



The title of the exhibition *Jazira* refers to the word “island” in Arabic, which according to historians gave its name to the city because of a group of islands off the coast of Algiers (El Djazair), and by extension to all of Algeria. Throughout history the territory of Algiers expanded onto the sea, and gradually the islands became connected to the city. The land appropriated the sea in the same way that it appropriated the cultures and civilizations that came into contact with it. Over the course of centuries, Algeria was nourished by Phoenician, Roman, Berber, Arab, Ottoman, Jewish, Spanish, French tales... The religious and social syncretism deriving from these cross-fertilizations make up the background of Algerian society.

El Meya inherited this diversity. She borrows traditional scenes from the collective imagination and the history of the country, which she transposes into her paintings. The subjects matters, the objects, the backgrounds she juxtaposes on her canvases follow a precise codification, as do rituals (scenes of sacrifice and trance, rites of passage...). She stages men and women executing specific gestures that are sometimes simple to understand, and sometimes in need of deciphering. Like in a puppet show, bodies appear strangely divided up. Each face, each limb, seems to have been assigned a specific function. The grotesque stands alongside the tragic, delicacy alongside cruelty.

The creative context of El Meya’s work is informed by tastes inherited from trends running through art history up until today: modern art, but also Islamic art and Persian influences.

The works exhibited show a particular interest in orientalist representations depicting how the colonial gaze fantasizes local populations. El Meya extracts singular situations of people, places and images which supposedly represent typical Algerian men and women. “Through my paintings I try to talk about present day Algeria from my subjective viewpoint as an Algerian painter, who neither wants to reestablish the old orientalist vision nor wants to deconstruct knowledge inherited from the past, but strives rather to create new images, those of a new perspective reinstating the complexity and diversity of histories, places, and facts.”

F.B.

El Meya was born in 1988 in Constantine. She lives and works in Algiers. For her first solo exhibition in France, she is presenting a series of paintings created in Algeria and during her residency at the Villa Arson in Nice in the spring of 2023.

Fayçal Baghriche In Arabic, Algeria is called *El Djazair*. This means “islands”. You decided to call your exhibition *Jazira* (The Island). This word comes from *isla* (isolated, separated on all sides). I can’t help thinking of how insular the country is. It’s particularly difficult for Algerians to travel abroad, and relations with the international art scene are extremely limited. For decades, the country has been evolving in complete isolation, and until very recently the art world was nourished essentially by classical and modern references. How did your painting burgeon in such a context?

El Meya Choosing the name *Jazira* actually was directly related to Algeria. Personally, I believe there are many ways of opening up to the world. And indeed the Algerian art scene today clearly shows this. It’s true for visual arts, literature, cinema, or music.

The country is much more open to foreign influences. Algerian authors are released in France, films are co-produced and screened in several international festivals. Algeria is not as isolated as it used to be. In any case, artists have found a way to make their works known. And this opening to international culture is widely relayed through social media. The Algerian art scene is no longer invisible.

Jazira, my exhibition, enabled me to explore Algeria through founding figures such as Emir Abdelkader and Lalla Fatma N’Soumer. But also to question the representation of the Algerian world by orientalist and/or colonial painters: how would we, Algerians, represent ourselves? And how can I, an Algerian painter, deal with these issues?

F.B. A Western audience might expect a young Algerian artist to deal with questions such as submissive women, Islam, unemployment, exile, the weight of dictatorship and so on. But your painting seems to keep these society issues deliberately at a distance...

E.M. In my work, I am guided by very personal, or even intimate, sources of inspiration. Preoccupations or subjects that interest me as an Algerian woman and painter.

Often when I work, I answer a call from within, alone before my subjects.

The audience receives my paintings in a later phase. I offer them to whoever is interested in taking them, no matter their culture or their origin. When I paint, I am not aware of the public, whether Algerian, North African, African, Arabic or Western. My painting is the first place where I exercise my freedom, and it would be impossible for me to lock it up or to lock myself up in predetermined issues.

Art is about expressing oneself freely, and especially about providing the freedom to approach it, to appropriate it and to interpret it according to one’s own preferences.

