

T H III R D

Soufiane Ababri: Revelling in the Intimacy of The Queer Arabic After Party

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Bringing together installation, performance and drawing '*Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated*' is a multidisciplinary exhibition that investigates the significance of rave culture and how it fosters an environment for gay men of Arabic heritage and beyond.



Words and portrait by **Sol Rei**

Soufiane Ababri is a Moroccan-born artist who divides his time between Paris, France and Tangier, Morocco. His art practice, which spans drawing and performances is deeply influenced by both real and fictitious encounters, exploring the intersection of the Western and Non-Western queer experiences. This exploration reflects Ababri's own experiences as a gay Arab man, offering a distinct perspective of the queer experience. His homoerotic drawings, saturated with vibrancy and humour, depict the nuances of intimacy and masculinity within the queer community.

In Ababri's recent commission to create an exhibition in The Curve, Barbican, Ababri draws parallels between the Barbican's architecture and its similarity to the Arabic letter Zayin (ز) which is the first letter of the word Zamel – a derogatory term for gay men. This connection inspired Ababri to delve into the evolution of the term from its original meaning of 'close friendship' to its current use, demonstrating how homophobia threatens same-sex sexuality as well as friendship.

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A highlight of the exhibition was the captivating 'Aller au plaisir comme on marche au devoir' from Ababri's Bedwork series. This artwork, imbued with joyful energy and rich in bold hues, immediately draws attention as a powerful expression of Ababri's exploration of queer nightlife and a celebration of the marginalized. Central to Ababri's artistic journey, his Bedworks are analogously crafted while he is lying in bed, utilizing coloured pencils instead of traditional paint. Through this intimate and unconventional method of creation, Ababri seeks to challenge and address the issues of racial, sexual, and colonial injustices. The act of creating art while lying down serves as a peaceful yet poignant form of protest, symbolizing a serene defiance against oppression.



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This exhibition is now open to the public at the [Barbican](#) for free until 30th June 2024.

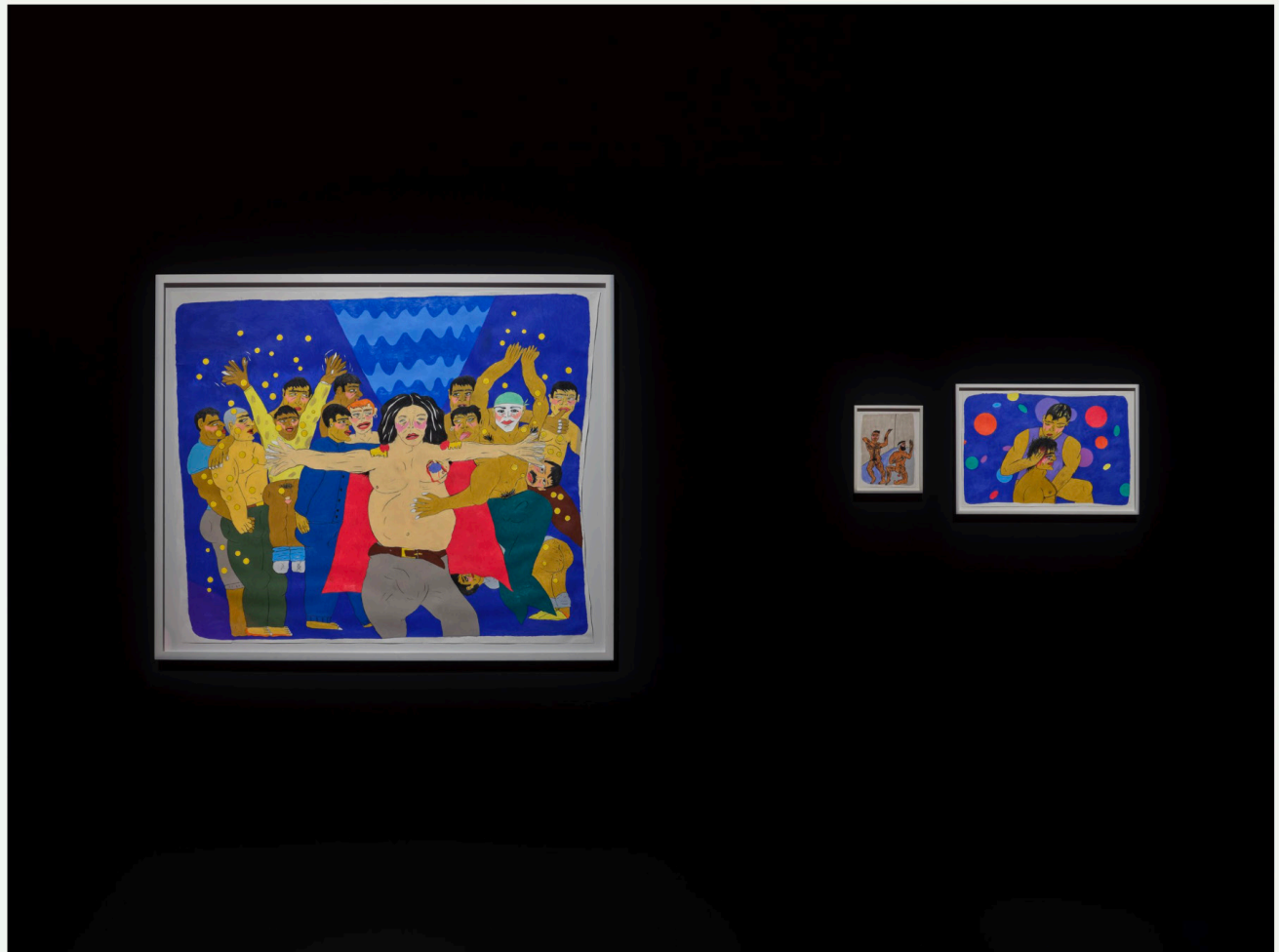
Sol Rei: How would you say that your artistic process has developed through this commission?

