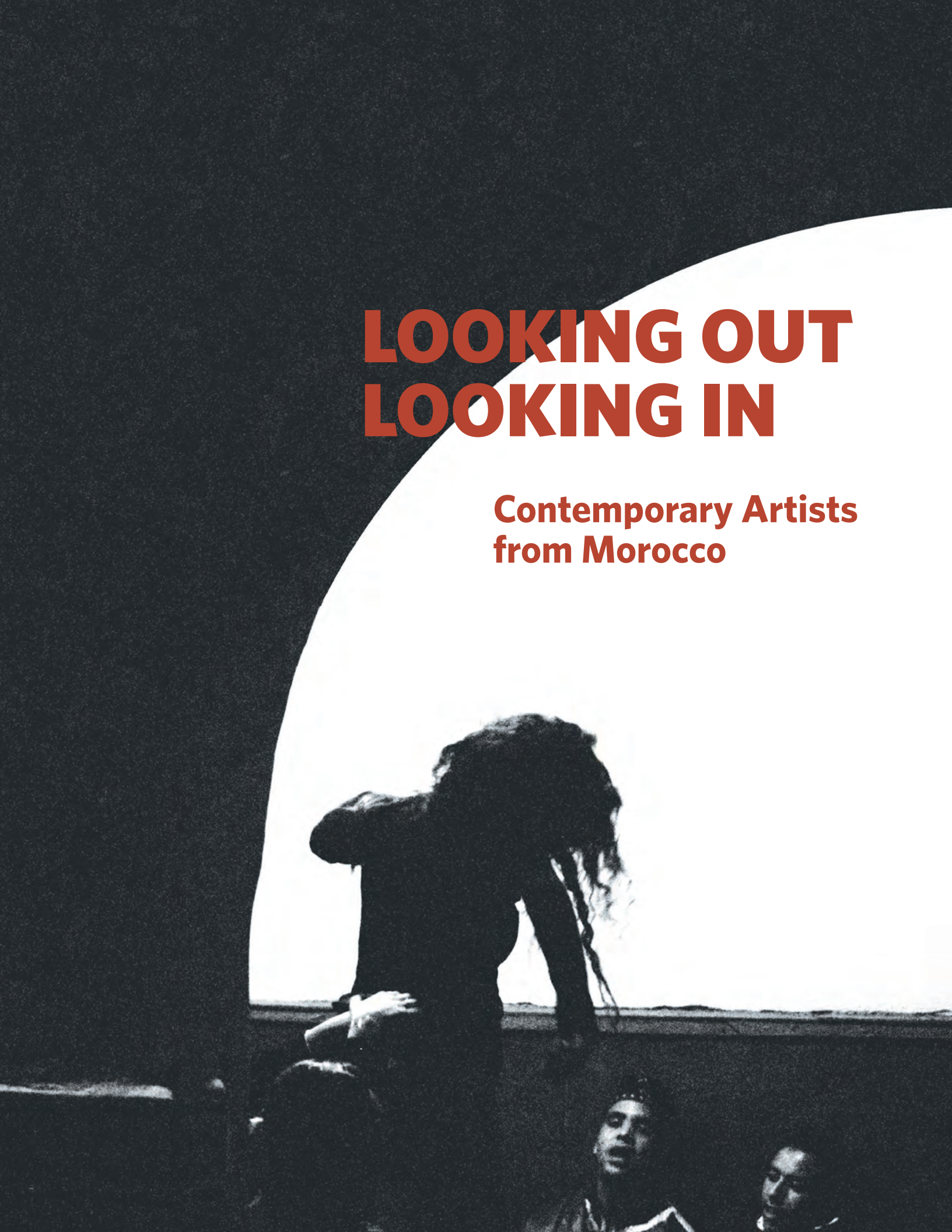


# LOOKING OUT LOOKING IN

Contemporary Artists  
from Morocco





**LOOKING OUT  
LOOKING IN**



## Boston University Art Galleries

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

*Looking Out, Looking In: Contemporary Artists From Morocco.*

Faye G., Jo, and James Stone Gallery

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Cover Image: Lamia Naji, video still from *Couleurs Primaires*, 2003 - 2005.  
Courtesy of the artist.



# LOOKING OUT LOOKING IN

## Contemporary Artists From Morocco

### Looking Out

Hassan Darsi

Wiame Haddad

Randa Maroufi

### Looking In

Hassan Hajjaj

Safaa Mazirh

Lamia Naji

Nour Eddine

Tilsaghani

Curated by Cynthia Becker and Nadia Sabri

# Looking Out, Looking In

**Looking Out, Looking In: Contemporary Artists from Morocco** brings together seven diverse photographers and videographers for the first time. Each artist works in a unique style and comes from a different background, but they are linked by a self-conscious exploration of what it means to live in contemporary Morocco. They recognize that the process of looking is a political act that is impacted by preconceived misconceptions and stereotypes. Some look inside at local histories and cultural factors, addressing how they impact one's self-perception. Others look outward to explore Morocco's political and social inequalities. The artists address such issues as collective memory, urban utopias, gender identities, minority communities, and border crossings. These artists emphasize the ambiguity of meaning contained within the visual and present a nuanced view that captures the historical and cultural complexity of today's Morocco.

## Territory and the Contemporary

Two key concepts that impact this exhibition are the ideas of "Morocco" as a distinct territory and "contemporary" as a temporal concept. What does it mean to concentrate on artists from a particular geographic territory? Territories, we assert, are not only geographic but are also reliant external and internal perceptions of belonging. During the period of the French Protectorate (1912-1956), hand woven carpets, silver jewelry, and painted ceramics were the focus of artistic production in Morocco. French authorities divided and classified crafts according to their geographic location, ethnic origins, and gendered attributes, and, in the process, created a dichotomy between "traditional" and "modern" art.

