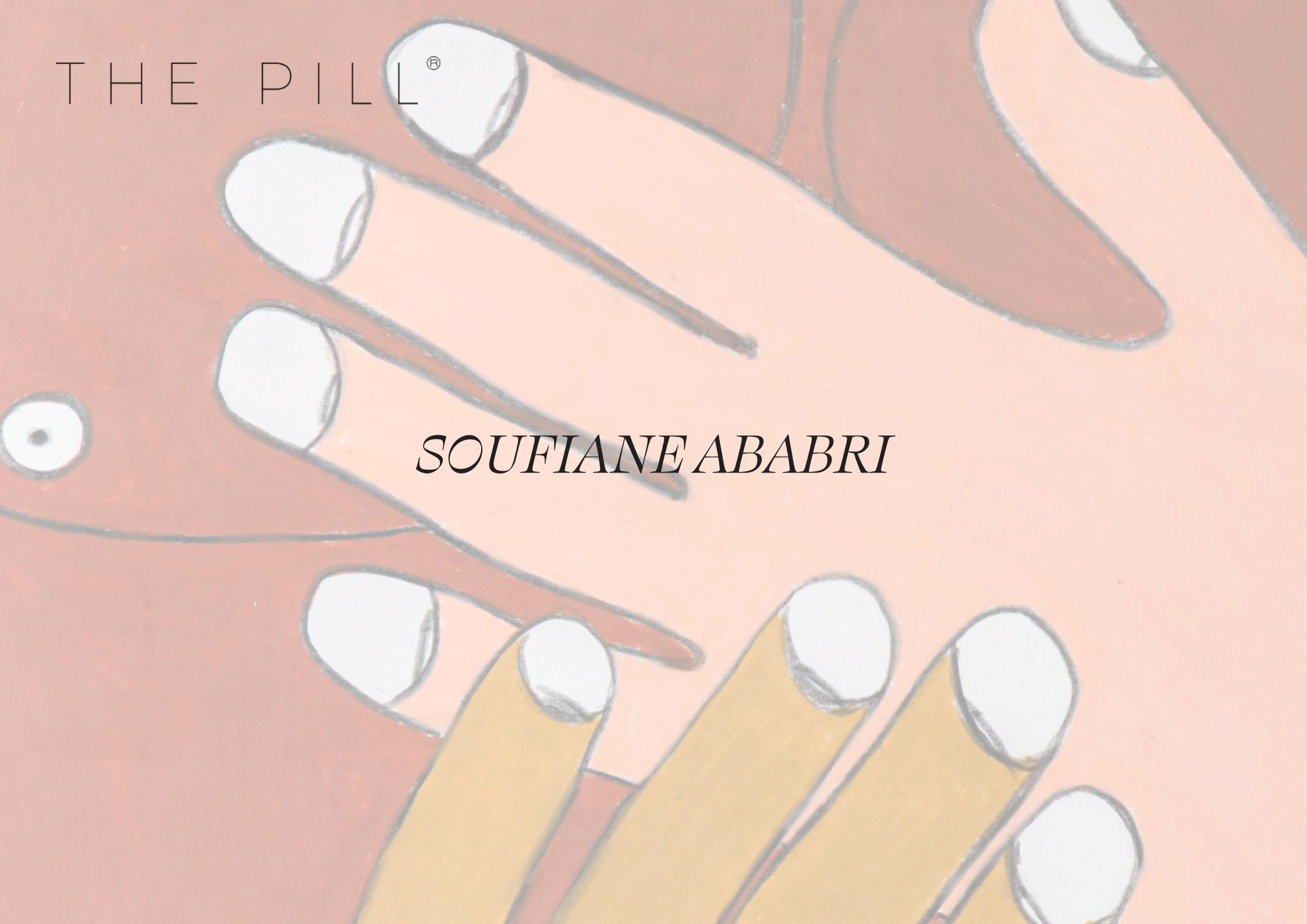


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The background is a soft, light pink color. Overlaid on this are stylized, abstract shapes representing hands or fingers. Some shapes are a muted red color, while others are a mustard yellow. The outlines of these shapes are drawn with a thick, dark grey or black line, giving them a hand-drawn, graphic quality. The shapes are scattered across the frame, with some appearing as simple ovals and others as more elongated, finger-like forms.

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SOUFIANE ABABRI

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Revealing queer identity as a utopian horizon and the underlying vulnerability in expressions of masculinity, Soufiane Ababri's works critically and humorously engage with historical works of art and texts — essays and literature — and unfold within a historical and contemporary discussion at the intersection of queer politics and postcolonialism.

Ababri's visual storytelling is akin to an art-historical activism questioning the process of history writing while emphasizing minor histories and intimate recorded events as the point of departure of his works. Deftly weaving his own biography and heritage with the intellectual and artistic output of figures such as Jean Genet, Michel Foucault, Felix Gonzales Torres, Allen Ginsberg or Nazım Hikmet, his works mobilize the anecdotal, diaristic and sometimes accidental as the location where an intimate knowledge based on affinities can engender a sense of community in motion across time and place. Working against hierarchical conventions of art making, in his ongoing series *Bedworks*, he chooses to work both literally and conceptually, from a horizontal plane instead of “vertically”; from the privacy of his bedroom instead of the studio, emphasizing domesticity; and using crayons and pastels on paper instead of oil or canvas.

The exclusively male figures in his drawings seem often caught in moments of intimate, social, sexual and emotional exposure and vulnerability, alternating between expressions of shame, desire, horror and joy. Depicting scenes in a simplified, almost naive manner, his drawings present a flattened perspective reminiscent of both orthodox imagery and Persian miniatures in their collapsing of distance and spatial hierarchy to re-arrange values associated to figure and background, between what is obviously visible and what may not be. Ababri's use of text alongside drawing at times conveys an internal dialogue in confessional or humoristic form from the introspective space; while in larger collage works he paints over found materials to activate a deeper social and political backdrop.

Besides series of drawings and collages on paper, Soufiane Ababri actively engages with installation, sculpture and performance to create immersive environments in reference to queer and clandestine forms of socializing, acting through intermediality and theatricality to reflect on how we record, share, claim and participate in collective resonances of our most intimate fantasies and fears.

Soufiane Ababri (1985, Rabat) lives and works between Tangiers and Paris. He has had solo exhibitions worldwide including *In An Instant The Magician Had Conjured A Dove From His Hat*, THE PILL, Istanbul (2023); *Si nous ne brûlons pas, comment éclairer la nuit?*, Praz-Delavallade (Paris, 2023); *NON MERCI!!!*, Dittrich & Schlechtriem (Berlin, 2022); *Bunch of Queequeg*, Praz-Delavallade, (Los Angeles, 2021); *YES! Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï ... AM*, Mendes Wood DM, (Brussels, 2021); *A Circus Act Behind Bars of Lilac And Blood*, Kulte Art Center (Rabat, 2020); *Tropical Concrete Gym Park*, Glassbox (Paris, 2020) and *Memories Of A Solitary Cruise*, THE PILL® (Istanbul, 2019).

His work has been shown in institutional group shows such as *Every Moment Counts*, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter (Oslo, 2022); *Queering The Narrative*, Neuer Aachener Kunstverein (Aachen, 2022); *Trilogie des cendres*, FRAC Pays de la Loire (Carquefou, 2022); *Habibi, les révolutions de l'amour*, Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris, 2022); *Attention*, International Festival For Contemporary Art (Glasgow, 2021); *Welcome Home Vol.II*, MACAAL (Marrakesh, 2020); *Lignes de vies - Une exposition de légendes*, MAC VAL (Vitry, 2019) and *Par amour du jeu*, Magasins Généraux (Pantin, 2018), among many. His work is part of private and public collections of FRAC Poitou-Charentes and FRAC Pays de la Loire; MACVAL; Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden in Morocco and X Museum in Beijing.

SOUFIANE ABABRI

1985, Rabat.

Lives between Paris and Tangier.

Education

- 2017 Post-Diploma, École Supérieure des Beaux Arts, Lyon, FR
- 2014 MA II, École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, FR
- 2010 BA, École Supérieure des Beaux Arts de Montpellier, FR

Solo Exhibitions (selection)

- 2024 *Their Mouths Were Full of Bumblebees But It Was Me Who Was Pollinated*, Barbican, London, UK
- 2023 *In An Instant The Magician Had Conjured A Dove From His Hand*, THE PILL, Istanbul, TR
Si nous ne brûlons pas, comment éclairer la nuit?, Praz-Delavallade, Paris, FR
- 2022 *NON MERCII!!*, Dittrich & Schlechtriem, Berlin, DE
- 2021 *Bunch of Queequeg*, Praz-Delavallade, Los Angeles, USA
YES ! Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï ... AM, Mendes Wood DM, Brussels, BE
- 2020 *A Circus Act Behind Bars of Lilac and Blood*, Kulture Gallery and Editions, Rabat, MA
Berliner Luft - Soufiane Ababri, Dittrich & Schlechtriem, Berlin, DE
- 2019 *Something New Under the Little Prince's Body*, Dittrich & Schlechtriem, Berlin, DE
Tropical Concrete Gym Park, Glassbox, Paris, FR
Call me by their names, Ravnikar Gallery Space, Ljubljana, SI
Memories of a Solitary Cruise, THE PILL, Istanbul, TR
- 2018 *Here is a Strange and Bitter Crop*, Space, London, UK
Haunted Lives, Praz-Delavallade, Paris, FR
- 2017 *Oh please! don't be angry! it's based on emotional facts*, Eternal Network, Tours, FR
- 2015 *What's the name of this nation*, cur. Karima Boudou, Le Cube Independent Art Room, Rabat, MA

Group Exhibitions (selection)

- 2023 *Soleil Triste*, SOL ! The Regional Biennale #2, cur. Anya Harrison, MO.CO. Panacée, Montpellier, FR
Dans Ma Chambre, Centre Culturel Jean Cocteau, Les Lilas, FR
Who's Afraid Of Stardust? Positionen queerer Gegenwartskunst, Kunsthau and Kunsthalle Nürnberg, Nürnberg, DE
- 2022 *Habibi, les revolutions de l'amour*, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, FR
Every Moment Counts, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, NO
Trilogie de cendres, "Ta langue une allumette qui craque", Frac des Pays de la Loire, FR
Trilogie de cendres (V.2), "La prochaine fois, le feu", Frac des Pays de la Loire, FR
Queering the Narrative, NAK Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, Aachen, DE
AS IF IT COULDN'T, THE PILL, Istanbul, TR
L'été retrouvé, Praz-Delavallade, Paris, FR
- 2021 *Nowhere*, Horse & Pony, Berlin, DE
Attention, Glasgow International Festival for Contemporary Art, Ecosse, GB
Male Nudes: a salon from 1800 to 2021, Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, BR
- 2020 *La terre est bleue comme une orange*, Praz Delavallade, Paris, FR
MITHLY, Soufiane Ababri and Julian Volz, SYNNIKA, Frankfurt am Main, DE
Welcome Home Vol. II, MACAAL, Marrakech, MAR
- 2019 *50+ Exhibition*, La Galerie, Contempo Galerie, Paris, FR
Bootleg by DOC!, Brooklyn, NY, USA
Désolé, École Municipale des Beaux-Arts, galerie Édouard Manet de Gennevilliers, FR
Un monde, un seul, pour demeure, cur. Enrico Lunghi, collection des FRAC de Nouvelle Aquitaine, Château de Biron, Vergt- de-Biron, FR

Love my way, 34e Festival International de Mode, de Photographie et d'Accessoires de Mode à Hyères, Villa Romaine, Hyères, FR

Lignes de vies - une exposition de légendes, MAC/VAL, Vitry, FR

RITES_TEMPOS, Tous les matins je prends mon café et je rentre chez moi, Atelier Blanc, Villefranche de Rouergue, FR

Dramaturkia, University of Antwerp, Antwerpen, BE

Jamais au dessus, ni même en dessous, éventuellement un peu à côté, mais toujours là, Pôle de recherche Contrat Social, Institut supérieur des Beaux Arts de Besançon, FR