For example, I could speak about the body, one of my work’s main preoccupations. I started by analyzing the representation offered by orientalist artists, only because this was the painting style and the female body closest to myself and to my history.

But this was not the body that I wanted to depict. It was far from reality, smooth, frozen, more like an

exotic postcard than a representation of someone with a history and an experience of life.

F.B. One is aware of the social situation in Algeria. How does the art scene manage to exist?

E.M. To answer this question I can only talk about my own situation, I can’t generalize or put the entire Algerian art scene in one bag. It’s true that there’s an enormous lack of art institutions, of exchanges and of means in Algeria. However personally I feel that I was lucky in meeting the right people at the right time. At the school of fine arts in Algiers, our teacher Nadira Laggoun invited the artists in residence at aria (artist residency in algiers) to meet the students. I remember one day when I was in third year, the artist Zineb Sedira who founded the residency came to present her work.

After graduation, we created an artist collective and we organized exhibitions that we called *Picturie Générale* (General Pictoria), which enabled us to show our work and to vitalize the cultural scene. Shortly after, art venues, galleries and artist residencies started being created, which allowed for emulation in the art scene and offered more visibility to Algerian artists.

As for me, I met artist Mohamed Bourouissa who was on a visit to Algiers. He invited me to participate in a round-table that you were organizing at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris in 2018. And now I am at the Villa Arson with you again and with aria.

In short, I would say that an artistic journey is always specific to an artist, to her history, to her work and to various encounters.

F.B. Amongst the works you are featuring in this exhibition, three are inspired by heroic Algerian figures.

E.M. Yes, there is a painting representing a scene from Genesis, another showing Emir Abdelkader, and the last one showing three female figures in military garb floating in the air, each holding an Algerian flag.

The first painting, where we can see a man and a woman in front of a tree, is inspired by Lalla Fatma N’Soumer and Chérif Boubaghla, two important figures of the resistance movement in the early years of the French conquest of Algeria.

Lalla Fatma N’Soumer was a warrior originating from the Kabyle nobility, who became military Chief of Staff. After creating alliances with other tribes, she defended the Kabyle territory. In fact, the French called her the Algerian Jeanne d’Arc.

Chérif Boubaghla started by fighting alongside Emir Abdelkader, then after several defeats at the hands of the French army he became Lalla Fatma N’Soumer’s ally.

I imagined them as an original couple around a fig tree and an olive tree, those that symbolize Algeria.

F.B. Do these two figures participate, like Adam and Eve, in the construction of a founding myth for Algerian identity?

E.M. I find it difficult to evoke a specific Algerian identity. The identity of a people evolves in the course of history. We keep unearthing new figures

from the past that inspire us. For example in the case of Lalla Fatma N’Soumer, this vision of a free woman, strong and Berber, served as a model.

F.B. Are Lalla Fatma N’Soumer and Chérif Boubaghla recognizable? And is it important to know who they are?

E.M. The figures of Chérif Boubaghla and Lalla Fatma N’Soumer in this diptych are not recognizable. I didn’t necessarily want them to be identifiable. What I really wanted was for anyone to be able to picture themselves in their place, to imagine that they were just any woman and any man. In any case there are few representations of these two characters, compared to Emir Abdelkader for whom we have numerous paintings, prints and photographs. Chérif Boubaghla and Lalla Fatma N’Soumer only appear on a few rare prints or paintings. This lack of representation leaves room for my imagination to give them whatever appearance I like.

F.B. You dedicated a painting to Emir Abdelkader. Is it important to recognize him?

E.M. Emir Abdelkader is the most famous of the war chiefs. He brought together the tribes from the east and the west to create a united nation against the French colonial army. He imagined common policies, a single currency. He also created a nation: the state, or emirate of Abdelkader, qualified as a modern Algerian state organized around justice, financial organization, schooling and especially the Army.

As I said before, the Emir has been enormously represented. He is an official figure and his myth is kept alive. But I realized I didn’t know much about the man, that I didn’t know his history. He seemed far away, the embodiment of an inexpressible myth, even though he was present when I grew up: the Islamic University in my hometown bears his name. When I was small I passed this building every day, and so the word “emir” was an integral part of my sound universe. A few years later, when I left Constantine for Algiers, again the emir was there, with his statue erected in the heart of Algiers.