At the same time, Moroccans were traveling to Europe and beyond to receive training in visual artistic forms associated with the "West." When they returned to Morocco after the end of the colonial period, many embraced the jewelry, textiles,

and other forms of artistic production classified as "craft" by the French as a means to reject Western cultural and political hegemony that marginalized Moroccan material culture as lesser. For example, the artist Farid Belkahia studied in Europe in the 1950s, returning to Morocco in 1962 to become director of the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca. He had his Moroccan students study local artistic forms. Belkahia himself turned to painting on leather, stretching the animal skins over curvilinear wooden frames and then painting the skin with natural plant dyes such as saffron, henna, and sumac. For his famous piece entitled *Main* (1980), he created a work in the shape of a hand that literally burst out of the European convention of the four-sided rectangular canvas. Belkahia intentionally challenged European dichotomies such as "art" and "craft," as well as "artisan" and "artist."

At the same time that Moroccan artists working in the 1960s and '70s embraced cultural specificity, other artists began to reject their embrace of national particularism as self-Orientalizing. In other words, some criticized artists such as Belkahia as replicating Western stereotypes and fetishizing issues of identity, marginalizing their work by over-emphasizing its geographic connection to Morocco. For example, the artist Fouad Bellamine who studied in Morocco as well as Paris in the 1970s, rejected the issue of identity and its overwhelming impact on Moroccan artists, engaging in global art trends and embracing an abstract style of painting. His ambivalence toward their work can be found in his often quoted statement that "there is no Moroccan painting, only Moroccan painters."<sup>1</sup> The "contemporary" came to refer to those artists who engaged with universal, global art trends. This exhibition moves beyond such dichotomies and features artists who both embrace local Moroccan culture while also creating works that engage with today's global political issues, looking out and looking in at the same time.

## Looking Both Ways at the City

Many of the artists in this exhibition use the city as a resource and artistic inspiration. Urban spaces in Morocco are rapidly changing due to rural migration and increased engagement in the global economy. Artists draw from lived experiences to invert paradigms of power by bringing attention to the social inequalities that people experience due to accelerated urbanization. They confront the market economies of urban spaces and look at the impact of the global economy on local industries.

### *Hassan Hajjaj: Artisanal Remix*

This exhibition rejects the facile categories of art and craft, as well as tradition, modernity, and the contemporary used to classify art production in Morocco today. Local markets in cities, such as Marrakesh, not only sell skin lamps decorated with henna (i.e. craft) but also house many galleries selling contemporary art (i.e. fine art). However, it is impossible to delineate between the two in the work of Hassan Hajjaj. For example, in 2006 Hajjaj opened a gallery-space inside Marrakesh's medina (old city) called Riad Yima. Inside, one finds Moroccan-style sitting areas designed by the artist from recycled materials. Hajjaj uses plastic Coca-Cola cartons and paint cans from Morocco that he covered with cushions created from imitation Louis Vuitton vinyl fabric and pillows made from flour sacks. Mundane commercial products, such as sardine cans, shampoo bottles, Coca-Cola bottles, and dishwasher detergent, are arranged on a series of built-in shelves, creating bold, repeating patterns typical of Islamic ornamentation and, at the same time, resembling the interior of a family-run shop in Morocco. Hajjaj, who divides his time between London and Marrakesh, intentionally fuses cultural elements to blur conceptual boundaries typically used to classify artistic production, effectively drawing attention to the artificial nature of such categories as "art" and "craft."

### *Hassan Darsi: Utopias of the City*

Living in Casablanca, artist Hassan Darsi creates intricately made models that address the urban politics of the city. In 1995, he founded a collective

of artists called *La Source du Lion*, which first took actions that engaged with the city. In 2002, Darsi began a project around the reclamation and revitalization of Le Parc de l'Hermitage (2002-2007), one of the oldest public parks in Morocco. Stretching over 18 hectares, this garden was designed between 1917 and 1927 by the French landscape architect Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier and served as a green space in a densely populated area of Casablanca before deteriorating in the mid-twentieth century due to neglect. Over the years, Darsi and a team of artists engaged intensely with the overgrown and dangerous space, photographing and documenting its flora and fauna. Darsi's team worked meticulously with their hands to create an exact small-scale model of the garden to reflect its state of neglect. This captured the attention of the local authorities and motivated them to intervene. After years of active engagement, the park was cleaned, its gardens replanted, and the space eventually reclaimed by the city of Casablanca. Unfortunately, Forestier's original design - the "grid" style of formal French gardens - clashes with local Moroccan cultural preferences.

Darsi looks in at the architectural patrimony of the urban landscape and looks out to suggest how collective space should be realized in the urban reality of contemporary Casablanca. In his project *Le square d'en-bas* (The Square Below) (2014-2017), based on the wood factory Legal Frères & Cie in Casablanca, Hassan Darsi plays a major role in suggesting how the city should be conceptualized, drawing attention to the urgency of co-constructing the strategic choices that determine the future of urban development in Morocco. He aims to engage all citizens in debate regarding the various proposals for urban development that impact all citizens.

## Reviving Subverted Memories

In Morocco, as in other countries with a colonized past, the link between memory and the narrative of a collective "we" remains a major challenge. What relationship does one have with memory, and in particular, traumatic memory? What narrative forms and mechanisms do the official narrative and the collective unconscious put in place to construct or rehabilitate this memory? Many contemporary

Moroccan artists take on these issues and bring visibility not only to the colonial past, but also to the country's post-colonial political history.

#### *Wiame Haddad: Repairing Traumatic Memories*

Moroccan contemporary artists Mounir Fatmi and Mahi Binebine confront the current political realities of Morocco and lay the foundation for young artists such as Wiame Haddad. Haddad's project entitled *Ceux qui restent* (Those who stay) (2012–2016) is the result of intense reflection and research around Morocco's "Years of Lead," a period of political oppression that occurred during the reign of King Hassan II (r. 1961–1999). Haddad engages in the repair of traumatic memory by evoking the voices of the victims, photographing objects created by political prisoners during their years of detention in a secret prison called Tazmamart.