2018 *Salon du Dessin Contemporain*, La Panacée, MO.CO, Montpellier, FR

Par amour du jeu, Magasins Généraux, Pantin, FR

MILF Plateaux, Espace Témoin, Genève, SW

I am what I am, ici.gallery, Paris, FR

Liberté, Egalité Fraternité, cur. Rasmus Myrup, New Gallery, Paris, FR

2017 *Moving Frontiers – Do and undo / Faire et défaire*, Espace doual'art, Douala, CM

62ème salon de Montrouge, Montrouge, FR

Tous des sang-mêlés, MAC/VAL, Vitry, FR

Clinicat Régina, Mexico, MX Traversées remarde, cur. Julie Crenn), Bourges, FR

Productive contradictions, cur. François Piron, Lyon, FR

2015 *Les tentatives invérifiables de rentrer dans l'Histoire*, Bétonsalon centre - d'Art et de recherches, Paris, FR

Boys don't cry, Talk with Virginie Bobin, MAC VAL, Vitry, FR

Workshop at Quimper art school, Quimper, FR

What's the name of this nation, cur. Karima Boudou, Le Cube independent Art Room, Rabat, MA

Recto/Verso, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, FR

Chercher le garçon, cur. Frank Lamy, MAC/VAL, Vitry, FR

I'm Burning Paris, cur. Stanislaw Ruksza, Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, FR

Hospitalité, Bétonsalon & MAC/VAL, Vitry, FR

2014 *You can delete any comment that you create*, cur. Karima Boudou, InBetween, Brussels, BE

2013 *Ce lieu n'est pas la maison de Descartes*, cur. Karima Boudou, Institut Français Amsterdam, NL

Awards & Grants / Residencies

- 2019 Résidence Ravnikar Gallery Space, Ljubljana, SI
- 2018 OUT d'Or de la création artistique, Association des journalistes LGBT, Paris, FR
Space, London, UK

Collections

- FRAC Poitou-Charentes, FR
- FRAC Pays de la Loire, FR
- MAC/VAL Musée d'art contemporain du Val de-Marne, Vitry, FR
- Museum of African Contemporary Art AI
- Maaden (MACAAL), Marrakesh, MO
- X Museum, Beijing, CH

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WORKS AND EXHIBITIONS





Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork, After Aureole, 2023
Color pencil on paper
101 x 71 cm



Ababri's commission connects the crescent shape of The Curve gallery to the curling form of the Arabic letter Zayin. This is the first letter of the word 'Zamel', 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. Ababri takes the transformation of Zamil into Zamel as his starting point to investigate the ways in which language has been coded and weaponised. In doing so, he reveals how homophobia continues to threaten not only same-sex sexuality but undermines the possibility of intimate, non-heteronormative relationships based on radical forms of friendship.

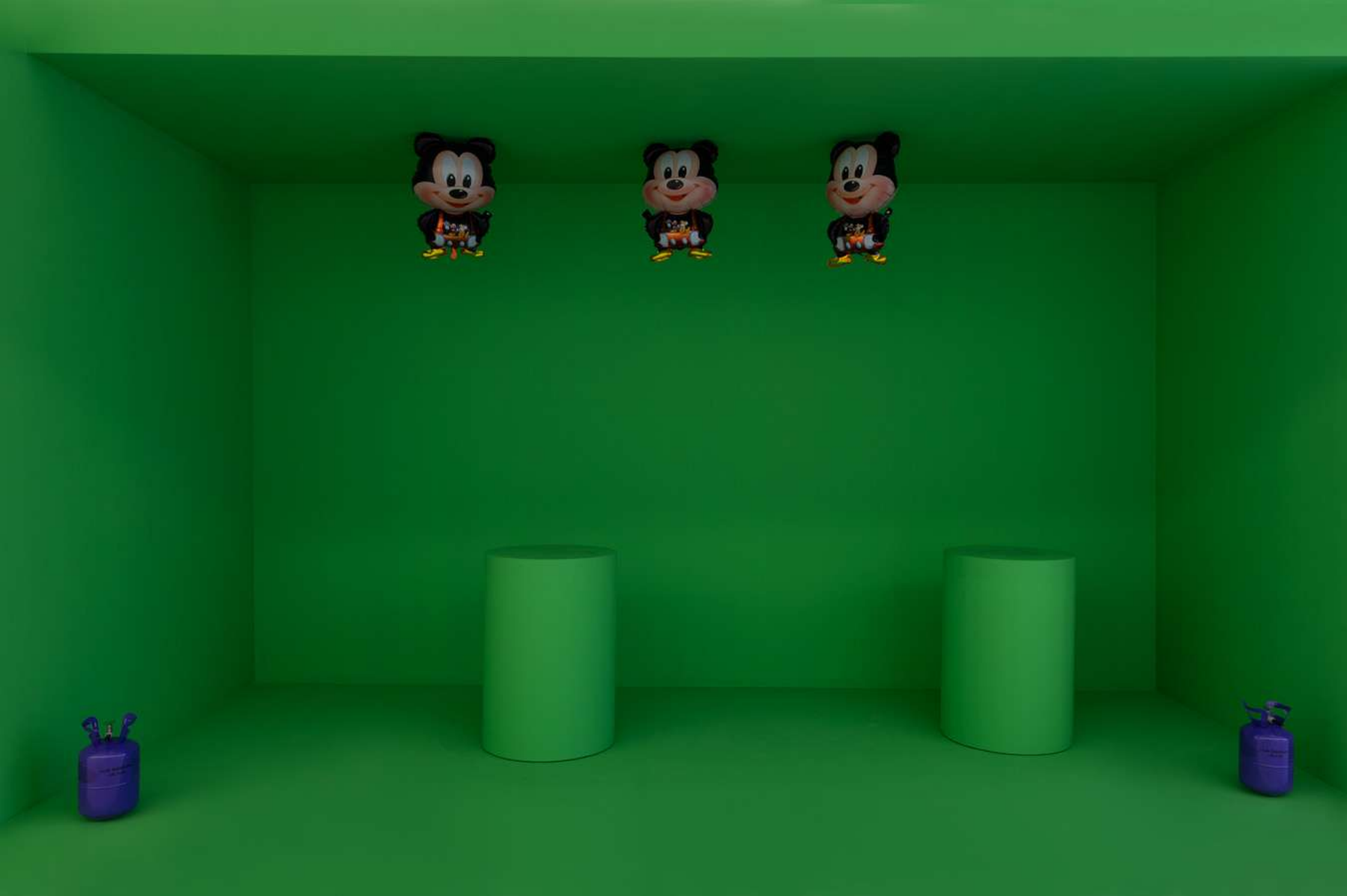
Inspired by a thirteenth-century illustration by Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti that depicts a tender moment between two men holding hands and looking into each other's eyes, through this commission Ababri is engaging in art historical activism. Drawing from western and non-western queer experience, his work challenges traditional representations of intimacy and sexuality. In their place, he forges an alternative canon, reversing the historic marginality of non-heterosexual relations.





Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork, Men in the Sun, 2023
Color pencil on paper
130 x 110 cm





In An Instant, the Magician Had Conjured a Dove From His Hat
21.09.2023 — 05.11.2023

In a conversation with Ross Bleckner from 1995, artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres recounts “People would say, “Can I come to your studio?” And, I’d say, “Sure, but my studio is underneath my bed.” Activating this historical conversation around art and artistic practice in the most intimate setting, Soufiane Ababri invites the spectators to take part in a trans-historical imaginary exchange between himself, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Ross Bleckner taking place in the bedroom.

The space of the bed as a metaphor for the rejection of the studio has been a prominent feature in Soufiane Ababri’s practice for a long time, particularly embodied in his ongoing series of drawings titled *Bedworks*. Critically and humourously engaging with the intimacy of the bed in its associations with the body and the subconscious, Ababri’s works reveal the underlying vulnerability in expressions of masculinity. In his large drawings and collages, what’s hidden, stored or repressed underneath the bed is deployed through a colorful fantasmatic imagery intertwining fear and eroticism. The exclusively male figures in his drawings seem caught in moments of intimate, sexual, and emotional exposure and vulnerability, alternating between expressions of shame, desire, horror and joy. Besides a series of new glass sculptures and an immersive installation, the exhibition features the latest works from Ababri’s ongoing series “Bedworks”, produced from a horizontal bodily position using crayons and pastels on paper, further emphasizing the privacy and affect of the bedroom and instead of the studio.

Soufiane Ababri’s visual storytelling is akin to an art-historical activism questioning the process of history writing while emphasizing minor histories and intimate recorded events as the point of departure of his works. Deftly weaving his own biography and heritage with the intellectual and artistic output of figures such as Jean Genet, Michel Foucault, Felix Gonzales Torres, Allen Ginsberg or Nazim Hikmet, his works mobilize the anecdotal, diaristic and sometimes accidental as the location where an intimate knowledge based on affinities can engender a sense of community in motion across time and place.

Besides series of drawings and collages on paper, Soufiane Ababri actively engages with installation, sculpture and performance to create immersive environments in reference to clandestine forms of socializing, acting through theatricality to reflect on how we record, share, claim and participate in collective resonances of our most intimate fantasies and fears.



SOUFLANE ABABRI *In An Instant, The Magician Had Conjured a Dove from His Hat* 21.09.2023 — 05.11.2023





An intimate take on Gonzalez-Torres' renowned photograph of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas' shared tombstone in Paris, the drawing repeats and modifies the terms of the original photograph.

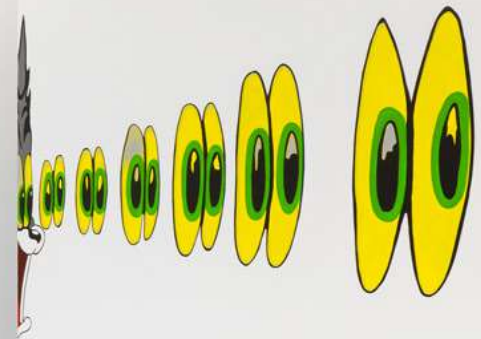
Depicted as embraced by Ababri's own arms and in vibrant colors, the drawing touches upon the romantic couple as an exchange of energy, a hierarchical structure and as a potential of material transmutation stretching beyond the grip of death, loss and grief to become a source of emancipation for queer communities in motion across time and space.

The characteristic flattened perspective serves to collapse distances and spatial hierarchies to re-arrange values associated to figure and background.

Soufiane Ababri
*Bedwork / Gertrude & Alice after Felix
Gonzalez-Torres, 2023*
Color and wax pencil on paper
160 x 170 cm

A Dove from His Hat 21.09.2023 – 03.11.2023



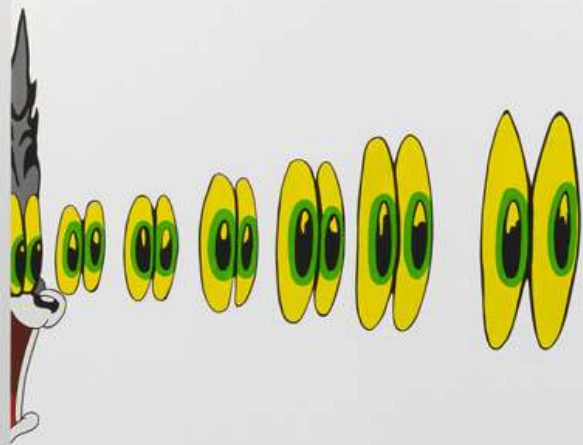


This work centers around the space underneath the bed as the loci of fears and fantasies stretched between horror and eroticism. The partially visible human figure stands in lieu of an imaginary, racialized queer community while the bottle of Moroccan wine references both the colonial period in Morocco and Dionysian rituals of emotional catharsis.

The drawing features a prominent light source that touches parts of the objects within the frame while obscuring others, creating an inlaid structure that interweaves what's readily visible and what remains hidden, in a critical engagement with history, memory and transmission.



Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork / A Little Rest Under Proust's Bed, 2023
Color and wax pencil on paper
117 x 157 cm









A series of unique glass blown sculptures shaped like pairs of pillows, *These Fluids Between Us* were produced in tribute to Felix Gonzales-Torres' work *Untitled (billboard of an empty bed)*.

