

ART SAPPER

MUHAMMAD YUSUF DESCRIBES THE WORK OF AN ARTIST WHO MAKES A DEAD SET AT PET THEORIES

Zoulikha Bouabdellah is a Moscow-born, Paris-based artist of Algerian origin who is now showing her works (June 10 – July 23) titled *Set Me Free From My Chains* at the Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde (IVDE), Dubai. It is Bouabdellah's first solo in the UAE, though she has had a more than a passing acquaintance with the Emirates. She was one of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize winners in 2009 at Art Dubai.

Bouabdellah's oeuvre is brimful with feminist themes, large-hearted enough to include men also. Her works are rooted both in Islamic culture as well as the secular or Western culture. She inhabits a rainbow world, where borders clash and new ways of expressions spring. It is obvious she thoroughly enjoys her place in it and drinks it to the lees. The result, happily for everyone, is a bountiful fountain of exuberant artwork, subverting *ancient* theories and interpreting them in fresh ways.

Though on the right side of thirty still, Bouabdellah owns an intimidating CV. She has been at Venice Biennial, Pompidou Centre, Art Dubai, Mori Museum, Tokyo and the Brooklyn Museum, New York. But fame sits lightly on her. You wouldn't guess — unless you did your homework — that she is a familiar face at such impressive places.

A breezy, extroverted character, she dedicates her current work to "all women in the Arab and Muslim world and civilisation" since "they are not really about myself."

The exhibition consists of hanging sculptures carved in wood with the letters forming the sentence *Set Me Free From My Chains* hung from giant paper nails; flashing neon lights twisted to form colourful letters; monochrome drawings on paper where the artist reproduces sequences from an Egyptian movie and a reinterpretation of the *Grande Odalisque* of Ingres.

Bouabdelleh has a thing against the oppression of women. "Generally speaking," she says, "the status of women leaves much to be desired. Especially in the Muslim world, where someone — father, brother, husband, son or male guardian — is responsible for them and where men take decisions on their behalf."



Zoulikha Bouabdellah

This hapless situation has not changed even during the new millennium. It will take some changing too, since the origin of the idea of what makes a man or a woman is very old. "Men are considered to be warriors, and women are thought of as reproducers," says Bouabdelleh, which, though not an original observation, has been treated with a certain freshness in her show.

According to her, the situation of women is more or less also the same in the West. There, "men provide the images of women." Gender relations are being still being fine tuned out in the West. For example, the struggle for the "same hours, same salary" is still being waged. Thus she sees a continuity between the Muslim and Western worlds in the gender sector.

You cannot show Bouabdelleh a border — whether national, religious or gender — without provoking an itch in her to transgress it. She does this naughtily sometimes, sometimes seriously, but always with humour and an element of surprise to soothe any hurt feelings.

She is not after effect, though. "It is not about the scandal, but awareness," she once said about the uproar her works sometimes caused. What she wants is for people to broaden their borders, question their fond (mis)beliefs and to try to understand the viewpoint of the "Other."

The focus of the works on show is on man-woman relations. The *Hobb* (Arabic for Love) series con-

sists of entwined human forms — in calligraphical shapes. Bouabdelleh knows the restrictions on showing the human body in the Muslim world. Worse, any exhibition of sexual intimacy, even in art form, is also a strict no-no.

But the art of calligraphy, on the other hand, is revered by Muslims. Bouabdelleh uses this opening to present human forms necking and petting each other. "I can't be accused of representing human shapes!" she exclaims innocently. "At the same time, I am totally representing them. It's subversion. The way to divert is to be smart and be wise. I think it is a good way to get things moving."

She honed the art of subversion — or the undermining of power, in this case, male authority — as a child growing up in Algeria. For the women of the family, subversion was a tool of daily life.

Bouabdelleh calls this mode of survival "women's best ally." In a society dominated by men, the wisdom of women derived mostly from knowing how and when to subvert.