So I chose to approach him in the form of a portrait. He is always represented wearing a *burnoose* – a long and sleeveless woolen coat with a pointed hood, worn essentially in Maghreb (white or black) –, in either of three poses: sitting, standing or riding his white horse. The poses represent three types of functions: the religious emir, scholarly and erudite; the formidable warrior; and the emir (which means prince) Muslim head of state.

Physical descriptions of the emir vary. For instance, in some stories he is described as having blue eyes, sometimes as having green eyes, brown or black eyes. The fascination for his character has created mythology.

I realized that for this painting I had to create my own image of the emir. I painted a multiple emir with eyes that change. The myth/fantasy opened up a path to my portrait of him. I imagined him with multiple appearances, facing us, seen in profile and even back to front. My emir Abdelkader has no ceremonial dress: no turban and no *burnoose*. The only thing left is his white horse, a majestic animal, an intermediary figure between the human and divine.

Images [recto] *Chrif et Fatma* (detail), 2022, diptych, acrylic on canvas, 149 × 190 cm – 159 × 190 cm [verso] *Cheval Blanc* (detail), 2021, acrylic on canvas, 175 × 198 cm, donation Claude et France Lemand/ Musée de l’IMA, photo: Leila Saadna Design In the shade of a tree Impression Perfectmix-Photoffset

villa arson

Agenda	June 17 2023 • 5pm Opening
Every day of the exhibition	• 3pm Meeting around the exhibitions
Students on a mediation course at Villa Arson will create guided tours of the exhibitions, sometimes with performances, evoking their personal interests in relation to the artistic issues of the program. Free admission. No reservation needed.	

Practical informations
Exhibitions opened every day (except on Tuesdays) from 2 to 6 pm, and from 2 to 7 pm starting July 1st.
Villa Arson is a public institution of the ministry of Culture and a legal member of Université Côte d’Azur. It is supported by the City of Nice, the Alpes-Maritimes Department, the Région Sud Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur. Villa Arson is a network member of Écoles(s) du Sud BOTOX(S), Plain Sud, d.c.a, ANDEA and ELIA Art Schools.
This exhibition is in partnership with aria (artist residency in algiers) (Algiers), and with the support of the French Institute in Algeria and the cultural agency/ Paperbagg (Algérie).



el meya

Jazira

Curator
Fayçal Baghiriche

18.06-
27.08.23



Where one would expect solidarity, compassion, mutual assistance, strength, femininity, I found a lot of brutality, hardness, domination, inequality and ugliness. Aspects often associated with men. I wanted to represent this.

Also, while observing paintings that represent women, I realized that they were often depicted as being gentle, docile and loving towards each other, though reality is completely different.

Outside, in the street, the male gaze is about desire, sexuality, seduction and envy, but the female gaze is judgmental, brutal, insulting. We've all heard stories about mothers and daughters, stepmothers and stepdaughters, about problems between friends, and also in the work space. The competition and domination is all too real, in fact there is an Algerian expression *Souk el nssa* (the women's market) to describe the violence and the rivalry between them. In *Le Salon*, I depicted three women in an intimate space away from any exterior gaze. A place where they can be themselves. The cow, which symbolizes femininity and motherhood in many cultures, here becomes the symbol of the fallen woman. In the painting, the cow is a pet next to its mistress. It occupies the whole space of the armchair, and the older woman offers it all her tenderness.

In *Le Salon*, I wanted to depict what we would rather not show or what we don't want to see.

The issue of the nude is more and more present in my work. Why do we paint nudes, and why am I myself beginning to paint them? But how can I question the nude in my work if I cover up my subjects? How can one speak about nudes without representing nudes? I think it's important to confront oneself with this image. For me the nude belongs to the intimate sphere. It can be represented without being shocking, hurtful or even pornographic.