As reminders of desire, lost love and grief as a common human experiences, the series continues Ababri's reflection on the romantic couple as an exchange of matter and energy, their hollow shape serves a spectral reminder of desire, lust and transcendence achieved through the body. Ababri partially fills these sculptures with white, red and rose wine in a tribute to Gonzalez-Torres' romantic partner Ross Laycock, a celebrated sommelier who died from complications due to AIDS.

Complicating the work's possible meanings in an act of resistance against labels and literal interpretations, the varying hues of liquid evoke bodily fluids such as urine, blood and inflammation, pointing to a gesture of proliferation against any identitarian capture.

Soufiane Ababri
These Fluids Between Us III, 2023
Handblown glass and red wine
Variable dimensions



A series of collages assembling found elements and drawings, *Birthday Boy* turns LIFE magazine's July 1985 issue into a canvas. Coinciding with Ababri's month and year of birth, this period also registered the highest peak in the number of deaths associated with the AIDS epidemic. Each framed piece features a double spread from the magazine, deconstructing the original publication into its building blocks and creating new juxtapositions between seemingly unrelated content covered in July 1995. This contributes to create a distanced, critical look into the historical moment, while Ababri's collages and drawings bring into play elements from his own biography as well as Felix Gonzalez-Torres' vocabulary. Images of strange birds, toys with popping eyes and toilet paper motifs meet Calvin Klein models from the 1990s, reports on AIDS, sports events and terror attacks, bringing forth an archeology of queer artifacts in an ambiguous relationship to context.



Soufiane Ababri

Bedwork / Birthday Boy, LIFE July 1985 II, 2023

Color and wax pencil, photograph and magazine collage on paper
68 x 78 cm





Soufiane Ababri

Bedroom / Oscar Wilde offering André Gide a young Arab, 2020

Crayon, colored pencil and pastel on paper

116 x 150 cm



Soufiane Ababri
*Bedwork / The New Man reading Abû
Nawâs*, 2020
Crayon, colored pencil and pastel on paper
151 x 161 cm



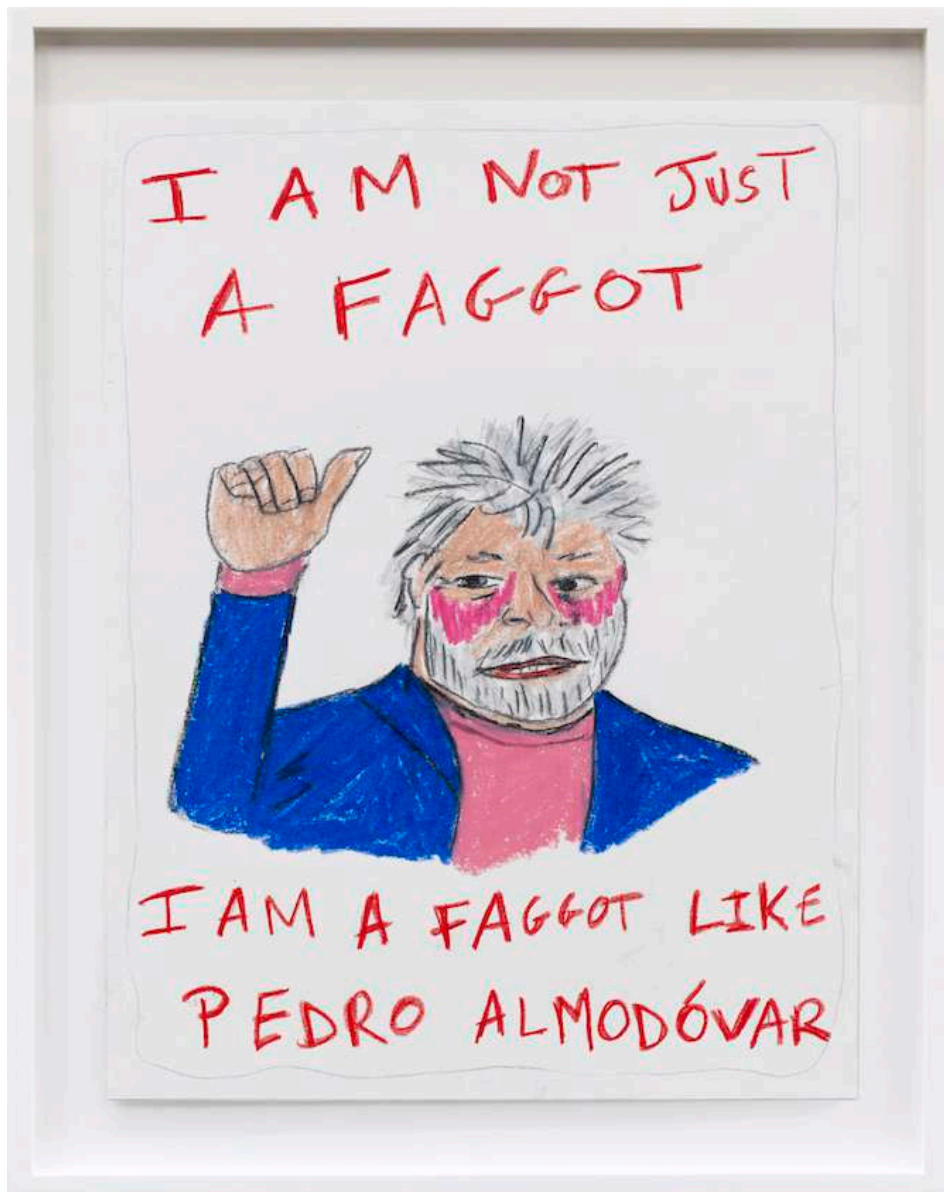
Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork, 2020
Crayon, colored pencil and pastel on paper
65 x 50 cm



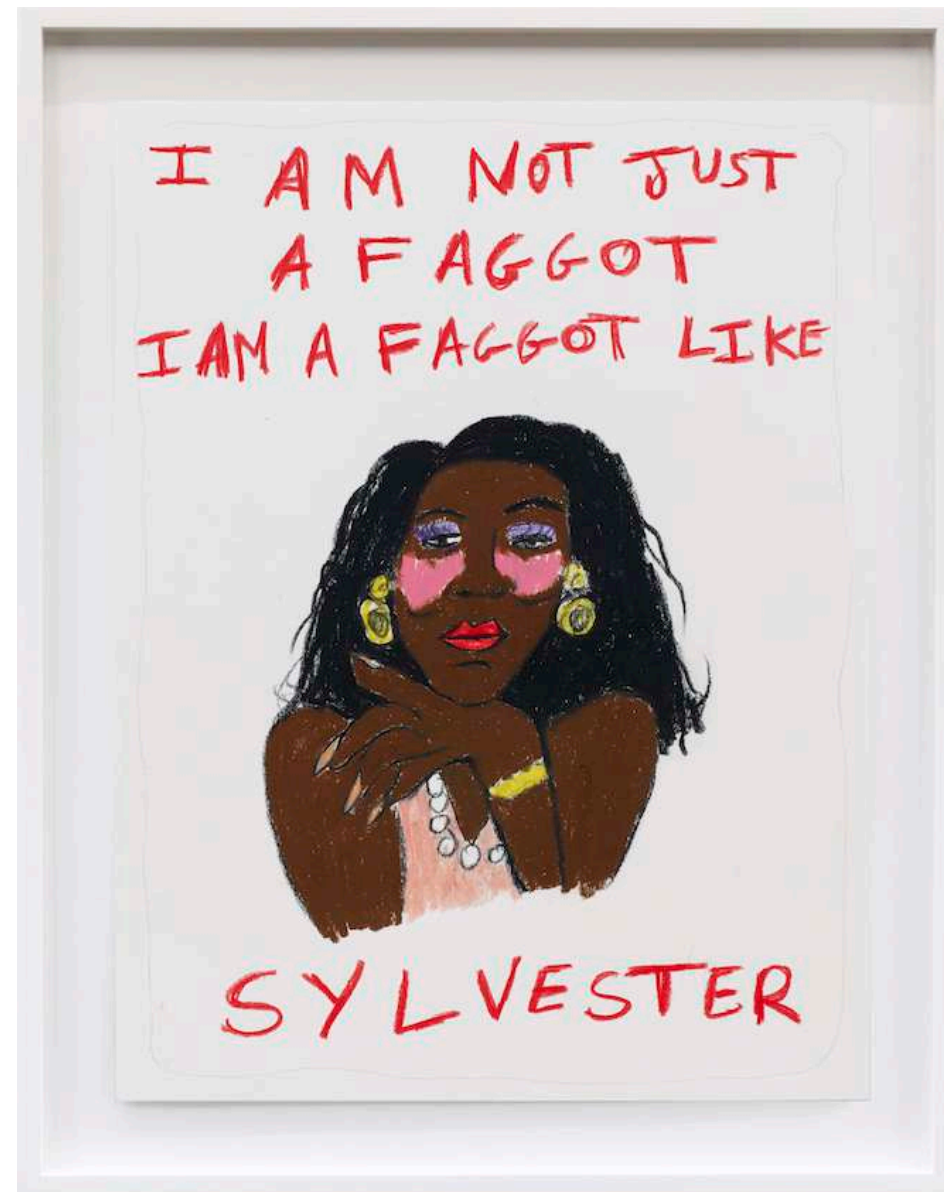
Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork / The New Man reading Ibn Battûta, 2020
Crayon, colored pencil and pastel on paper
170 x 150 cm



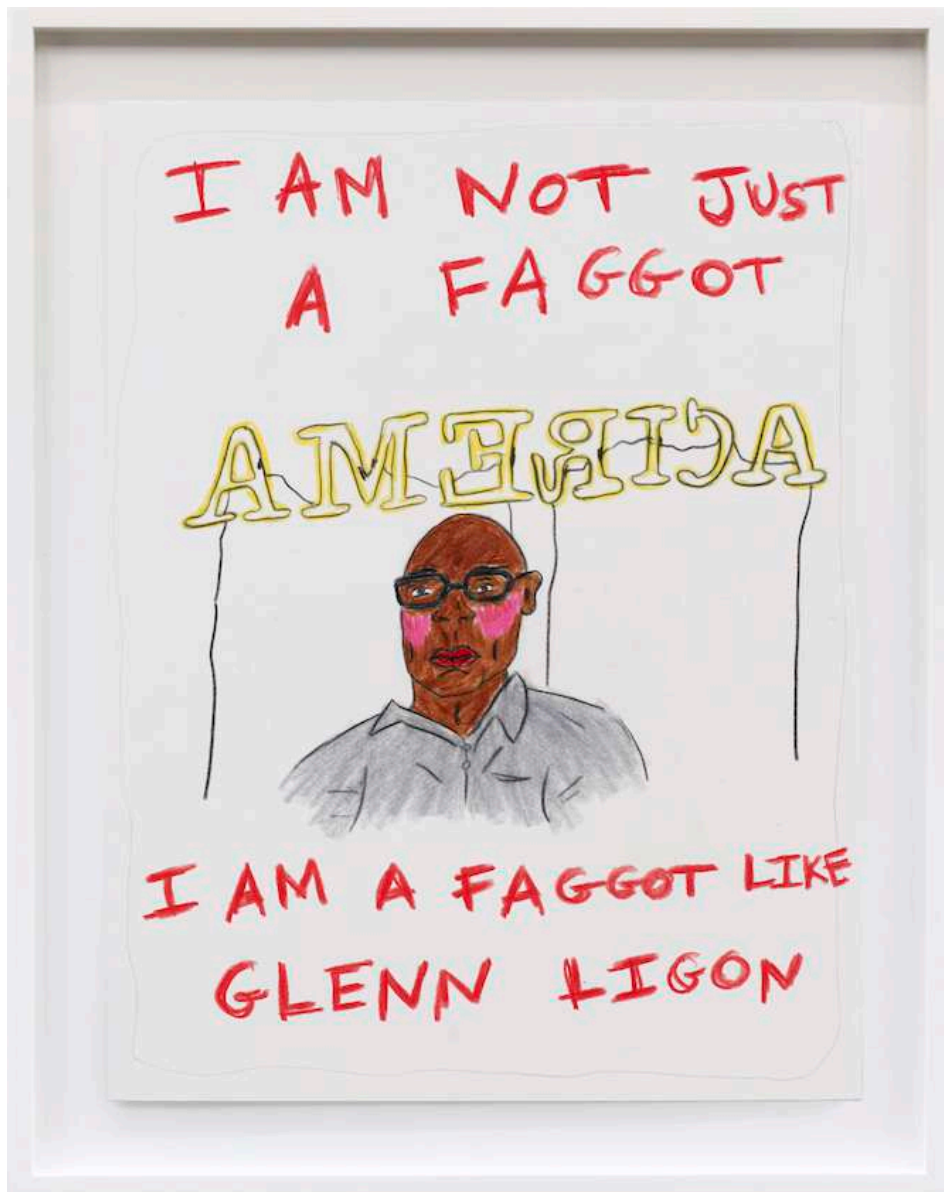
Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork / Marguerite Duras loving and hating Yann Andrea, 2020
Crayon, colored pencil and pastel on paper
90 x 101 cm