Paradoxically, the Eastern world does allow women to subvert male power — through their seductive prowess, though it is also frowned upon at the same time. "Eastern society allows a woman to show her power through seduction," says Bouabdelleh. "In other areas, she is forced to be silent." For example, belly-dancing is an admired art and belly-dancers enjoy fabulous lifestyles, though both are not considered very respectable. Sotto

voce, Bouabdelleh says that in the West too, women also use their bodies to dominate and be in control.

This is shown by her in the *Genie Lady* (Afrita Hanem) series, where she reproduces scenes from the eponymous Egyptian movie. In the film, Farid Al-Attrach wakes up to discover the famous Egyptian belly-dancer Samia Gamal performing a highly seductive oriental dance. Ironically, Al-Attrach is suited and booted and Gamal is, as befits her role, only partly dressed. He wears a bemused expression throughout. His authority, symbolised by his suit and tie and no less his confusion, has been well and truly neutralised.

Finally, Bouabdelleh gives Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* with its impossibly elongated proportions, the once over. In the place of the languid, decidedly feminine posture of the 1814 painting, we have an androgynous figure, whose eyes, lips, ear, hands, legs and feet are cut and bleeding. The end result is as though Miss (Muslim) World has suddenly become a Western Vampire Bride! Bouabdelleh has done this with the aim of shattering Western clichés of the Muslim woman "who lies all day long, doing nothing."

Emphatically Franco-Algerian, brown, non-Caucasian, Arab, Muslim and happily married with a glittering wedding ring to show for it, she draws from a wide range of inspiration. In an interview to Abraaj Capital Art Prize, she said she is influenced by cinema, literature, philosophy, music and fashion. "I like buildings in Kurirck asymmetric, in David Lynch's imbalance, with Youssef Chahine," she said. "I like emotion in Yasmina Khadra's reinvention of the classic, Amin Malouf in his concern for the world, with its Samuel Beckett, Derrida and disarray among its way to deconstruct to rebuild... I also like Umm Kulthoum's power, Callas' grace and Nazakat Ali Khan's classical magic."

An enemy of stereotypes, banalities, simplifications, pat judgements and knee-jerk reactions, Bouabdelleh has the knack of dealing with loaded subjects in a light-hearted, anecdotal way, all the more hard-hitting because of the easy accessibility of her creations.

Photograph: Nisham A. Manaf

CONTENTS

FILMS	THE LAST AIRBENDER	04
MUSIC	MACY GRAY	06
VIEWPOINT	SONAM KAPOOR	12

COVER STORY

FASHION	JOHN GALLIANO	16
TRAVEL	HAWAII	18
MOTORING	VAUXHALL AMPERA	30

LADY GAGA

PLUS	08
STARGAZE, ASTROSCAPE, HEALTH WATCH, FOOD QUIZ & YOUNG WORLD	

Published by
Taryam Omran and Abdullah Omran

Editor
Aysha Taryam

Features Editor
Nutan Sheriff

Design
Ansar Saleem

Chief Sub-Editor / Reporter
Raghib Hassan
Zafar Iqbal

Senior Sub-Editor / Reporter
Riaz Ali Khan

Sub-Editor / Reporter
Nabi Dad Khan

Special Features Writer
Muhammad Yusuf

Editorial
Tel: 06-5777999
Fax: 06-5777737
E-mail:
gulf_today@alkhaleej.ae

Marketing
Tel: 06-5777888
Fax: 06-5777677

Circulation
Tel: 06-5777444
Fax: 06-5777642

Dubai
Tel: 04-2625304

Abu Dhabi
Tel: 02-6426266

Al Ain
Tel: 03-7656796

Fujairah
Tel: 09-2241970

Ras Al Khaimah
Tel: 07-2334380

Representative Offices

India
The Times of India – Response Department
Tel: 0091 22 2630338
Fax: 0091 22 2673145

Bahrain
Arab World – Advertising & Information Centre
Tel: 00973 277794
Fax: 00973 254297

Pakistan
Tel: 0092 21 6634795
Fax: 0092 21 6634795

Muscat
Tel: 789 268

Paris
4577 0 220

London
3419 284

Printed and published by
Dar Al Khaleej
P.O. Box 30
Sharjah, United Arab Emirates