#### *Safaa Mazirh: Looking In at Hidden Signs*

The photographer Safaa Mazirh looks at memory in her series *Amazigh*, highlighting tattooing rituals widely practiced by rural women until the 1960s. Today, tattooed women are often criticized, as this is now considered a taboo practice. Due to shame and embarrassment, few elderly women are comfortable speaking about the meanings of their geometric tattoo marks. Mazirh reclaims these tattooed patterns by superimposing them onto her nude or partially clothed body. She creates a self-narrative that confronts the Orientalizing and exoticizing anthropological gaze. While she revives a visual trope common to such 1960s artists as Farid Belkhaia and Ahmed Cherkaoui, her work is inherently political, as it gives visibility to local signs that have been muted in recent years.

### **Bringing Visibility to the Invisible**

Since the nineteenth century, European and American photographers produced images of Morocco tied to Orientalist stereotypes and colonial political agendas. Lamia Naji and Nour Eddine Tilsaghani depict aspects of Moroccan culture deemed exotic by outsiders, namely women's carpet weaving and spirit possession. Creating multi-layered work that involves visual, aural, and theatrical sensibilities, the

two artists represent a nostalgic form of remembering that confronts the colonial gaze. While Morocco has undergone rapid social and economic changes during its transformation from a largely rural-based society to an urban, globalized one, the artists self-consciously explore how local traditions interact with the here and now.

#### *Nour Eddine Tilsaghani: Making Women's Weaving Visible*

Artists use video and photography to bring attention to aspects of Moroccan life not often seen by outsiders. While many visitors to Morocco see colorful hand-woven carpets on display in the market, few people experience the actual process of weaving. Nour Eddine Tilsaghani's video of women's weaving (*Les tatoueuses du tapis*, 2017–2018), includes the entire process of weaving, including washing, combing, and spinning wool thread. The video contains songs and prayers performed by the weavers themselves, giving the viewer a sense of the symbolic and spiritual significance of weaving in women's lives. By drawing a connection between tattooing and weaving, he makes visible the fact that both are gendered symbols of women's creative agency.

#### *Lamia Naji: Between Seeing and Knowing*

Lamia Naji's project *Couleurs Primaires* consists of a series of photographs taken between 2003 and 2005 in the city of Essaouira. Naji photographed spirit possession and healing ceremonies organized by Gnawa practitioners. Rather than presenting Gnawa healing in an ethnographic or documentary-style, Naji's photographs feature unconventional angles and crops, dark interior spaces, and fragments of dancers' bodies. Her photographs provoke a desire to see beyond what the camera permits us to see. They urge us to consider what lies outside of the frame and recognize the constructed nature of the photographic gaze. Her photographic style brings attention to the fact that what is seen outside of the frame is consigned to invisibility, drawing attention to the constructed nature of photographic visibility.

## **Borders and the concrete metaphor of the door**

The issue of borders is one of the most important topics in the world, and Randa Maroufi addresses issues of mental and physical crossings in her various artistic projects. Her current project *Ceuta's Gate* examines global border crossings, and in particular, the border that delineates the Spanish enclave of Ceuta (or Sebta in Arabic). Ceuta and the nearby city of Melilla comprise the only autonomous, European-controlled territories in the African continent.<sup>2</sup> Today these borders serve as doors for intense crossings as thousands of clandestine migrants from across the African continent attempt to cross their borders every year in search of a dignified life.

Using a careful and precise documentation process, Maroufi investigates how the border of Ceuta is traversed daily by the thousands of Moroccans carrying contraband goods. Maroufi shows how frontiers are not always barriers but instead can paradoxically serve as geographic links that breed movement and encourage the development of travel practices. Maroufi captures how women are at the heart of this informal economy, crossing the border every day to transport the goods on their backs. But crossing is not always easy, as women are obliged to convince both Spanish and Moroccan authorities to let them pass. Invisible borders are also at the heart of the video *La Grande Safae* (2014), where Randa Maroufi portrays the life of transgender maid, telling her story through the real and imagined stories of the people who knew her.

## **Looking Out, Looking In**

The seven artists in this exhibition create politically charged and culturally engaged work that draws attention to inequalities, traumas, and the memory of losses. They also contemplate the moral and emotional experiences of looking in at oneself in response to looking out at those aspects of Moroccan culture that resonate across cultural and geographic boundaries. Each artist carries out investigative research for several years before creating dynamic multi-media projects intended to transform our views and engage in political action. They intentionally fuse cultural elements to blur

geographic boundaries, reanimating the diversity of Moroccan culture so that it does not fit into exoticizing stereotypes created by outsiders. Thus, artists in this exhibition look both in and outside of Morocco to emphasize the ambiguity of meaning contained within the visual and present a nuanced view that captures the historical and cultural complexity of modern Morocco. They defy easy categorization and suggest a new aesthetic that exists in-between tradition, modernity, and the contemporary.

Cynthia Becker and Nadia Sabri

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.atelier21.ma/en/fouad-bellamine-biography/>

<sup>2</sup> Because of the commercial importance of these cities to European trade, Portugal and eventually Spain fought Moroccan sultans for more than five centuries to retain control of these territories.

# Hassan Darsi

*Zone d'incertitude* (Zone of Uncertainty) is the title of the video that Hassan Darsi made as part of a larger project entitled *Le Square d'en Bas* (The Square Below) (2014-2017). Centering on the city of Casablanca, this is part of a larger body of work where Darsi meticulously creates accurate models of urban architectures around Casablanca during the last several decades, including a model of Legal Frères & Cie featured in the video *Zone d'incertitude*.

*Zone d'incertitude* focuses in on a man perched high on the ledge of a building. The building, located in heart of Casablanca, bears its previous name, Legal Frères & Cie. Built during the French colonial period, the structure served as a wood factory and was a flagship of the French economy in Morocco. The building became property of the Moroccan monarchy after independence in 1956; when Darsi created this video in 2014, it had been long abandoned and fallen into ruin, eventually leading to its demolition.

Darsi often looked upon this building from his Casablanca-based studio. Darsi captured a man white-washing the building's facade. The soundtrack of the video captures the voices and rhythms of the urban center of Casablanca; however, the artist slows down the sounds and broadcasts them in a loop where the sound starts and stops. The soundtrack intentionally marks the rhythm of the video, including the movement of the painter. This is an absurd gesture par excellence since the building is doomed to destruction and, refers to the name Casablanca itself, which means "White City" in Spanish.