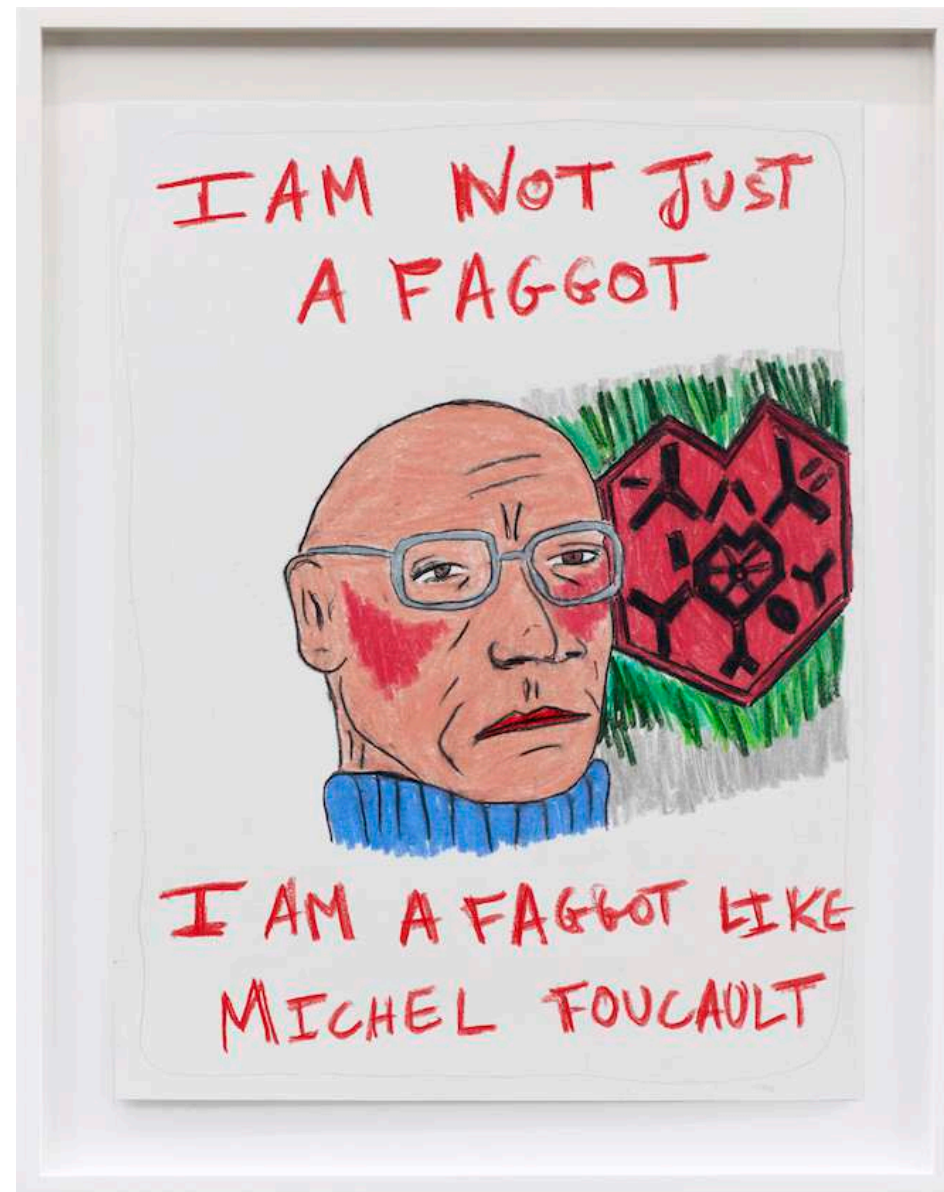
Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork / YES I AM, 2020
 Crayon, colored pencil and pastel on paper
 32 x 24 cm



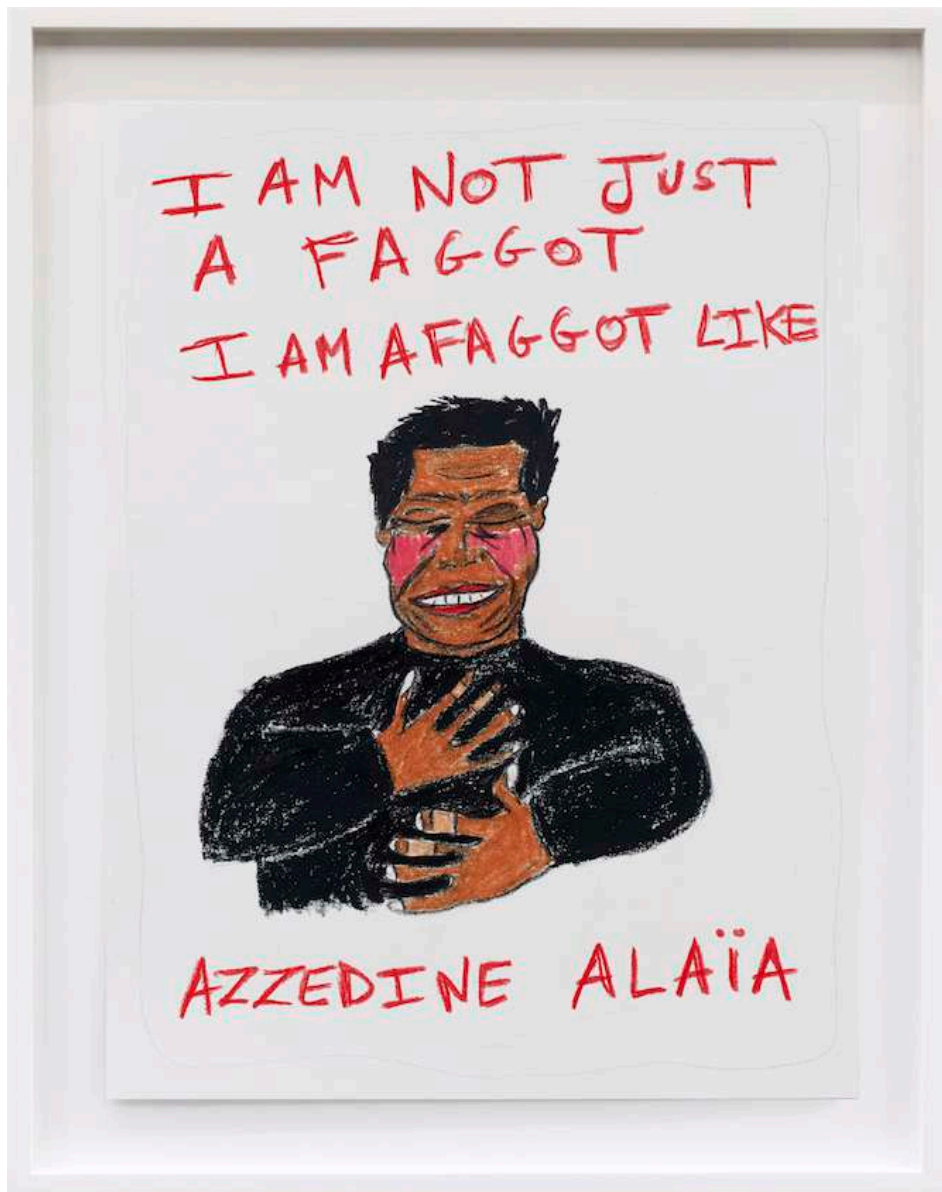
Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork / YES I AM, 2020
 Crayon, colored pencil and pastel on paper
 32 x 24 cm



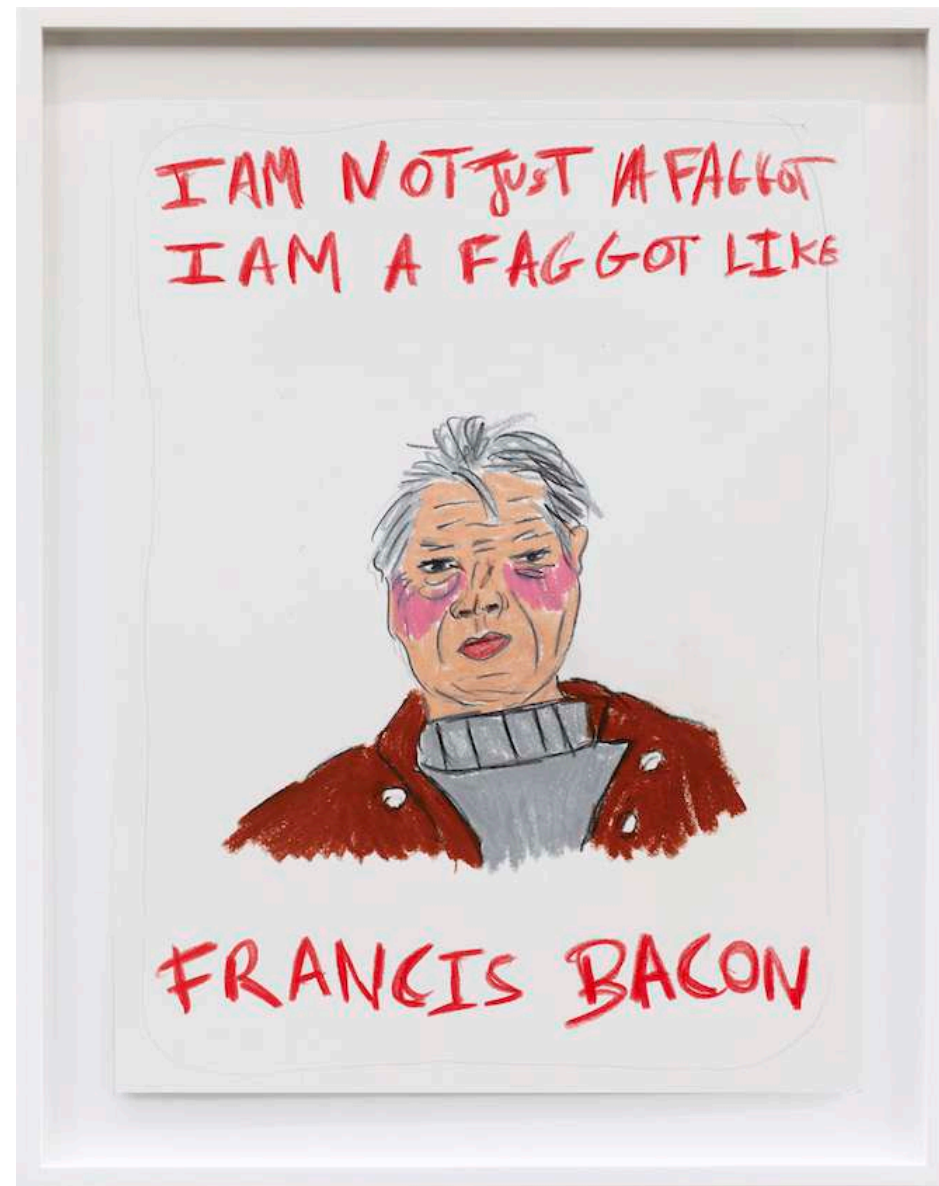
Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork / YES I AM, 2020
 Crayon, colored pencil and pastel on paper
 32 x 24 cm



Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork / YES I AM, 2020
 Crayon, colored pencil and pastel on paper
 32 x 24 cm



Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork / YES I AM, 2020
 Crayon, colored pencil and pastel on paper
 32 x 24 cm



Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork / YES I AM, 2020
 Crayon, colored pencil and pastel on paper
 32 x 24 cm



The exhibition's starting point is a public policy polling survey made in the United States in 2015 which found that 30% of Republicans and 19% of Democrats said they support 'bombing Agrabah' – the fictional nation of Disney's Aladdin – the poll emphasizes a whopping 41% of Donald Trump voters favor bombing Agrabah adding to the evidence indicating that his support is disproportionately drawn from the least knowledgeable parts of the electorate.

