

Igniting Casablanca's art scene: interview with Yasmine Laraqui

In the emerging contemporary scene, it's not rare to have artists wearing many different hats. That is certainly true of Yasmine Laraqui, founder of Dasthe Art Space in Casablanca. Yasmine's work as a curator and an artist run in parallel. Born in 1989 in the western Moroccan port city, her strength is the open-mindedness and determination typical of her generation.

Yasmine's family of scientists was not into the arts, so she developed this passion on her own, particularly while travelling. As a teenager, she started to explore museums and art shows around the world, then shared what she found with the local community.

Studying in Paris, Yasmine had her first international shows. She decided immediately to bring her new European connections back home, and started to propose a cross-section of artists from Morocco as well as abroad.

In 2010 she co-founded Youth's Talking, and in 2014 came Awiiily, two independent curatorial structures promoting non-conformist international artists, with an emphasis on their emerging Moroccan counterparts. "In my view, the most important thing that needs to be done for Moroccan artists, is aligning the local art scene to the international scene," she explains. "At first we were a group of young artists working with different media, and we started organising our own shows in abandoned spaces in Casablanca. We also started contacting art centres which didn't have any pre-existing programming, so they were open to have us exhibiting there."

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She notes that today there are more people trying to build an art system in Morocco, although at that time there was nothing of the kind. "What we were doing was out of the ordinary," she recalls.

What started as an independent, underground movement, was modified abruptly the following year with the 2011 Arab Spring. Suddenly, everybody started looking for a political agenda in the work of Moroccan artists. Yasmine

felt at times that artists, herself included, were somewhat instrumentalised.

“I like to work with Moroccan artists who have a political discourse,” she points out, “but mostly with those having an anti-exoticism and anti-orientalism perspective. I appreciate contemporary art without the postcard aesthetic.”

Yasmine observes that her generation is tired of the folkloric attitude that people attach to Morocco: “It’s true that it’s working very well market-wise. But is it really our reality? I don’t think so.”

As a gallerist, she is aware that most sales of Moroccan contemporary art are folkloric and orientalist works. “These kind of fantasies of the West are something we tried to overcome, even if we might not sell our works that much,” she laughs. With Dasthe Art Space and Agency, founded in 2017, she doesn’t shy away from considering the slippery art market, trying to carve spaces for emerging young artists, without compromising their true values.

In the interconnectedness of today’s world Yasmine deems it to be particularly important for artists to experience other realities in the most nurturing way possible. After all, the globalisation process is already happening in Morocco, whether we want it or not. “When young artists try to retrace the roots and inspiration for their work,” she notes, “they don’t only refer to the local traditional art and the older generation of artists here, but also more to international artists.”

The responsibility for this inter-generational gap also lies with 30 years of dictatorship in Morocco during which the arts were demonised because of a fear of a cultural revolution. “In the sixties and seventies, we had a group of artists and intellectuals who created some underground resistance art movement, but in the end they were all arrested or forced to leave the country. Hence, no one dared to try again for a very long time.”

Something finally started to change in 1999 when King Hassan II died. A wave of cultural change started with the musical scene. The L’Boulevard festival focused on rock music and marked a real cultural switch in Morocco.

“While conservative society attacked the festival, the organisation got the support of the international community,” says Yasmine. “This opened up the general sensitivity. Although visual art is still niche and less democratic than music, it definitely helped to open spaces for expression.”

Based between Brooklyn and Casablanca and travelling continuously, Yasmine

knows the perks and challenges that Casablanca has, in comparison with the more touristic Marrakesh. “Many galleries which were based in Casablanca are moving to Marrakesh, because the jet set and the foreigners spend more on the arts. You might definitely find more art galleries in Marrakesh, but they are catering more to that specific demographic. It’s an opportunistic kind of bubble.”

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Casablanca, on the other hand, is the biggest city in Morocco and also the economic capital, and visitors are coming mostly for work. “I love the city and I’m not going to change it, even if there is a better chance to sell in other cities,” the curator tells me with conviction. “I feel that artists here are bringing out issues that are more real and putting them onto the table.”

To form a collectors’ base, Yasmine has created an event at her gallery called “Collectors’ night”, encouraging Morocco’s thirty-somethings to buy some affordable pieces. However, according to her, what would really boost the art scene is the liberalisation of the economy. That would allow galleries to sell artists’ work on the internet, something they can’t do right now. “If we don’t enter the global economy we are stuck in a loop happening all inside the country and we have no chance to expand and grow.”

She sees this is not only as a problem for the art world, but also affecting many other sectors. “Morocco is still a very traditionalist and conservative country, and the older generation doesn’t see it as the way to go. It’s first and foremost a question of mentality. Status symbols like cars and television are more valued than art pieces by those with spending power.” This is making the most interesting Moroccan artists move abroad. “There seems to be no way for them stay in the country and keep growing,” she sighs. “Visibility and opportunities are just not there.”

Moreover, she admits that fighting and dealing with structural difficulties is frustrating at times, especially knowing how relatively easy things are overseas. However, she has the gritty approach of a woman who knows that she is in for the long run. “Sometimes you just need to go abroad for a while and then go back to tackle the problem with fresh eyes,” she notes. “It will take time, but I believe change will eventually happen.”