Through his use of slow motion visuals and sound, Hassan Darsi points to a state of inaction and apnea within the city. The superimposition of the sound effects, the slow-motion sound, the image that

barely moves, and the gesture of whitewashing reinforce a sense of global uncertainty. The viewer does not know if the image moves and evolves or if the sound corresponds to what is seen. An atmosphere (zone) of global uncertainty reinforces the artist's critical view of the painter's gesture as a metaphor for the city's politics.

The use of slow motion creates a scene that exists in opposition to the visible reality of Casablanca - a city filled with bustling traffic and pedestrians moving at a rapid and chaotic speed. Darsi's video exists in opposition to the tempo of the city and reinforces a sense of political, social, and economic uncertainty.

Nadia Sabri



**Hassan Darsi, *Zone d'incertitude*, 2014**

Video



*Photograph of the Legal Frères & Cie, Mers-Sultan, Casablanca,  
from the studio of Hassan Darsi.*

# Wiame Haddad

In this series of photographs, Wiame Haddad traces the traumatic history of Morocco's "Years of Lead," a period of political oppression that occurred under the reign of King Hassan II (r. 1961-1999). Two coup attempts in 1971 and 1972 against the King resulted in several military officers and dozens of soldiers arrested and imprisoned in a secret prison in the desert of southeastern Morocco, called Tazmamart. For decades, the regime denied the existence of this prison, and, in 1991, when the surviving prisoners were released, they told of their conditions of sequestration and the means and methods of survival, particularly through the production of clandestine objects.

Wiame Haddad confronts the history of these objects in her photographs of letters, scissors, beads, and other small objects made by prisoners during their incarceration. One prisoner made a string of prayer beads (*tasbeih*) from date and olive pits collected over a five year period. Another made two fabric scrolls from his prison blanket, embroidering brief notes to his family using threads pulled from his clothes.<sup>1</sup> The fragility of these objects shown through the distancing mechanism of photography and Haddad's use of a stark white background serve as a narrative of effacement.

Haddad's photographic technique throws a cold and distanced light on these objects. The few photographed letters of the detainees are the last visible traces of the years of lead in Morocco. The reparation of memory is partially conveyed through the voice of the victims, the stories of the families of the inmates, and the stories of the inmates themselves. This cathartic work was enabled by the Equity and Reconciliation Commission developed in Morocco in 2004. While reparation is a process that derives from the mechanism of identification and catharsis that speech and narrative allow, this repair is also triggered by the power of the silences that Haddad

visualizes in her photographs. These silences make it possible to see at a distance, and with lucidity, the last survivors and their objects-testimonies. Thus, one can grasp the suggestive power of the objects photographed by Haddad. The razor provocatively suggests the violence of detention, the chaplet alluding to the isolation and the psychological suffering of the detainees.

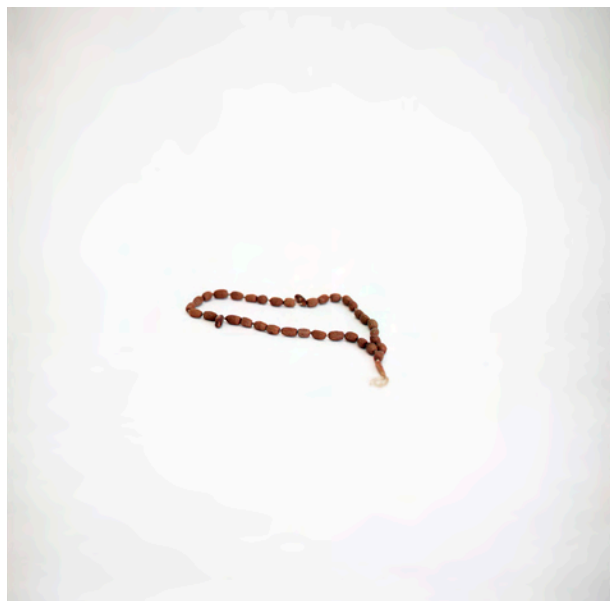
In her project *In Absentia Stills* (2018-), the artist photographs fragments of plaster moldings she creates using the bodies of political detainees in Tunisia in the summer of 2018. Haddad's approach continues what she triggered with the *Objets de Tazmamart* (Objects of Tazmamart) and *Ceux qui restent* (Those who Stay), using an approach of proximity to the intimate: photography of the objects of survival of the detainees, their personal letters, the moldings as a second skin of those bodies that were tortured. A distancing of this reality is then created in relation to the object loaded with memory thanks to the technical photographic processes that the artist puts in place. Voluntary distancing, through composition, lighting and processing of the background, creates a powerful neutrality of the photographs. This neutrality reinforces the "therapeutic" treatment of injured memory that Haddad voluntarily makes visible and bearable by the effect of distance.

Nadia Sabri

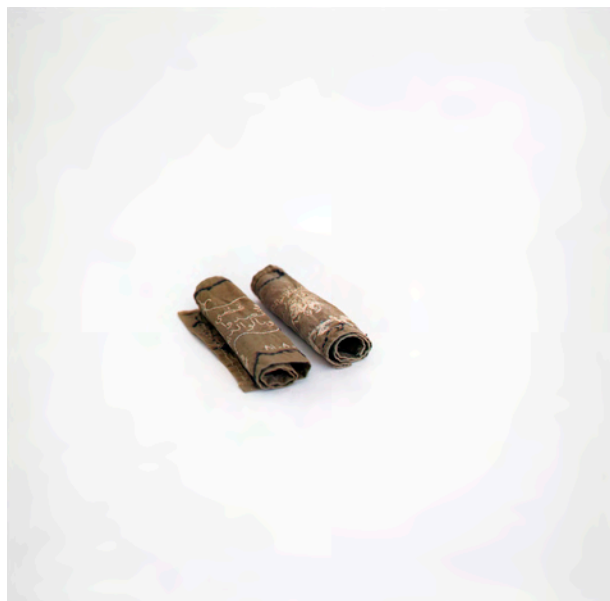
<sup>1</sup> Carol Solomon, "'Postmemory' and the 'Disappeared'," in *De liens et d'exils*, ed., Nadia Sabri, Brussels: CFC Editions, 2018, 139-142.