This tragi-comic news suddenly reveals the strength of collective belief mechanisms and in this case raises the question of how exoticism influences the way the 'exotic subject' is perceived and how he is determined as other.

Soufiane Ababri uses parodic tools to deconstruct the multiple layered construction of what exoticism should be in the eyes of a Western viewer. He will wander among Edward Said's writings such as *Orientalism* published in 1978 and known as one of the most influential scholarly books of the 20th century. In that essay Said examines Western scholarship of the "Orient," specifically of the Arab Islamic world argues that early scholarship by Westerners in that region was biased and projected a false and stereotyped vision of "otherness" on the Islamic world that facilitated and supported Western colonial policy.

Ababri has been fascinated by the ancestral Turkish wrestling tradition which is devoid of any form of ambiguity in the Turkish context assured by a strong stance of virility and a highly hetero-

normative social structure. What if the archetypical figure of the wrestler could be a window to reexamine queer theories within the Turkish context...?

Moreover, the playful dialog between these references intends to reveal the complexity of domination mechanisms and beyond that the long existing frictions between Northern and Southern countries.

♪ OH I COME FROM A
LAND, FROM A
FARAWAY PLACE,
WHERE THE
CARAVAN CAMELS ROAM ♪

♪ WHERE THEY CUT
OFF YOUR EAR
IF THEY DON'T LIKE
YOUR FACE,
IT'S BARBARIC, BUT
HEY, IT'S HOME ♪

♪ WHEN THE WIND'S
FROM THE EAST
AND THE SUN'S FROM
THE WEST
AND THE SAND IN
THE GLASS IS RIGHT ♪

♪ COME ON DOWN
STOP ON BY
HOP A CARPET AND FLY
TO ANOTHER ARABIAN
NIGHT ♪





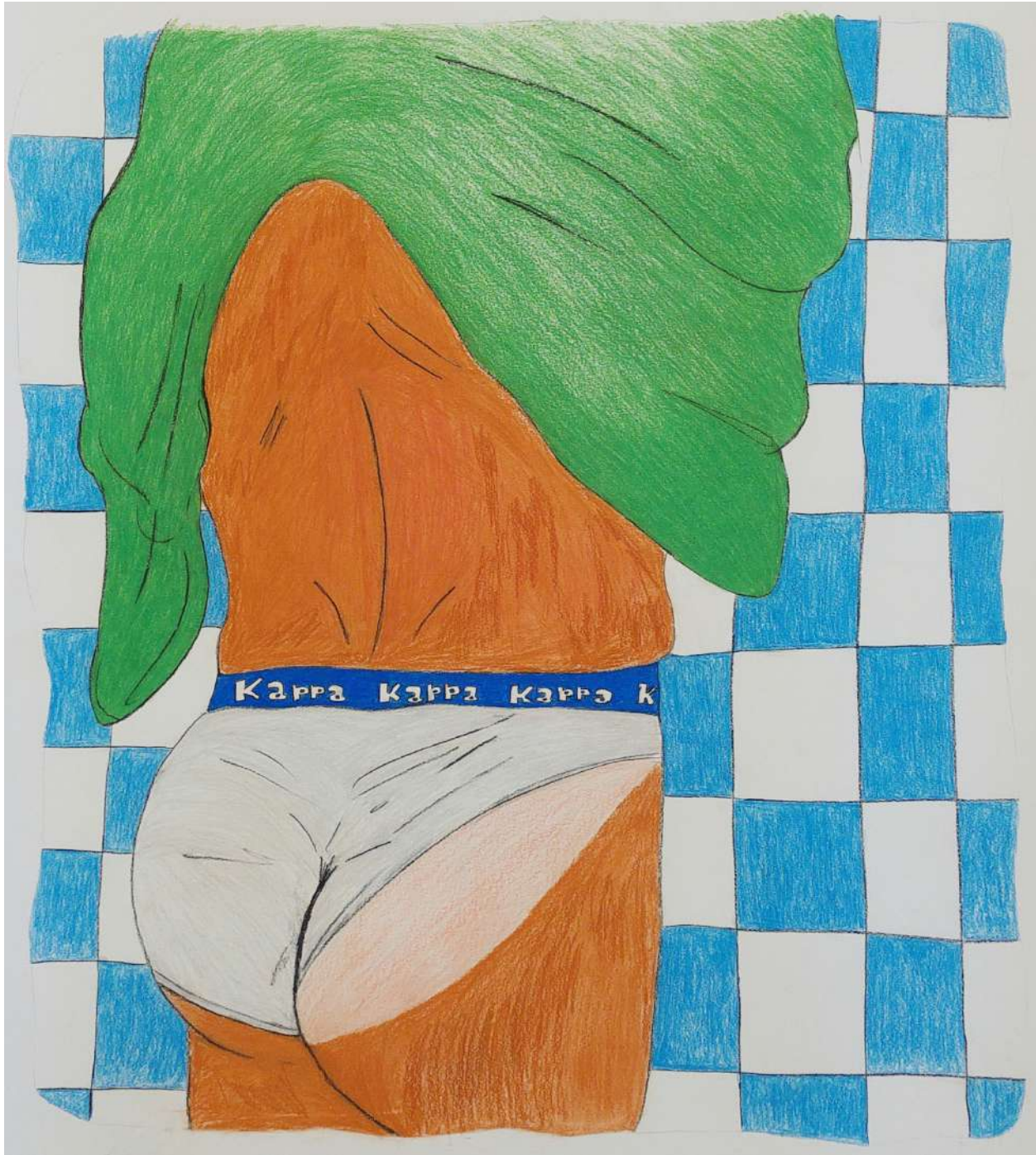
Soufiane Ababri
Fleur miraculeuse II, 2018
Enameled ceramics
110 x 90 x 24 cm



♪ OH I COME FROM A
LAND, FROM A
FARAWAY PLACE,
WHERE THE
CARAVAN CAMELS ROAM ♪

♪ WHERE THEY CUT
OFF YOUR EAR
IF THEY DON'T LIKE
YOUR FACE,
IT'S BARBARIC, BUT
HEY, IT'S HOME ♪





Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork, 2018
Color pencil on paper
90 x 86 cm



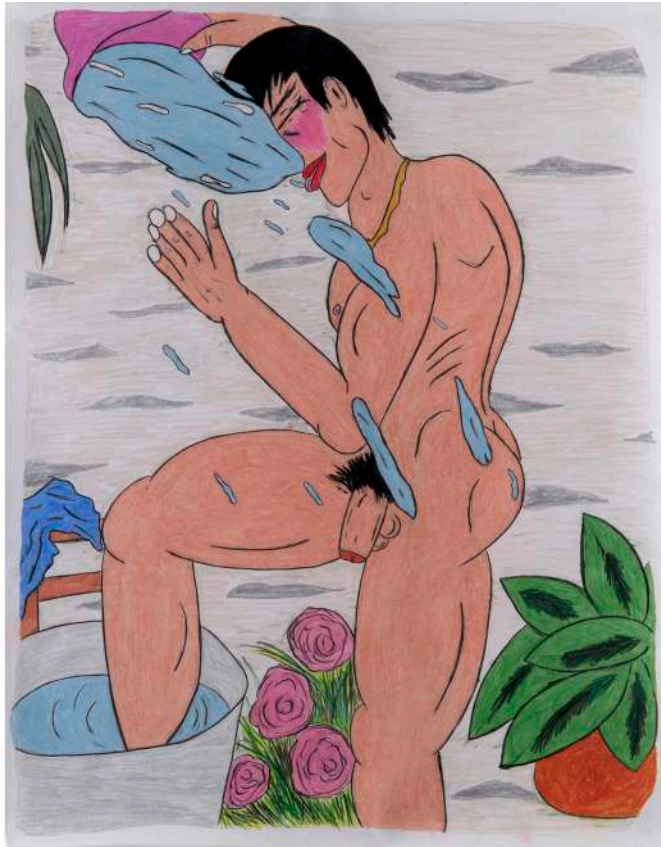
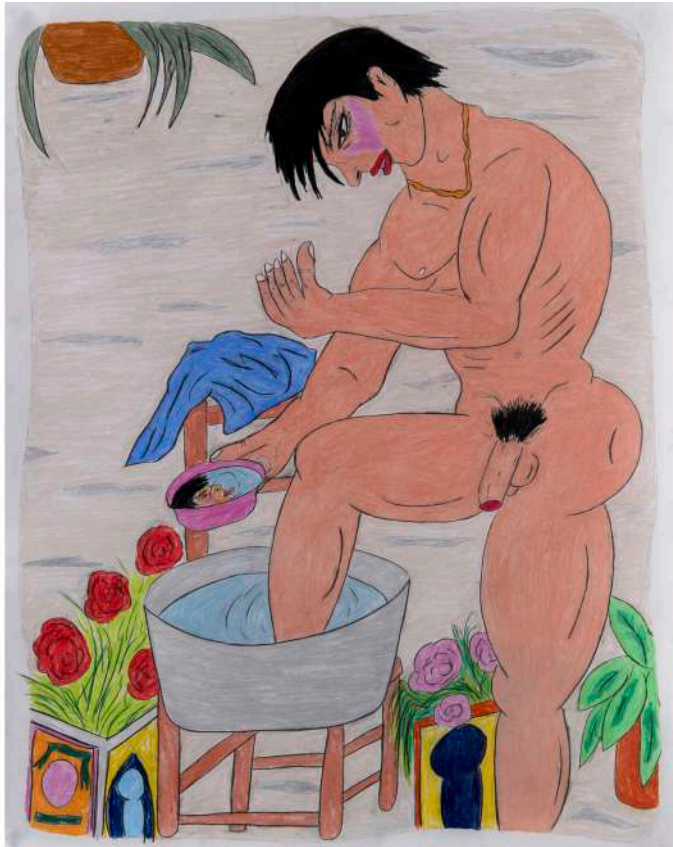


Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork XLII, 2018
Color pencil on paper
121 x 121 cm





Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork, 2018
Color pencil on paper
102 x 93 cm



Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork (triptych), 2020
 Color pencil on paper
 100 x 80 cm (each)

