

Inaugural Rabat Biennale show rewrites the rules of the contemporary art game

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Do we need another biennale when the landscape of such exhibitions worldwide is already saturated? Why do we need one in Morocco? What would such an event in al-maghib al aqsa – the far west of the Arab world — look like?

These were the questions that French-Algerian curator, philosopher, art historian and museum director Abdelkader Damani considered when he was asked to devise a biennale in Rabat, the capital of Morocco. The way that Damani responded is really rather unique in the international contemporary art scene.

Launched on 24 September, the Rabat Biennale’s main show features 63 artists and collectives. They are all female, and mostly from the Arab world. The exhibition sends a powerful message in re-balancing gender equality in the male-dominated art world. It also paves the way for greater exposure of Arabic-speaking and African artists.

Damani is convinced that in order to advance creatively, we must first settle our debts: “And our debt is fundamentally towards women,” he explains. However, the Rabat Biennale doesn’t advertise itself as a “women artists only exhibition”. The organisers are more interested in content than in communication tools. “Focusing on the exclusivity of women artists would have underlined the wrong message,” he pointed out, “The artists are not in the show because they are women, but because they are great artists.”

Male artists are not excluded, though. The Biennale has been built as an archipelago; if the international exhibition is only open to female artists, the other parts include male *and* female artists.



Rabat Biennale’s main show features 63 artists and collectives. They are all female, and mostly from the Arab world Mona Hatoum Baluch red 2007-Photo [Jen Ziehe Berlin]

In terms of the general feel of the show, this echoes a very specific mix of cultural influences from the Arab world and Mediterranean, specific to Rabat. By creating an event of international reach, the Biennale also offers a platform for expression and visibility to the many heritage sites of the city.

The visitor can't fail to catch its poetic features: "Here the sea and horizon present the melancholy of a space coming to its conclusion," says Damani. "It is from this border, from this melancholy, that the title of this first edition came to me on one evening in the Moroccan capital: 'An Instant Before the World'."

For Damani, this concept is tied to art's provision of new beginnings and imagining of new possibilities. It often questions the established founding principles of what art really is. Art, according to the curator of the Rabat Biennale, considers the world not in its actual state, but as a white sheet that we need to completely rewrite.

This process must involve the senses. Several artworks articulate this "relearning to feel the world". We can see a heightened awareness of its landscape in the works of Etel Adnan or in the traversable landscape of Diana Al-Hadid (Smoke Screen, 2015).

Conversely, an awareness of the self and its existence manifests itself in the work of Katharina Cibulka, and is indicative of the world that we hope for (As long as following our rules is more important than following our hearts, I will be a feminist, 2019) as much as the work of Déborah Benzaquen (Où sont mes rêves?, 2019).

There is also the work that brought Amina Benbouchta onto the question of desire (Éternel retour du désir amoureux, 2019) and also political engagement, with Ghada Amer (All oppression creates a state of war, 2019).

In Damani's vision, the Rabat Biennale hopes to be a re-assessment of the established conventions. The invited artists are coming from all corners of the world, but especially from the African continent, unveiling the diversity of practices and creations outside of the occident.

"If female artists are often in a minority in group exhibitions," he explains, "then the artistic non-western creation is still underrepresented in a world pretending to be globalised. The Rabat Biennale, without following any geographic determinisms, is an attempt to withdraw this injustice."

Surprisingly, Damani didn't encounter any resistances to his breaking of this particular glass ceiling from the established art scene in Morocco. "I received, for my part, complete trust from the artists and the institutions, trust which allowed me to design this project with complete freedom."

More than thirty art works have been commissioned by the Rabat Biennale. When it closes, a number of them will become part of the permanent collection in the Mohammed VI Museum. "This is one of the most beautiful ways to contribute to the Moroccan contemporary art scene" concludes Damani. "Creating the conditions for it to evolve, to nourish itself of new works, of new discourses, new artists."