**Wiame Haddad**, *Objets de Tazmamart*, (letters), 2012-2016  
Color prints



**Wiame Haddad**, *Objets de Tazmamart*, (chaplet),  
(embroidery), 2012-2016  
Color prints



# Randa Maroufi

Randa Maroufi is a video artist and photographer who works between France and Morocco. Her interests lie in the staging of the body in the public space, particularly of women (*Reconstitution*, 2013), and young people (*Le Park*, 2015). Her current project consists of a film and photography project entitled *Ceuta's Gate* that deals with the border crossings that mark the entry to Ceuta, a Spanish enclave on Moroccan soil. This border between Spain and Morocco is rife with stories of contraband and illegal crossings, proving to be an excellent playing field for Maroufi to stage people in movement. *Ceuta's Gate* goes beyond a simple documentary narrative - the experimental video project addresses the complexity and intensity of border crossings.

In her photograph entitled *Nabila et Keltoum* (2018), Maroufi brings attention to the thousands of impoverished Moroccan women who illegally cross the border into Ceuta each day to attain manufactured goods. Nabila and Keltoum are among these women that smuggle goods from Ceuta to supply the Moroccan market with tax-free goods, such goods as Chinese-made clothing, household items, cosmetics, and foodstuffs. Maroufi lived with Nabila and Keltoum for several weeks, becoming integrated with their families and sharing their daily struggles, many of which were marked by violence. Referring to them by name and having them engage with the viewer gives Nabila and Keltoum agency and portrays them as strong, powerful women.

Maroufi's film *La Grande Safae* (*The Great Safae*, 2014) experiments with the limits and tensions of identity that exist in the real or imaginary life of a transgender person in Morocco. The central character of Safae works as a servant for Maroufi's family, and Maroufi bases her film on this real figure. However, the artist blurs reality and

imagination in the film, featuring conflicting stories of family members about Safae's "true" identity. Each one describes Safae in a way that blurs and distorts the stories of others.

While believing to know, everyone ignores the real identity of Safae. Is she woman or man? A real person or a figment of the imagination? The film recounts the ambiguity of an identity that does not fit into social conventions and narrow familial norms.

Maroufi's character certainly evokes a similar video work done by the artist entitled *ClosUp* (2016). Maroufi sent the image of Gustave Courbet's painting *The Origin of the World* (1866) to people around her. She then invited them to react with voice messages about what they saw and how they felt. As these examples demonstrate, Maroufi invites people to consider sex-objects or the sexual identity of a transgender person. She engages in sociological and anthropological investigations to learn about her topic through objective facts, but, she forces the viewer to consider the disconnect that exists between the imaginary and the objective.

Nadia Sabri



**Randa Maroufi**, *Nabila et Keltoum*, 2018

Color print



**Randa Maroufi**, *La Grande Safae*, 2014

Video still



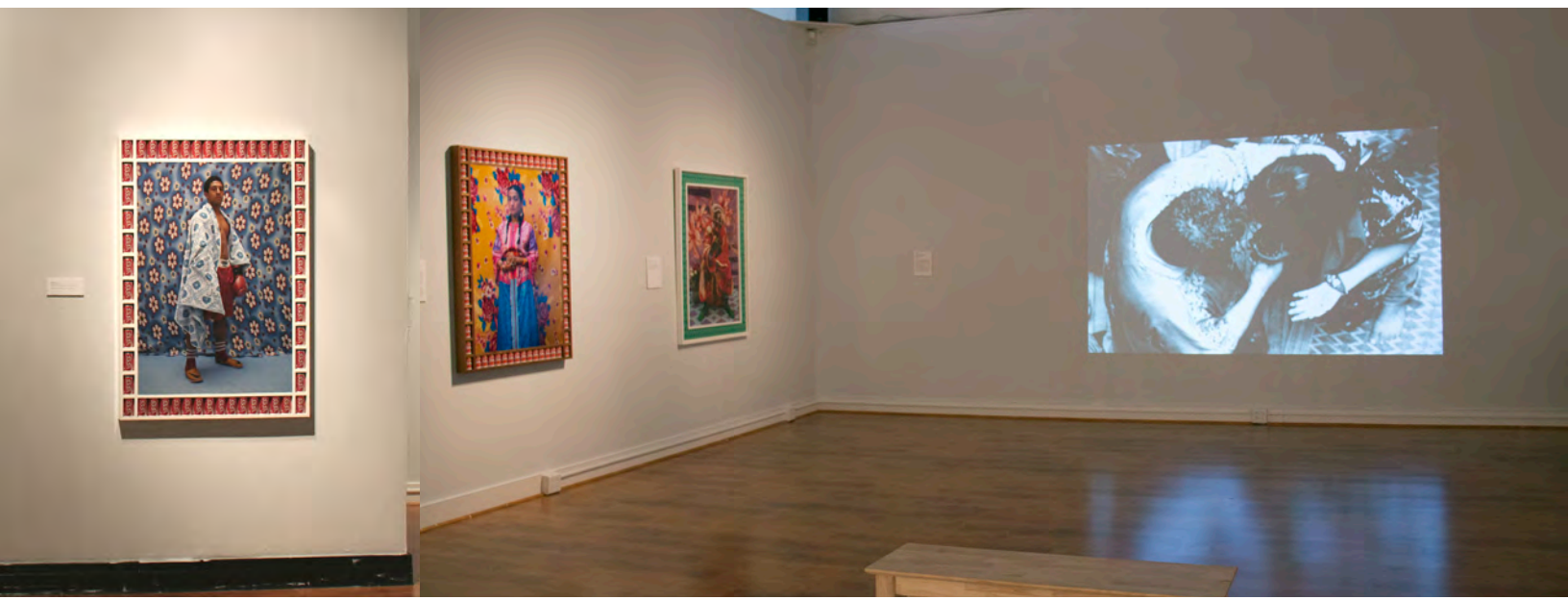
## Looking Out, Looking In: Contemporary Artists from Morocco

*Looking Out, Looking In: Contemporary Artists from Morocco* brings seven diverse photographers and videographers together for the first time. Although each artist works in a unique style and comes from a different background, they are linked by their self-conscious exploration of what it means to live in contemporary Morocco. Each recognizes that the process of looking is a political act impacted by preconceived misconceptions and stereotypes. Some look inside at local histories and cultural factors, addressing how they impact one's self-perception; others look out to explore Morocco's political and social inequalities. All emphasize the ambiguity of meaning contained within the visual and present a nuanced view that captures the historical and cultural complexity of today's Morocco.