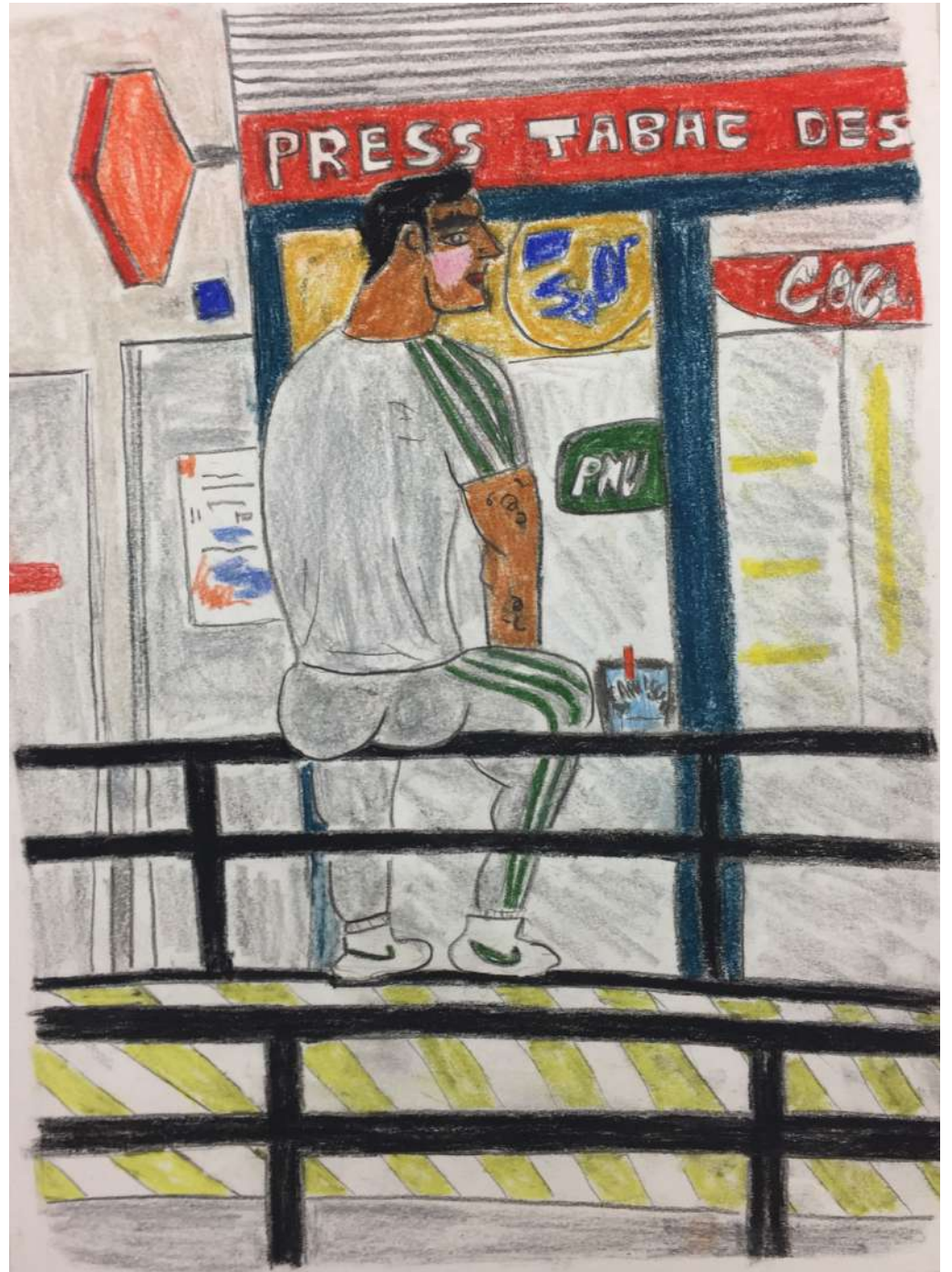
Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork, 2018
Color pencil on paper
32 x 24 cm





Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork LIV, 2018
Color pencil on paper
32 x 24 cm

Soufiane Ababri
Bedwork LX, 2018
Color pencil on paper
32 x 24 cm



THE PILL[®]

SELECTED PRESS AND TEXTS



From bed to Barbican: the Queer portraits of Soufiane Ababri

Erotic and political, the artist's colored-pencil drawings conjure an imagined gay community – and celebrate the right to love

By Anya Harrison | Apr 9, 2024 | 5 min read

Like many young artists, Soufiane Ababri found himself a bit stuck when he left art school – with no studio, and no money to rent one. So, he became – in his own, Duchampian words – an *artiste de valise*. The Moroccan artist, who today divides his time between Paris and Tangier, spent several years moving from one flatshare to the next, making and transporting his artworks, largely drawings, along the way. From 2016, Ababri began titling these pieces 'Bedworks' to reflect the fact that he makes them in bed. The series, which is arguably his best-known body of work to date, not only points to its site of production as a space distinct from a traditional studio – historically considered the norm for art production – but, for Ababri, also operates as a marker of class division and hierarchy.

'No one took me seriously at the beginning because I was working from my bed,' he tells me when we meet at a café in Paris's Marais neighborhood. Our capitalist society runs on efficiency and productivity, whereas 'a bed is associated with laziness,' he continues – and is conducive to neither. Ababri's fate has clearly changed since. In recent years, he has had solo presentations at galleries including Praz-Delavallade (Paris), THE PILL (Istanbul), ***Dittrich & Schlechtriem*** (Berlin), and ***Mendes Wood DM*** (Brussels). On the day of our interview, he had just returned from opening his first major institutional solo show at The Curve gallery in London's Barbican.

Entitled *Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated* (2024), this site-specific commission not only includes drawing but also performance and set design – two other significant components of Ababri's visual vocabulary. The work responds to the architectural particularity of the exhibition venue: a monumental curve that gives the space its name. Brightly colored drawings hang on pitch-black walls or against alcoves hand-painted scarlet. Made in the artist's signature medium of colored pencils and crayons on paper, they picture an imagined gay community in which mainly non-western male bodies – in various stages of undress, sexual arousal, and intimacy – meet, rest, play, and dance.

Ababri took inspiration from the similarity between the venue's curvaceous form and the shape of the Arabic letter *zayin* (ز), which is also the first letter of *zamel*, a pejorative slang word used to insult gay men in the Maghreb. On the exhibition's opening night, to the soundtrack of a muffled heavy bass – evoking the experience of standing outside a club – dancers performed a choreography that drew on Moroccan dance while touching on subjects that are at the core of Ababri's work: belonging, homophobia, (post-)colonial violence, and the perennially exoticized and fetishized immigrant body. Pressed against the gallery's curved walls, lying on their backs or crawling on all fours, the dancers appeared to refuse to stand upright. For the artist, this refusal to act 'appropriately' and the choreography as a whole – created in collaboration with choreographer Guillaume Le Pape – was part of a necessary reflection on how to reclaim imagery and gestures that belong to largely non-white, non-western communities at a time when these very same communities are living through a period fraught with tension and violence.

Taken as a whole, the exhibition is a 'paranoiac project,' explains Ababri, in which the space of the gallery is 'throwing insults at you and sending signals more real than reality itself.' Ababri is committed to addressing histories of violence and subverting dominant and normative regimes of representation. After a childhood spent in Rabat, the artist moved to France in 2004 to study psychology, before dropping out and immersing himself in the night-time shift work of gay bars and saunas. Having long harbored a desire to study art, Ababri was awakened to its political potential after seeing work by ***Bruce Nauman*** at a show in Montpellier. He took the plunge and enrolled at the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Montpellier, before moving on to Paris's École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs. It was only after finishing his studies at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, however, that Ababri made the decision to place drawing – a medium that, historically, has been seen as painting's poor cousin – at the center of his practice. He has aligned it with his own lived experience as a gay, Arab, immigrant man, brought up in a religious context but also as part of a generation well-versed in post-colonial thinking.

At once erotic and political, marked by a carnal, raw energy evident in the pencil marks, the men in his drawings constitute a chosen family of gay or subcultural icons, especially literary ones. (Jean Genet and writers associated with the Beat generation – Paul Bowles, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg – make recurring appearances.) They fill an art-historical and socio-political void, namely by portraying, as Ababri explains, ‘sexual relations between men of color.’ In doing so, they reclaim an agency for subjects that the western canon of painting has long presented as passive, spurred on by an Orientalist gaze that saw Arab men simply as slaves or exotic specimens, sexy figures to be readily consumed by a bourgeois and aristocratic public.

Ababri’s insistence on working from his bed, then, takes on an additional meaning: he purposefully rejects the traditional image of the artist painting while standing erect in front of his easel. This refusal of convention extends to the artist’s radical approach to self-portraiture. ‘The figure of the artist who represents himself as a genius just doesn’t sit well with me,’ he says. As if to drive the point home, Ababri incorporated fecal matter into his *Autoportrait en excrément et rose et bleu* (Self-Portrait in Pink and Blue with Excrement, 2022), one of a series of drawings exhibited last autumn as part of ‘SOL! The Regional Biennial’ at MO.CO, Montpellier. In this piece, Ababri attempts to liberate the scatological from its historical associations with mental illness and asylums while injecting a degree of impurity into the often-sterile environment of the art institution.

It would be tempting to say that Ababri’s practice flirts with the clandestine. The artist himself prefers the term ‘infiltration’ to describe a way of making political statements that does not necessarily rely on an activist vocabulary. His series ‘Bedwork / Yes I AM’ (2018–ongoing) takes as its starting point a chapter titled ‘Who Defends the Queer Child?’ from philosopher Paul B. Preciado’s book *An Apartment on Uranus* (2019). In it, Ababri draws individual portraits of gay men – including his contemporaries and predecessors, from Michel Foucault and the late curator Vincent Honoré to artists of his own generation, like Paul Maheke or **Philipp Timischl** – who, for him, make up a spiritual community. It unfolds as an ‘ongoing encyclopedia’ that celebrates and honors those who also strive to make themselves heard.

Interview

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

Angelique Chrisafis



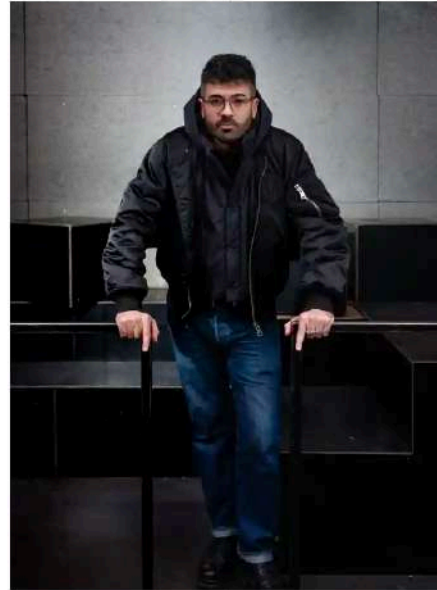
Between the paragraphs of Oscar Wilde's reading – a "bedwork" by Soufiane Ababri. Photograph: Rebecca Fanuele/© Soufiane Ababri

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."

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

Pink Cheeks, Brown Shades: Soufiane Ababri's Queer Erotics
Cüneyt Çakırlar

I was invited to write this short piece on Soufiane Ababri's art practice when I have been passionately reading and studying Gayatri Gopinath's recently published monograph *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (2018), and thinking which queer art practices could be also be incorporated to the scholar's discussion. Extending her theoretical framework in *Impossible Desires* (2005), which focuses on the South Asian queer diasporic cultural practices and the "erotics of power" embedded within these practices' articulations of colonial memory (2005:2), Gopinath's *Unruly Visions* conceptualises a "queer regional imaginary" by focusing on a selection of contemporary art practices including those of Chitra Ganesh, Aurora Guerrero, Sheba Chhachhi, Akram Zaatari, Tracey Moffatt, Allan deSouza, Sher Shah, and David Dasharath Kalal. These "aesthetic practices of queer diaspora", Gopinath argues, "dwell precisely in the digressions offered by mining both personal and regional histories, identifications and affiliations: they constitute alternative byways that veer away from developmental and assimilationist narratives of both gay and national formation" (2018: 26).

What is formulated as artistic subjectivity here is defined through its refusal to be embraced or "included" by the heteronormative/homonormative discourses of liberation, empowerment, and citizenship. This register of queer aesthetics, whose investments are in neither a categorically intelligible desire nor a self-ameliorative empowerment, resonates with Soufiane Ababri's fierce art practice. This ambition to imagine a post-colonial queer practice seems to invest in, in Abrari's words, "a way of imagining how to perform a

political and engaged practice without using the vocabulary of the dominant power ... [the social domination of which] infiltrates and contaminates systems of representation".

In his interview for the solo exhibition *Here is a Strange and Bitter Crop* displayed at SPACE in London (2018), Ababri makes clear how the queer accent in his art practice works through the intersectional operations of his identity: "the fact that I belong to several groups, namely immigrant, homosexual, brown-skinned, and being part of a postcolonial generation, gives me the opportunity to see things differently and interpret things in a specific way". However, this claim to difference in Ababri's practice does not merely translate into specific regional/geographic markers of identity but also work as an expansive, trans-local queer-of-color sensibility that relates to different contexts of queer intimacy and desire.