Soufiane Ababri: I would say this space [The Curve] is really a challenge for any artist. But that's good in my case, since I like to make contextual proposals that speak to where I am working. So, I embarked on a sort of subjective discussion with the architecture of the place. I tried to take it elsewhere, towards another reading that a queer Arab diaspora could understand in contrast to Western codes.

SR: A central part of your practice is the 'Bed Works', when did you begin to develop this approach to your artistry?

SA: In 2016 I spent a year in Tangier, and it was a year that I took after my studies to think about what I was going to do. It was during this time that I made the decision to put the medium of drawing at the centre of my practice. I loved drawing but I had moved away from it for different reasons, the main one being that I went to art schools at a time when it was not taken seriously as a medium. As my work explores this relationship of the social margins and the deconstruction of mechanisms of domination, I decided to put drawing back at the centre and see how far I could push it.

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SR: How does your movement between Paris and Tangier influence your work?

SA: All movements, be it voluntary or forced immigration, have consequences on the people who experience them. Leaving my country of birth to experience something new elsewhere has allowed me to see the world around me from different perspectives. The dimensions of race and colonialism, and the clash of cultures between the West and the Global South, have become essential in the conception of both my drawings and those elements that surround them [installation, sound design, performance, etc].

SR: How has it been preparing for this exhibition at the Barbican, your first solo exhibition in a UK institution?

SA: The preparation went well but it was quite intense, since the architecture of The Curve, and the Barbican more widely, is not so easy to work with. Luckily, the team was there to resolve many technical difficulties.

SA: However, the end of the installation was quite complicated, since the management of the Barbican decided to cancel a lecture by Pankaj Mishra organized by the London Review of Books, after they were informed that his speech would focus on Israel's instrumentalisation of the Holocaust to justify the genocide in Gaza. I was able to have open discussions with the curator of my exhibition, Raúl Muñoz de la Vega, and we will continue to discuss the situation throughout the run of my exhibition.

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SA: Yes, it is very important indeed. But my project also tried to explore another theme which is: what happens in between two rave parties? What happens when you leave the club to head home, alone or with someone else? And above all, how do people who don't share the social codes and who don't have access to the rave parties live, those who are rejected by this community too? We all know that within the queer community, there is a hierarchy and people are rejected because they do not correspond to the criteria of the moment.



SR: Why is it important to highlight intimate non-heteronormative radical friendships?

SA: Political friendship in gay communities is often a lifeline. This is a theme that is very little explored by the social sciences. Societies have a sacred relationship with family and monogamic love, but friendship remains something that is not supported institutionally. So, the notion of a Family of Friends is a very important concept when reflecting on the alternative relationships that marginalised people can have with each other.

SR: Would you consider yourself an activist through your art practice?

SA: I obviously work on issues that concern racial and sexual minorities and use my personal image to speak out and make these communities visible. I have an artistic focus that questions the relationship to colonialism and Western domination that is often found in art from the Global South. But I don't have any of the vocabulary or strategies of what I would consider activism. I'm just trying to infiltrate, make visible and represent what systems of domination are trying to make disappear.

SR: What do you hope the next generation of queer individuals take from your work?

SA: Quite simply that my work creates connections between them and pride in being together in this beautiful community. Let them see themselves as sublime people who are part of a family that changed the world.