The exhibition is curated by Cynthia Becker, Associate Professor of African Art, Boston University Department of History of Art and Architecture and Nafsa Saleh, Professor of Art History and curator, Faculty of Education Sciences, University of Mohammed VI in Rabat, Morocco.

The exhibition is cosponsored by Boston University's African Studies Center, the Arts Initiative, the Institute for the Study of Muslim Societies & Civilizations, and the Department of History of Art & Architecture, and the Boston Cultural Council.

*Looking Out, Looking In* installation view, Faye G., Jo, and James Stone Gallery, 2019.



# Hassan Hajjaj

Hassan Hajjaj is known for his bold photographic portraits, brightly patterned garments, and vibrant frames. While his patterned studio backdrops are reminiscent of those used by twentieth century Malian studio photographers Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé, his primary source of inspiration was having his picture taken as a child by itinerant Moroccan photographers. These photographers took images of people as they wanted to be seen. People visited studios dressed in their finest clothes and photographs represented them in a respectful and empowering manner, existing in sharp contrast to late nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs of North Africans by Europeans which relied heavily on exoticizing stereotypes.

Hajjaj typically photographs people from below to give them an emboldened and theatrical appearance. He also designs the clothing worn by his models and prints each photograph on a high gloss aluminum panel that gives the image a sharp and vibrant finish that resembles product packaging and is intended to reflect on the globalized nature of contemporary Moroccan life. Hajjaj, who moved to London at the age of twelve, now divides his time between London and Marrakesh. His work fuses cultural elements from Morocco and Europe, blurring geographic boundaries to reference his dual heritage. He playfully creates a cultural mash-up that intentionally places local Moroccan references in dialogue with global pop culture.

In this portrait of the Moroccan singer Hindi Zahra, Hajjaj channels the iconic Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, fusing their names to create the title *Hindi Kahlo*. Zahra moved to Paris at a young age and began performing music, creating a style that blends jazz, blues, and rock. She performs in English as well as the indigenous Amazigh (Berber) language. Hajjaj's photograph captures the innovative culture and aesthetic forms created by musicians such as

Zahra, who merge music forms from Morocco with those associated with the West. The frame made from tomato cans refers to the English slang term "tomato" (referring to an attractive woman), consciously playing with British stereotypes and words with double meanings.

Hajjaj also takes photographs of local heroes, such as his portrait of Zezo Tamsamani, a retired Moroccan champion boxer (seen on page 24). As is typical in Hajjaj's portraits, his subjects are not disempowered individuals or victims but have a sense of agency and self-worth. Tamsamani represented Morocco in the 2000, 2004, and 2008 Olympics, winning a bronze medal in 2000. Tamsamani stands proud in Hajjaj's portrait of him, wearing Moroccan slip-on leather shoes with a Nike logo. Both the Nike swoosh and Coca-Cola cans written in Arabic playfully serve to make the work more approachable to outsiders for whom Morocco is an unfamiliar or "exotic" land.

Hajjaj is sometimes criticized for creating Orientalist clichés; at the same time, he pokes fun at them by embracing them and turning them on their heads. The artist's incorporation of such things as product logos, mass-produced plastic mats, and Coca-Cola cans breaks down conventional hierarchies of value in the art world to privilege a lived, globalized experience. Hajjaj straddles the line between fine and commercial art, poking fun at an elitist art establishment that condemns street styles and popular culture as "lesser." At the same time, Hajjaj's work contains a sense of dynamism and agency that asks us to rethink cultural misconceptions. He fuses cultural elements from both inside and outside of Morocco to disrupt stereotypes of Morocco and demonstrates how visual art can thrive in an interconnected world.

Cynthia Becker



**Hassan Hajjaj, *Hindi Kahlo*, 2000**

Metallic Lambda print on dibond with  
wood and found objects

# Safaa Mazirh

Mazirh's approach to photography is autobiographical, inspired by her daily life and family history. The title of her series, *Amazigh*, refers to the indigenous people of North Africa and her family's heritage. Mazirh was fascinated by the meaning and symbolism of the markings that elderly women, including her grandmother, tattooed on their ankles, hands, and faces. This series serves as a nostalgic look into what these identity symbols once meant for women. As the primary subject of her own photographs, Mazirh superimposes tattoo patterns onto her own body. Her image appears blurry and ghost-like in relation to the sharply focused tattoo designs, and this gives her photographs a performative and theatrical quality. Her body appears to merge with the tattoo designs, provoking questions of visibility and identity.

Until the 1960s, tattooing was widely practiced by rural women as markers of their group identity. Tattooed at puberty, the geometric symbols marked a girl's transition into womanhood, indicating that a girl was of marrying age. Many tattoo motifs were variations on a triangular pattern or resembled plant-like forms, largely serving as fertility symbols or as protection against the evil eye. Tattooing largely faded from fashion in the 1980s when people criticized it as a taboo practice contrary to Muslim beliefs, seeing tattoos as permanently transforming God's perfect creation. Furthermore, tattoos developed into symbols associated with provincial and uneducated rural-dwellers. Due to the shame and embarrassment connected with tattoos today, few elderly women are comfortable speaking about the meanings of the geometric marks that once served as identity symbols and expressions of female agency. Given the association of tattoos with the Amazigh population, some see the suppression of these symbols as a means of silencing and erasing Morocco's indigenous Amazigh community in favor of promoting Morocco as an Arab-Muslim nation.