Multiple layers of appropriation are at work in Ababri's work. Yet, the most significant gesture is located within its medium-specificity. He titles his drawings as "bedworks" implying that the artist's production takes place in his bed. The literal, metaphorical and ideological implications of uttering "bedworks" as title do not only offer a playful intervention into the marginalized status of drawing-as-medium within the hierarchical value system of the discipline of art history but also highlight the artist's embodied labor in the process of producing (homo-)erotic art. Ababri swerves from a professionalized and disembodied space of art production to a personal, sexual, intimate and affective territory. The bed becomes the studio.

Ababri's aesthetic choices in form, context and content helps us consider his works as a personal album, or an archive that

presents everyday erotic encounters. This archive documents “queer affiliations across disparate locations [by] contesting the ongoing legacies of colonial modernity ... that consigns gendered, sexualised and racially marked bodies to hypervisibility and/or invisibility within a hegemonic visual field” (Gopinath 2018: 169-170). Rather than investing in a liberal humanitarian optics that urges us to see and save victims/objects rather than to witness agents/subjects, Ababri’s sketchy and banal imagery of everyday queer tensions between men prioritizes an exploration of the intersections between the exotic, the erotic, and the ideological within dominant depictions of non-white masculinities, and their reception.

Ababri collects images from various sources including films, pornography, art works, and photographs he takes with his phone. The series of bedworks displayed under the title of *Memories of a Solitary Cruise* contains various artistic references including David Hockney’s paintings/drawings, Wolfgang Tillmans’ photography, Keith Haring’s activist drawings, Caravaggio’s paintings, Warhol’s screen tests, and Ang Lee’s film *Brokeback Mountain*. Ababri’s urge to “draw men with extreme masculinity” resonates particularly with Hockney’s early paintings and drawings in the 1980s, especially those inspired by the American beefcake magazine *Physique Pictorial* and 1980s’ gay soft-core. This connection with Hockney operates through not only the homoerotic content but also the formal/stylistic gestures these drawings perform. While Ababri strategically uses drawing as medium to present mainly non-white masculinities by means of a miniature-like aesthetic that lacks Western perspective, Hockney’s early paintings (especially those with references to swimming pools and physique magazines) also attempt to contest the articulations of photographic realism

in Western canons of visual arts. Similarly, Ababri’s incorporation of non-white men into drawings that cite Tillmans’s photographic fetishism and Caravaggio’s *tableau vivants* clearly demonstrates the artist’s investments in hybrid, cross-cultural frameworks of queer aesthetics. Rather than attempting to authenticate specific cultural locales of homosociality, Ababri re-appropriates formal registers of queer representation by reflecting on his own experience of diasporic double consciousness. Perhaps, the emphasis on the “solitary cruise” demonstrates the situatedness, and the libidinal/erotic nature, of the artist’s own reflections on erotic embodiment and same-sex desire. In parallel to the practices of Hockney, Tillmans and even Caravaggio, Ababri’s art practice explores the political potentials of erotic expression rather than those of fixed, stable identities and their affirmations/celebrations.

While the early examples of Ababri’s bedworks seem to be more eclectic in the ways in which they are grouped and exhibited as compilations of images, the artist has recently been working on a set of site-specific projects that enabled him to further contextualize his queer aesthetics by responding to specific locations of sexual politics. Here is a *Strange and Bitter Crop*, the solo show at SPACE in London (2018), is a creative response to the suicide of Justin Fashanu, the first professional football player who came out as a gay man. Here, Ababri’s work expands from Fashanu to a broader meditation on the racialized black body in popular culture and on the ways in which the colonial memory works as an imprint in representing and locating black male body. Ababri’s bedworks provide a queer response that celebrates black body through presenting black men having sex in the cotton fields. While the *mise-en-scène* in these works presents a symbolic landscape of colonialism and slavery, the sexual exchange of black male figures

Ababri located within this landscape juxtaposes sexual pleasure with colonial violence. However, by making the colonial memory the very playground for sexual pleasure enjoyed by men of color, Ababri's practice politicizes the erotic while eroticising the political memory. There is no sexual desire without that memory.

Ababri's show at the PILL® in Istanbul, titled *Memories of a Solitary Cruise*, seems to offer another site-specific queer response to the Western exoticisation of "Oriental" masculinities. The artist's starting point for this project is a 2015 Public Policy Polling survey made in the USA, which found that 30% of Republicans and 19% of Democrats said they would support 'bombing Agrabah' – the fictional country of Disney's *Aladdin*. In response to this post-truth American perception of the Middle East, Ababri takes the genie in *Aladdin*'s lamp as a point of departure in this project. Anthropomorphised as an ambiguous, asexual and submissive figure, the blue genie in *Aladdin* becomes an object of Orientalism in Ababri's imagery. In his depiction of the traditional Turkish wrestling, the artist abstracts the genie by painting the wrestlers' bodies in blue, and transfers its Orientalist meaning to an all-encompassing color that flows throughout the exhibition space on- and off-canvas. Blue becomes the male flesh in Ababri's depiction of the wrestling scene, or perhaps it is the lubricant oil that facilitates male wrestling and its homoerotic theater of masculinity. By using another Orientalist image of homoeroticism, where the erotic is located outside the intelligible sexual identity categories, Ababri's bedworks gaze back at the West by appropriating its tools of representation.

Majority of the male bodies depicted in Ababri's bedworks, including his Turkish wrestlers and his black lovers of the cotton

fields, have pink cheeks, which can be considered as the artist's "signature". Ababri notes that these pink cheeks are used to add a feminizing effect to the masculine men he usually depicts in his works: "Putting on these pink cheeks eroticises the male body and it's also a way to access to a system of representation of fragility... the pink cheeks imply a body that loses control of its own representation".

Ababri's practice is a quest for queer commons in the field of the (homo-)erotic. The artist discovers new answers to the question who counts entitled to desire or eroticise whom or what, and who is entitled to make that desire visible if not legitimate.



← **BED WORK CVII**
COLOR PENCIL
ON PAPER
65 × 48 CM
2020

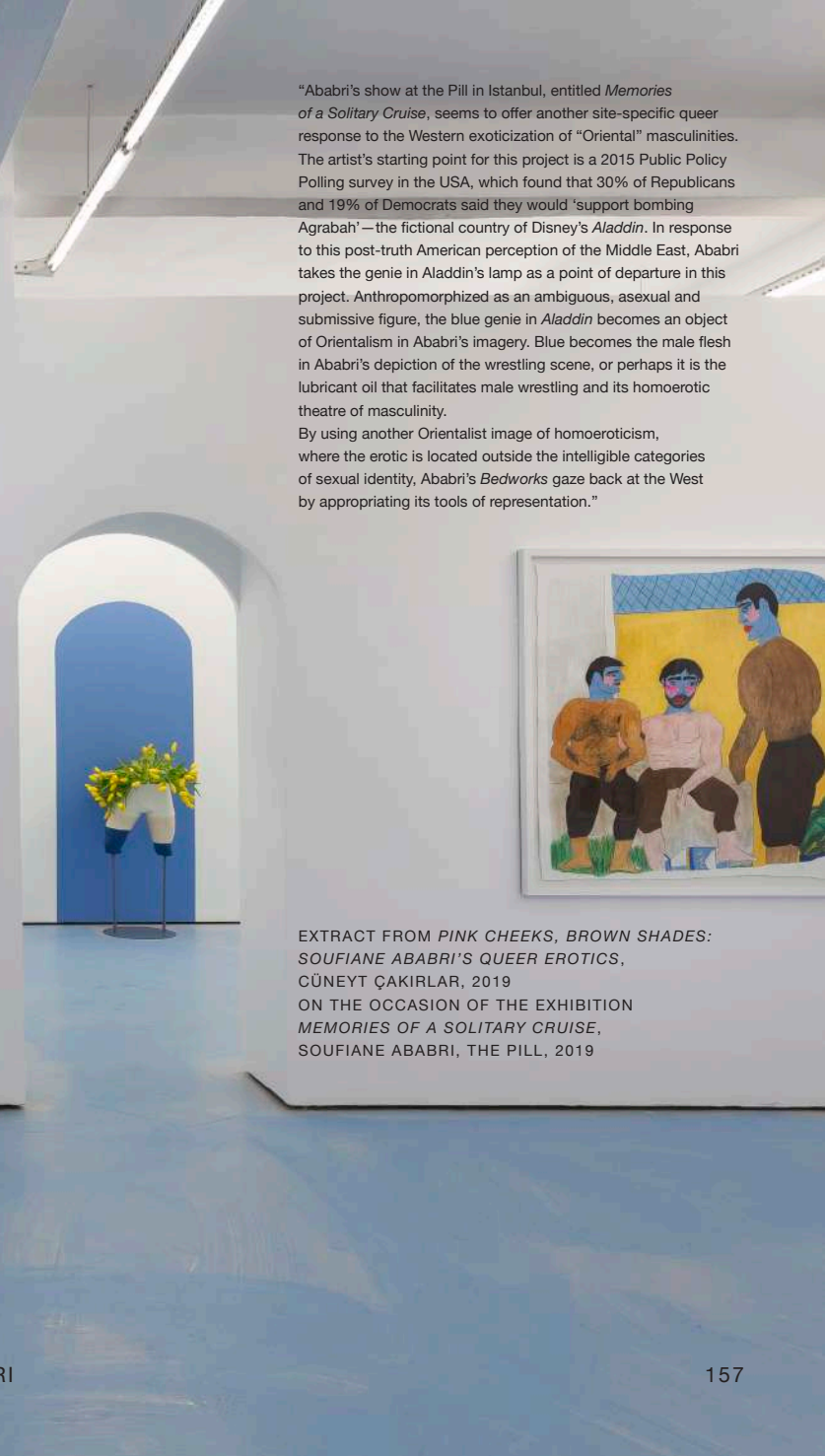
Soufiane Ababri: On Giving Flesh, Blood and Rosy Cheeks to “Reparative Reading”

Soufiane Ababri's colored pencil drawings possess the frail intimacy of his medium of choice. Since his *Bedworks* series, initiated in 2016, the Moroccan artist depicts scenes of erotic intimacy, domestic bliss or brotherly love. His portraits delineate a series of queer male-identifying subjects of color through representational strategies that reverse the normative, Eurocentric gaze. There are, for instance, the rosy cheeks—and sometimes butt cheeks—indicative of a softness obliterated by the stereotyping of the non-white male to a hyper-virilized fetish or a threatening Other. Another, less commented upon, feature is the recurring presence of language throughout his works. This takes the shape of brand logos, movie posters or magazine covers permeating domestic interiors or urban décors; but also, more directly, through the representation of books by authors such as William Faulkner, Abû Nawâs; Edouard Glissant, Elisabeth Lebovici, or demonstration placards bearing the words “Don't shoot,” or “Nous nous souviendrons,” (We will remember)—both referring to police brutality. Through intertextuality, Ababri provides a visual incarnation of Eve Kosofsky Sedwick's “*reparative reading*.” In her book *Touching Feeling* (2003), the scholar develops the concept in response to critical theory's dominant mode of “*paranoid reading*,” a hermeneutics of suspicion unable to account for queer—and in Ababri's case, racialized—pleasure, creativity and solidarity. “*What we can learn from such practices*,” she assesses, are “*the many ways in which selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.*”



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SOUFIANE ABABRI



"Ababri's show at the Pill in Istanbul, entitled *Memories of a Solitary Cruise*, seems to offer another site-specific queer response to the Western exoticization of "Oriental" masculinities. The artist's starting point for this project is a 2015 Public Policy Polling survey in the USA, which found that 30% of Republicans and 19% of Democrats said they would 'support bombing Agrabah'—the fictional country of Disney's *Aladdin*. In response to this post-truth American perception of the Middle East, Ababri takes the genie in *Aladdin*'s lamp as a point of departure in this project. Anthropomorphized as an ambiguous, asexual and submissive figure, the blue genie in *Aladdin* becomes an object of Orientalism in Ababri's imagery. Blue becomes the male flesh in Ababri's depiction of the wrestling scene, or perhaps it is the lubricant oil that facilitates male wrestling and its homoerotic theatre of masculinity.