The nude in itself is not the problem, it's the way that it has been used historically, and that the models who posed for the artists have been treated. And one last thing, the nude has always been represented by men artists, and I think that a woman's gaze on another woman is not the same as a masculine gaze.

Don't you also find representations of nude female bodies seductive?

Of course as an artist I'm interested in human anatomy. As I said before, I'm very interested in the body. However, the body I'm searching for is one that has a story to tell. A body with whom anyone can identify, with its defects, its distinctive features, an imperfect body.

To conclude, can we speak of the painting *Le Salon* (The Living Room)?

Le Salon is an earlier painting. It's part of a series called *OUMLIL*. When I was doing my research on orientalist painting, I found myself juxtaposing my paintings with Delacroix's *Les femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* [Algerian women in their apartment] (1833). I thought how strange it was that two such different interiors could come from the same society. I like the idea of comparing their contents: a women's apartment painted years ago by a male orientalist gaze on one hand, and by a contemporary female Algerian painter on the other hand.

In this painting you stage an incongruous scene with a cow on a sofa. I really like the intriguing character of this painting. The signs that you place make us question its meaning. The flat tints and the way you stage the subjects in the decor create a composition which is both calm and oppressive. I find it very accurate, for all its strangeness. The interactions you create between the subjects enable the gaze to circulate in a convincing way. It's a symbolic painting. Can you give us some of the keys to it?

Yes, the cow symbolizes femininity and motherhood. I represented it like a pet, just like a cat or a dog. A girl is pulling the cow's tail and at the same time crushing her sister's foot. It's a circular play of violence and domination. The cow has the best place. It fills up most of the space and benefits from the woman's tenderness.

We often speak of the relationship between women and men, but never of the relationship between women and women.

I started observing how women look at each other both in the urban and the intimate space, and I realized that the violence they impose on one another is added onto the violence that comes from men.

Yes. Étienne Dinet lived most of his life in Algeria, he took the name Nasr ad Dine after converting to Islam. He is considered to be "the" Algerian painter.

He painted many pictures in the city of Bou Saâda where he settled down and where a museum bearing his name has since been dedicated to him. No other Algerian artist has had this privilege: not Issiakhem, nor Khada, nor even Baya.

Whereas the Algerian people reject orientalist painting, Étienne Dinet's folkloric and fantastical representations are accepted. In a country where the nude is forbidden, this artist's representations are allowed. It's pretty surprising. I wondered about this exception.

Perhaps because these paintings made during the colonial era are considered to be part of the historical heritage.

Yes, this is one of the reasons why I'm interested in exploring them. As if the fact that he painted men praying, young girls playing in the village, women working, gave him permission to paint nude young girls. For me, this is quite violent.

Étienne Dinet's nudes are represented as being integrated in the life of the village. Just like the old woman begging or the men praying. We can just see him in Bou Saâda, making sketches of the population. The realism of his representation expands the limits of racism. The nude model is not in the studio at the service of a fantastical orientalist vision, it is in the streets. It's really surprising that the Algerians don't question this vision.

Étienne Dinet painted a lot of nude young girls, as well as other more realistic characters. As if these young girls were the same girls that are shown on the other paintings wearing dresses, playing or attending various occupations. It seems to me that these are prostitutes who posed for him. I can't imagine children from the village of Bou Saâda accepting to pose for him. The teenagers who are playing with their breasts naked are staged. This does not exist in traditional societies, nor in contemporary societies actually.

Do you find that there is ugliness in the way that Étienne Dinet represents beauty? And do you want to highlight this ugliness in your pictures?

From an aesthetic standpoint, yes, there is beauty in ugliness. However, I can't say that Étienne Dinet's paintings are ugly. In fact I don't think this is the right word regarding his work. Concerning my own paintings, I would say that they are more like a way of criticizing, of questioning his mode of representation.

You also show images of nudes. How do you deal with this issue, as an artist, as a woman with a Muslim culture? You do not speak from the same place as orientalist painters.

frozen in time that we impose upon them. I imagined them young and beautiful with gorgeous costumes floating in the air, almost in elevation or ascending towards a different place which resembles them and for which they fought. A place where they can rest far away from us and from our gaze.