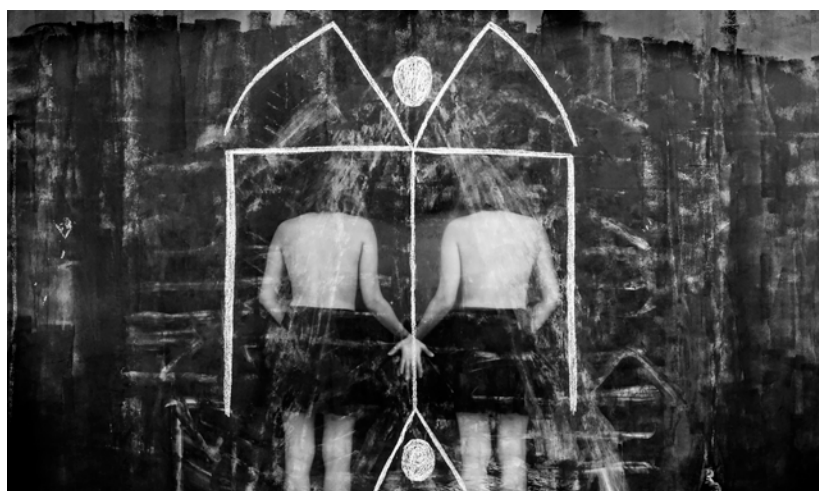
Mazirh's use of her own body conveys the highly personal nature of her project. She uses a multiple exposure camera technique, first drawing tattoo symbols on a dark wall in white and then standing in front of each design so that her body is captured numerous times. Mazirh's self-portraits are inspired by deceased American photographer Francesca Woodman, who photographed her own nude body in front of crumbling interior walls in the 1970s. Woodman used long exposure times and continuous fluid motions to blur her body to create serial images that vary slightly according to the body's performance. Both artists engage in theatrical staging, placing themselves inside their photographs to create haunting and extremely intimate self-representations.

Mazirh challenges the voyeuristic gaze by denying the viewer direct access to her nude body, covering her face with her hair or looking away from the camera. She also uses this photographic style to convey the mysteriousness and secrecy that surrounds women's tattoos in Morocco today. Her photographs reclaim the symbols of her female ancestors that society has deemed taboo, giving them a contemporary relevance and suggesting that they should not be forgotten to history.

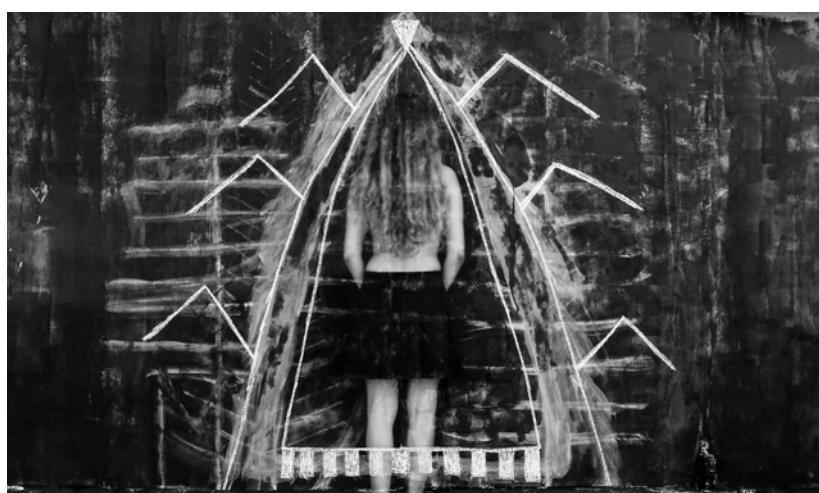
Cynthia Becker



*Aouchem, corps 2*



*Aouchem, main*



*Aouchem, visage 2*

**Safaa Mazirh**, From the series *Amazigh*, 2017

Digital print on Hannemuele paper

# Lamia Naji

Naji uses a series of black-and-white still photographs to create an energetic and dynamic video montage choreographed to an original score of contemporary trance music. The photographs were taken over a two-year period at various Gnawa healing ceremonies in the Moroccan city of Essaouira. The name “Gnawa” refers both to the descendants of enslaved West Africans and to the music that they perform to induce spirit possession, which results in healing. Naji spent considerable time in Essaouira with the Gania family, who allowed her to photograph their ceremonies. Among the Gania family are renowned Gnawa female diviners and male musicians who perform music using instruments with West African origins.

Naji arranges the photographs to appear so that they take the viewer through the stages of a Gnawa ceremony as it unfolds from beginning to end. A ceremony begins with an animal sacrifice, followed by an all-male performance that recounts the history of enslavement. The act of possession itself begins where certain songs, musical rhythms, incense, and colors are used to attract spirits into possessing a human host. While both men and women may be possessed, spirits inhabit women more frequently. Each spirit has a distinct personality which reveals itself during possession. For example, a woman possessed by the aggressive spirit Sidi Hamou wears red and dances with a knife. She runs the blade on her arms and legs, but the spirit protects her from harm. A woman inhabited by the spirit of Sidi Mimun, a spirit believed to originate in West Africa, wears a black tunic and holds lit candles under her arms to satisfy Sidi Mimun’s craving for fire. The act of honoring the spirits through possession can be intense, often causing the person to fall to the ground exhausted after the spirit leaves the body. However, people often describe the experience as bringing a sense of well-being and peace.

The title of the series, *Couleurs Primaires* (Primary Colors) exists at odds with the grainy, high-contrast black and white photographs themselves and hints at the layered meanings contained within this work. First, the title refers to the association of individual Gnawa spirits with specific colors. Second, it suggests the primordial nature of spirit possession and healing, which exists across the world in many cultures. The choice of a soundtrack that features contemporary trance music mixed in with chanting common to Gnawa ceremonies further suggests the universal nature of possession and the trance state. The music allows us to compare the intensity of dancing in an American or European nightclub to the experience of possession during a Gnawa ceremony.

