as much as possible from the academic aspect of a practice and a medium. It was urgent for me to criticise the academic and virile image of the artist working in a workshop with technical tools. So I started drawing in my bed with coloured pencils that I bought in stores that are not professional art supply stores.

**BP: You've made a literal connection between the shape of the Curve gallery with the curve of the Arabic letter Zayn, which is often used as a homophobic slur, and many of the paintings are depictions of gay scenes, would you consider your works to be a political statement against homophobia?**

SA: Yes completely, but obviously not only that, since it also deals with geographical borders and social classes, racialisation and racism, immigration, colonialism and post-colonialism. But obviously denouncing homophobia is part of it since my work goes in the direction of visibility of hunted communities, of communities marginalised for racial or sexual reasons.

**BP: In the composition of your canvases I can see a lot of references to other artists (Oscar Wilde) and styles, why do you make your work so referential?**

SA: The idea is that there is a part of society who, because of their sexual difference, do not find a reference in their family circle. Their family ties at that time can do nothing for them. So if they are lucky they come across a municipal library or second-hand booksellers on their way and realise that they have a family, people through history who have experienced the same things as them. It becomes a reference family.



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*Soufiane Ababri: Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated is at The Curve until June 30th*

## GALLERY



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