The flag in my painting is a pictorial element which simulates flying away and levitation. It symbolizes resistance and these combat fighters' struggle for freedom. The flag was sewn by them and carried proudly, and later handed down to us.

I like the idea that they are looking at us, that they are flying, and that they are looking at me.

Is it a patriotic painting?

It's not a patriotic painting, it's a tribute to the women fighters who made the liberation of their country possible.

In the painting *Jazira*, which gave its name to the exhibition, we can see men and women leaving Algeria aboard small boats...

Actually, they are heading for the island in question. This place is none other than Algeria. An Algerian El Dorado in which these characters can feel at home. To paint this "Jazira", I was inspired by old representations of the old Algerian towns, the *kasbahs* that we see everywhere in Algeria: Algiers, Constantine, Ghardaïa...

This image you painted of the city makes me think of those old maps that represent birds-eye views of Algiers. These maps date back to the 18th century, the Ottoman period. Aren't the people in these boats heading towards an ideal that belongs to the past?

Yes, you're right, it looks a lot like that. In fact, I find these maps particularly beautiful: the perspective they use, the city constructed in flat tints moving upwards.

Are they heading towards the past? I don't think so.

The people on these makeshift boats don't look distressed.

No, you're right, I watched videos of *Harragas* (this is what we call people who cross borders illegally). When they get aboard these makeshift boats, more and more of the youngsters film themselves and share the images on social media.

Often the videos shared by these young people show a great moment of joy. In spite of the risk of dying on the high seas, of the history they are leaving behind, we see them singing. One does not leave one's country with a light heart, but the joy of going towards a new life is greater than the fear of danger. And then, the Algeria that I imagined, this "Jazira" that they can see from afar and towards which they are heading, is their home.

Your paintings are inspired by Étienne Dinet, a late 19th century orientalist painter whose work is characterized by a closeness to the local population.

My emir is multiple, he escapes us, free and indomitable, he makes fun of the obsessive way in which we try to grasp him. My emir rides the clouds, attached only to his white stallion.

The third figure you bring to our attention is the one of the female *Mujaheddin*, the female freedom fighter. Here we have three women in military garb floating in the air holding an Algerian flag.

When one speaks of the Independence war, one speaks almost exclusively of men. In the streets of Algiers, we can see sculptures or painted ceramics where the women fighters appear in uniform. But it's pretty rare.

It's true that women during the Independence war are often associated with figures bringing support to the male fighters, feeding them, caring for them, always remaining in the background. It reminds me of a film I saw recently in Katia Kameli's exhibition at the art center Bétonsalon in Paris, *La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* (The Women's Nuba of Mount Chenoua) directed by Assia Djebar (1977). The filmmaker interviewed women who actively participated in the Independence war from inside their homes. Whereas you show them in uniform, as armed fighters alongside men. What was their place in the liberation army?

My painting is a tribute to the women *Mujaheddin*, who fought during the Independence war of Algeria. I tried to apprehend these women, my women, to understand the weight they carried and the weight they are carrying. I tried to understand how 15 or 16 years old women could participate in the maquis, with all the fear, pain and suffering that this choice of life entailed. Through them I'm searching for women with whom I and we can identify, women made of flesh, with their personal histories, far from the symbolic image.

In my work, I placed the women *Mujaheddin* in the center of the subject and of the painting as a way of questioning their representation. How can these women who symbolize heroism be made accessible? How can a painting transmit bravery, courage and the grandeur of what they are and of what they accomplished?

You represented them flying, and at the same time I can't help from seeing them floating in water. The way you painted the sky here is not as characteristic as in the other paintings. The clouds look more like sea foam. What do you think of this?

I remember the moment and the state I was in when I painted the women *Mujaheddin*. I was spending a lot of time observing the sky, the clouds and the light of Algiers, fascinated by the splendors of nature. During the period of Covid-19, I was shut away in my studio. My only escape was the blue sky and the dense clouds.

When I imagined the women *Mujaheddin*, I asked myself how I would like to represent them today. I imagined them at a distance from everything, free. Freed from their suffering, from the symbolic image