

Interview

'It's effortless': the Moroccan art star who shuns paint and works from his bed

Angelique Chrisafis



Between the paragraphs of Oscar Wilde's reading - a "bedwork" by Soufiane Ababri. Photograph: Rebecca Fanuele/© Soufiane Ababri

Soufiane Ababri is so against the notion of painters at their easels that he always makes his erotic, irreverent and riotously colourful drawings lying down. Ahead of a major UK show, he reels off the many advantages

Soufiane Ababri, the young, taboo-breaking star of Morocco's modern art scene, sees creativity as a way to "invert the insults" he has heard all his life. Growing up gay in Morocco, and then becoming an immigrant in France, he was part of what he calls a post-colonial generation, in which people of colour felt fetishised and were often subject to violence. His answer to all the name-calling and worse is an approach to drawing that is irreverent, erotic and full of riotously bright colours. "It's all about transforming the stigma," Ababri says.

So when Ababri saw the crescent shape of the Barbican's Curve gallery in London, where he is about to stage his first solo show at a major UK institution, it reminded him of the curling form of the Arabic letter zayn (ز), and the z sound at the start of the word zamel, a derogatory term for gay men. "It's a word I heard at school," he says. "I have no doubt queer and LGBT children in Morocco still face it: that repeated zzzz sound, like a bumblebee, as you walk past people in school corridors." This persecution gives his show its title: Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated.

■ ■ *Lying down has a sense of performance, a hint of laziness - and it's associated with non-violence*



📷 Taunted for his sexuality ... Soufiane Ababri. Photograph: Magali Delporte/The Guardian

Ababri's coloured pencil work and performance art have made him, at 39, one of the most important gay artists in north Africa. His acclaimed 2021 series, *Yes I Am*, combined drawings of famous gay men with lines like: "I am not just a faggot, I am a faggot like Ludwig Wittgenstein." As he says: "Humiliation, suspicion and paranoia can inspire creativity."

Ababri grew up between Rabat and Tangier in what he describes as an average family: his parents were practising Muslims, his father a public sector worker, his mother raising the family full-time. Ababri devoured books at the public library and felt, like many, that his childhood was "a setting not open to sexual questions. There were a lot of taboos."

Ababri left home aged 18 to study psychology and then art in France. He has lived in France for more than 20 years but regularly travels to Morocco to work. While Moroccan law still criminalises what it deems lewd or unnatural acts between individuals of the same sex, Ababri continues to be a voice on gay culture there.

He wants his art to tackle violence - racial, sexual, colonial - but in a self-consciously gentle and non-violent way. To do this, Ababri works lying down. He has no studio, no easel, but instead draws on paper in bed, supine, to produce what he calls bedworks. "In orientalist paintings," he says, "there were always women, Black slaves and Arabs in lying-down positions: passive, lustful, who could be controlled, not productive. They were bodies at the service of the gaze of the male painter. So I started drawing in a lying-down position, to get as far away as possible from the vocabulary of the white artist in a vertical position in his studio."

He works in bed at home, while travelling, or in artists' residences. "It's this idea of working in a domestic space, in a bed, in an intimate space, but also to do it in a position that has a sense of performance, but is effortless, in a register of laziness. Often, lying down is associated with someone who is not violent. In protests, when police arrive, people may lie down. So it's a vocabulary of resistance."

Using colour pencil, sometimes seen as an amateur medium, is another deliberate act of rebellion. "I never use paint. Colour pencil takes you away from the academy element that paint and brushes represent." He draws the male body, usually men of colour, often naked, often in erotic situations, but his trademark is their blushing faces. "Blushing is the only moment when one loses self-control," he says. "An actor can fake anything - cry, laugh - but blushing is different." Blushing, he feels, means "losing that type of social performance that masculinity can represent".



📷 'A strong homo-eroticism still exists towards the Arab body, a consequence of colonialism' ... another bedwork from 2023.
Photograph: Rebecca Fanuele/© Soufiane Ababri

The fragility and tenderness of his drawings are an answer to the cast-iron, brute masculinity he saw on the street growing up. "I felt there was a kind of masculinity dominating the public space, that was so suffocating: a kind of heightened masculinity connected to youthful, muscly bodies, a masculinity that speaks loudly, that appropriates the public space, that can oppress LGBTQ+ communities and women."

His depictions of men of colour are also about the colonised body. "That quite ambiguous relationship that France can have with the image of the Arab," he explains. "There is a very strong homo-eroticism towards the Arab body that's really a consequence of colonialism."

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Ababri is also known for creating theatrical and dance-like performance pieces that often examine the building of gay communities and safe spaces. In the Barbican show, visitors will see six performers outside a club “who decide they’ll no longer walk upright but crawl along the ground”. Club music can be heard. “It’s about the safe space of a community - but being outside that,” he says.

The idea of men crawling along the floor came to Ababri when he was lying down making his Bedworks drawings. “I thought, ‘OK, so I’m lying down on a bed, but what about if you take away the bed? What do I become in that position then?’”

Ababri always broadens his frame of reference: the Barbican show moves from Oscar Wilde to Morocco to the club scene. Less than 10% of the images he draws, sexual or not, are his own real experiences. “I like to look at things from the perspective of both east and west,” he says. “It’s very important, with the rise of populism in Europe, to always keep critiquing, revisiting and re-reading.”

● [Soufiane Ababri is at the Curve gallery](#), the Barbican, London, 13 March to 30 June