Cynthia Becker



**Lamia Naji**, *Couleurs Primaires*, 2005

Still photography-based video with original music by Fernando Gullon.  
Photographs taken between 2003 and 2005 in Essaouira, Morocco.

# Nour Eddine Tilsaghani

Translating as “the tattooers of carpets,” Tilsaghani’s multimedia work *Les tatoueuses du tapis* was originally created for a special exhibition in Marrakesh that valorized the local tradition of tattooing. With the title of *Femme Gravée*, or “Engraved Woman,” the exhibition was held at the art gallery and cultural center Dar Bellarj and featured works from various artists that explored this pre-Islamic rite typically associated with Amazigh (Berber) women.

Rural women often tattooed their faces, forearms, and ankles at puberty. Tattoos served as symbols of womanhood, beauty, and group identity, and women wove similar patterns onto the textiles that they made. Although the practice of tattooing among women began to decline in the 1960s, the tradition of weaving has continued. Tilsaghani creates a massive gridded box with forty-nine openings that feature a series of black and white images of women’s tattooed hands, chins, and foreheads along with close-ups of carpet patterns done in color. The juxtaposition of carpets and tattoos emphasizes the similarity of designs between the two. Women weave the same geometric symbols found in tattoos into their wool carpets as expression of female creativity, communal values, and self-respect. The artist organized the images to create seven horizontal and vertical rows, as the number seven has mystical significance in Islam: Muslims circle the Kaaba in Mecca seven times and heaven is believed to have seven layers. Also, Moroccan women commonly wear seven thin bracelets on their wrists. Tilsaghani’s video work reinforces the mystical and ceremonial nature of women’s weaving and tattooing.

Tilsaghani’s four-channel video captures the methodical and time-consuming process of women’s weaving, presenting it as a gender-specific, ritualized tradition. Women who work wool are

highly respected; a common saying in Morocco is that a woman who makes forty carpets during her lifetime receives the ultimate blessing – a guaranteed passage to heaven after her death. In Tilsaghani’s video, women begin by honoring the sheep that provide the wool by anointing them with henna and chanting a song in Arabic that celebrates the sheep’s beauty. Before women shear the sheep, Tilsaghani films individual women singing a song that praises the Prophet Muhammed, a refrain typically performed at the beginning of Moroccan ceremonial occasions.

Tilsaghani then captures each stage of the weaving process: women cleaning the wool, carding it, and spinning it into thread. Women complement these communal activities by chanting a poem by the deceased musician El Hajj Belaïd, whose song in Tamazight valorizes women’s beauty. Colored pigments used to dye wool seem to descend from the heavens and steam rises from threads dyed in hot water as women hang them on a line. After showing the process of weaving on an upright loom, Tilsaghani ends by superimposing photographs of women’s tattooed faces over the loom itself, linking the act of weaving to the vanishing tradition of tattooing. He emphasizes the crucial and often hidden role Moroccan women play in the transmission of culture.

The installation includes a small carpet woven by the weavers themselves. Tilsaghani invites the viewers to touch the carpet.

Cynthia Becker



**Nour Eddine Tilsaghani**, *Les tatoueuses du tapis*, 2017 - 2018  
Mixed media work (above) and four channel video (below)



**Hassan Hajjaj**, *Zezo Tamsamani*, 2010

Metallic Lambda print on dibond with  
wood and found objects

## Exhibition Checklist

1. Hassan Darsi

*Zone d'incertitude*, 2014

Video, 19:03 minutes

Courtesy of the artist.

2. Wiame Haddad

From the series *Ceux qui restent, Objets de Tazmamart*, (chaplet), (embroidery), 2012-2016

16 x 16 in./40.64 x 40.64 cm.

Color prints

Courtesy of the artist.

3. Wiame Haddad

From the series *Ceux qui restent, Objets de Tazmamart*, (letters), 2012-2016

24 x 24 in./61 x 61 cm.

Color prints

Courtesy of the artist.

4. Randa Maroufi

*Around the Gate*, 2018

Color prints

4 @ 5 x 7 in./12.7 x 18 cm.; 2 @ 8 x 12 in./20 x 30.5 cm.;

1 @ 10.5 x 16 in./7 x 41 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.

5. Randa Maroufi

*Nabila et Keltoum*, 2018

Color print

40 x 60 in./102 x 152 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.

6. Randa Maroufi

*La Grande Safae*, 2014

Video, 15:56 minutes

Courtesy of the artist.

7. Hassan Hajjaj

*Hindi Kahlo*, 2000

Metallic Lambda print on dibond with wood and Coca Cola cans

50.75 x 37 in./129 x 94 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Taymour Grahne Art, London.

8. Hassan Hajjaj

*Zezo Tamsamani*, 2010

Metallic Lambda print on dibond with wood and found objects

53.5 x 37 in./136 x 94 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Taymour Grahne Art, London.

9. Hassan Hajjaj

*Hack*, 2011

Metallic Lambda print on dibond with wood and textile

53 x 37 in./135 x 94 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Taymour Grahne Art, London.

10. Safaa Mazirh

From the series *Amazigh*, 2017

*Aouchem, croix*

*Femmes berbères*

*Dos serpent, orvet, mille-pattes*

*Aouchem, corps 2*

*La hache*

*Aouchem, visage 3*

*La déesse mère*

*Aouchem, main*

*Aouchem, corps*

*Aouchem, visage 1*

*Aouchem, palmier*

*Aouchem, visage 2*

Twelve digital prints on Hannemuele paper

13.5 x 21.5 in./34 x 55 cm. each

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie 127, Marrakesh, Morocco.

11. Lamia Naji

*Couleurs Primaires*, 2003 - 2005

Still photography-based video with original music by Fernando Gullon, 4:36 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

12. Nour Eddine Tilsaghani

*Les tatoueuses du tapis*, 2017 - 2018

Mixed media, photographs, and dyed yarn

66.75 x 93.25 x 6.25 in./170 x 237 x 15.24 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.

13. Nour Eddine Tilsaghani

*Les tatoueuses du tapis*, 2017 - 2018

Four channel video, 7:42 minutes

Courtesy of the artist.