By using another Orientalist image of homoeroticism, where the erotic is located outside the intelligible categories of sexual identity, Ababri's *Bedworks* gaze back at the West by appropriating its tools of representation."

EXTRACT FROM *PINK CHEEKS, BROWN SHADES: SOUFIANE ABABRI'S QUEER EROTICS*, CÜNEYT ÇAKIRLAR, 2019
ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION *MEMORIES OF A SOLITARY CRUISE*, SOUFIANE ABABRI, THE PILL, 2019

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ARTFORUM



Soufiane Ababri, *Bedwork XLII*, 2018, color pencil on paper, 47 1/2 x 47 1/2".

ISTANBUL

Soufiane Ababri

THE PILL®

Ayvansaray Mahallesi Mürselpaşa Caddesi

181 Balat

January 10–February 23, 2019

In Turkey's oil wrestlers, Soufiane Ababri finds the focus for an exhibition tackling Western representations of the Orient. In the Moroccan-born artist's "Bedwork Series," all works 2018, oil-slathered Turkish men attempt to overthrow one another, less agents of domination than floral figures defying the homoeroticizing gaze. Pink-checked men with fluid gender identities, the *pehlivans* nourish and pour olive oil on each other as Ababri's affectionate, colored pencil depictions turn masculinity on its head; the softhearted male bodies derive their power from acts of kindness, not the roughness attributed

to them by Orientalist fantasists.

Drawn while the artist lay in bed, the second part of "Bedwork Series" concerns a cluster of men in Turkish settings: They drink espresso on stools, cook pasta in a kitchen, sit naked on a mattress, smoke hookah, and pore over a book. These twenty-four images offer glimpses into the erotics of the mundane, exploring the lolling shiftlessness of the subjects. *Fleur Miraculeuse* comprises four ceramic statues portraying lower bodies of wrestlers as they perform *peşrev*, the dance-like warm-up movements in wrestling matches. The sculptures, scattered throughout the rooms, double as vases filled with tulips. The title references Jean Genet's prison memoirs, and the floral arrangements, dug into buff bodies, echo that writer's surreal dramas.

In the video installation *Memories of a Solitary Cruise*, a bulky man prepares coffee in the gallery's kitchen before changing into a wrestling singlet. He meticulously mops the floors with blue paint, contributing to the exhibition's production. Smearing rather than cleaning the floor, the performer paints a wavy sea beneath him so that, in their appreciation of Ababri's subtle portraits and scenes, the visitors themselves become cruisers.

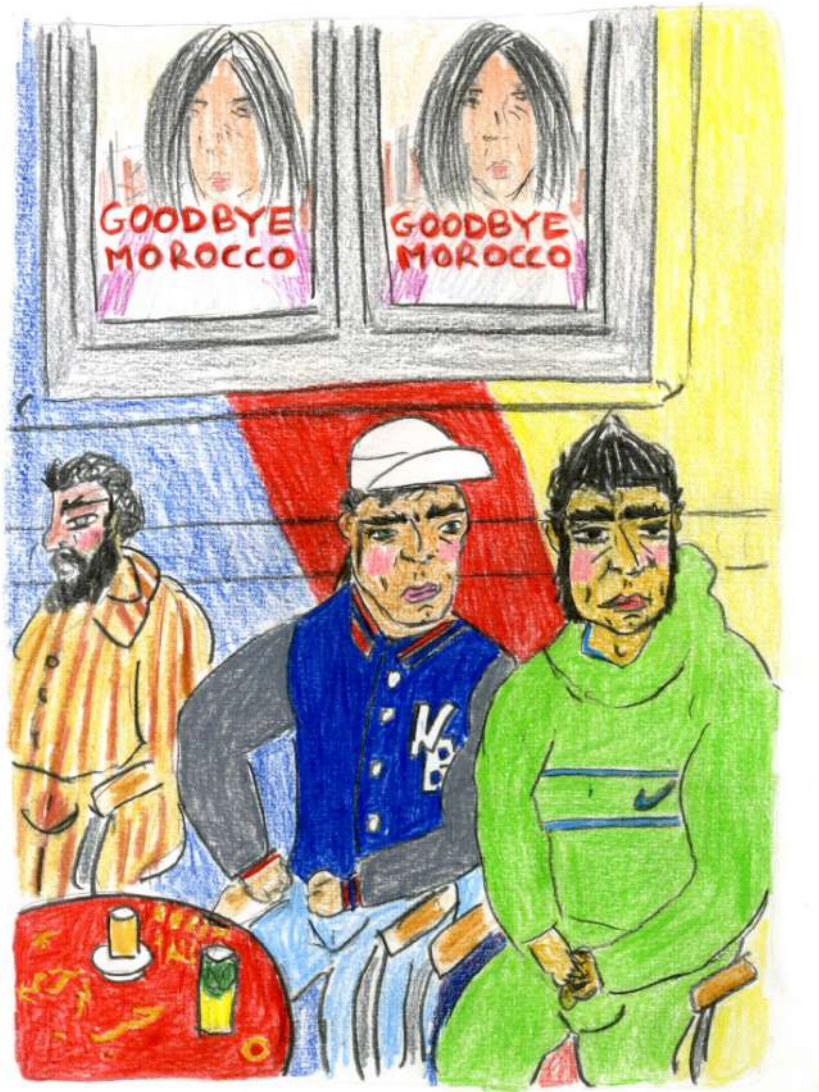
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Les esquisses érotico-politiques de Soufiane Ababri

À première vue, les esquisses colorées de Soufiane Ababri convoquent une imagerie insouciante faite de corps nus, de baisers exaltants et de personnages anonymes qui arborent fièrement un look streetwear. Avec une aisance maladroite, l'artiste griffonne des hommes masquant leur sexe. Exposées jusqu'au 23 février à la galerie The Pill d'Istanbul, ses hachures multicolores figurent des personnages dont la pilosité, la musculature et la pudeur modérée font surgir un leitmotiv : celui de la virilité. Fil d'Ariane, l'homosexualité heurte violemment un passé colonial, un racisme dont les stigmates gravitent inlassablement autour du globe. Et ce sont justement des mécanismes de domination que Soufiane Ababri cherche à révéler, discréditer puis démanteler. Pourtant, avec ses représentations lumineuses et naïves, le dessinateur refuse de porter l'étendard de la cause queer. Refusant l'appellation de "militant", il se contente de faire écho à un monde qui l'observe, pour mieux l'observer à son tour.

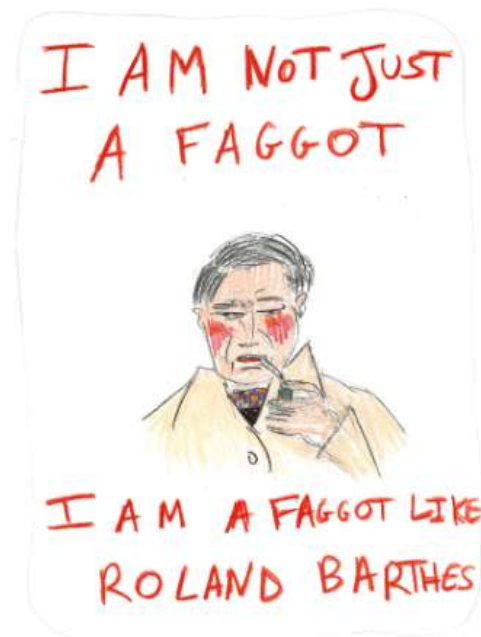


The Unapologetically Gay, Erotic Drawings of Soufiane Ababri



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.



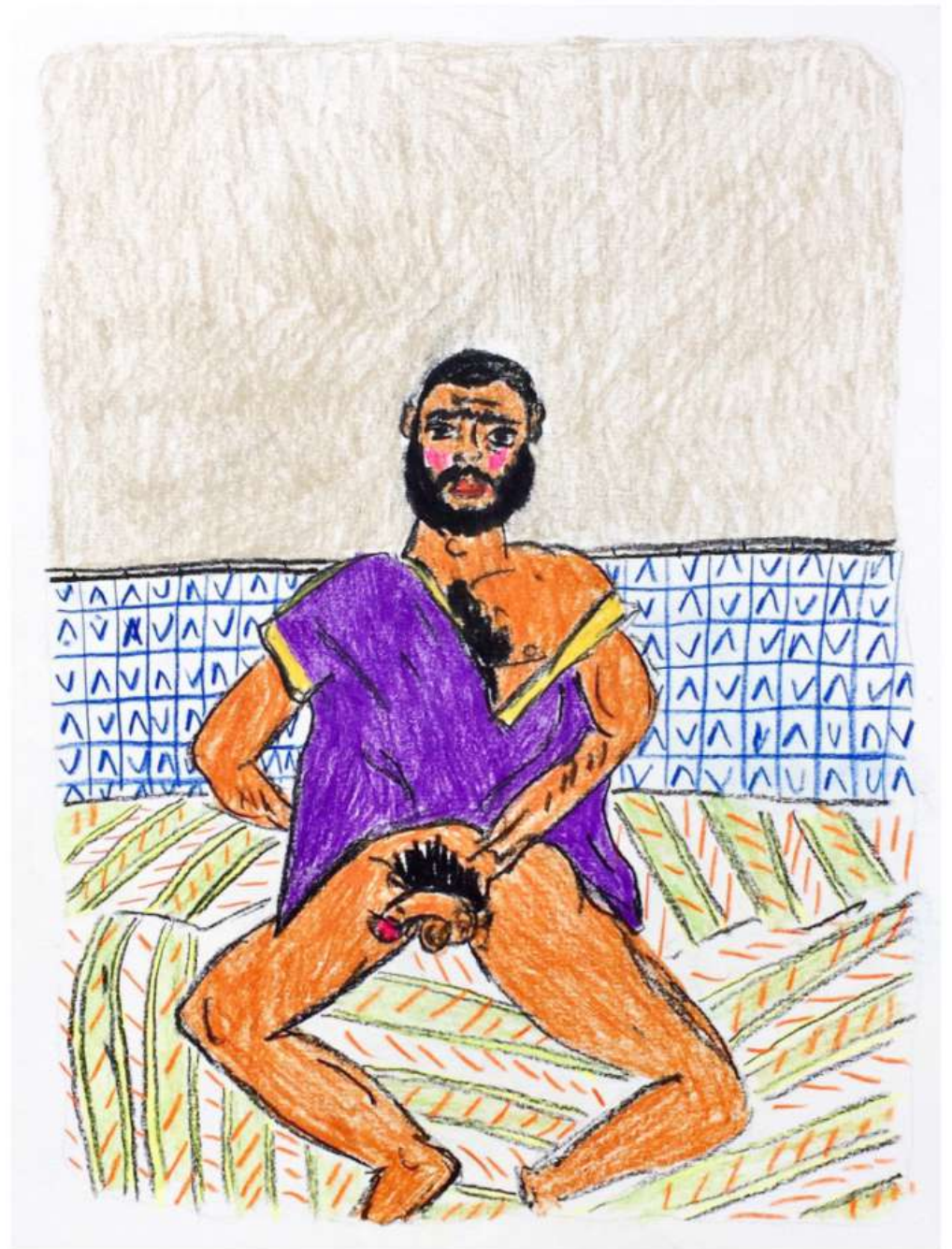
Soufiane Ababri, from *I Am Not Just a Faggot* (2019-2020), color pencils on paper, 24 x 32 cm

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.

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.



Soufiane Ababri, *Bedwork* (2019-2020), color pencils on paper, 24 x 32 cm



Soufiane Ababri, *Bedwork* (2019-2020), color pencils on paper, 24 x 32 cm

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.



Soufiane Ababri, *Bedwork* (2019-2020), color pencils on paper, 24 x 32 cm

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.

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