

Libyan-Egyptian artist Marwa Benhalim on food, politics and linguistics

Culture

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Palette gives an intimate understanding of history and geography. The New Arab spoke with Libyan-Egyptian artist Marwa Benhalim about her project, "Meals of Celebration and Meals of Death", and why interrogating food culture helps unravel difference.

Artist [Marwa Benhalim](#) told me there is an invisible line dividing Libya. I tried to guess what it was. But of the many divisions splitting Libya in two, I wouldn't have ever thought about this one: couscous and rice.

She explains to me that on the western side of Libya, there are semolina fields, and all the main dishes are based on couscous.

On the eastern side, it's all rice crops, and you can find rice-based recipes: "The couscous side of Libya was influenced by commerce with Morocco and Tunisia, the other side had rice comes from Asia through Egypt. Trade stopped in the middle because there is a very large desert," she says. "Through the food people eat, you can really understand the history of a country."

"I found that besides cookbooks, there isn't a lot of literature about food, although it is central in all sort of celebrations; when babies are born, when kids graduate, and even at funerals in Libya"

The artist and curator, born and bred in Egypt to Libyan parents, has an attitude for depths that mixes with sincere enthusiasm for one of her main subjects of research, which is food.

For Marwa food is not just something you have on your plate. She can see how it can tell the history of the planet and humanity: "Food in my art is not just a theoretical metaphor; it is something you can taste, it nourishes you. It involves all of your senses. It's connected to the body, to health, to agriculture, to nature, to politics."

This story she just told me, that of couscous and rice in Libya, is actually part of her long-term research, that one year from now will take the shape of a cookbook and a documentary. The working title is *Meals of Celebration and Meals of Death*, and it's research into Libyan culinary history.

For this, she went back to her parents' hometown Benghazi and met and cook with several women, to try to retrace how the cuisine changed over the years.

“I found that besides cookbooks, there isn't a lot of literature about food, although it is central in all sort of celebrations; when babies are born, when kids graduate, and even at funerals in Libya,” says the artist. “Libyan funerals last three to five days. And every day, there is a very specific kind of meal. It starts with food that is red in colour, having tomatoes. And then on the last day, the food would have meat and a lot more white rice in it.”

Marwa looked at all the cookbooks collected by her maternal ancestry, and she met with women who are used to cooking for big events, learning their stories and the significance of sharing food in the Arab world, and in Libya in particular: “Libya is a country that's been through a lot of pain and suffering in the last ten years, so these moments of gathering are important.”

Attempting the Abla Nazira

One of her most recent performative works explores the major Egyptian cookbook, called the Abla Nazira, by the homonymous chef lady, renowned in all the Arab world. This work was presented in Sharjah in April, in an exhibition entitled *Antithetical Domesticity, Attempting Abla Nazira* in collaboration with Emirati artist Moza Almatrooshi.

Both artists were familiar with the cookbook, and they first met in Sharjah in 2019, sharing portfolios. The opportunity to collaborate came during COVID when they followed each other on Instagram, and Moza first shared with her followers the recipe for iced coffee.

“During the pandemic, I felt so down. I wasn't doing much,” says Marwa. “And I love to cook. I contacted Moza and we told each other: ‘Let's cook from the Abla Nazira, and see what happens if we invite our followers to cook with us.’ It was quite a simple proposition, and it turned out to become something much bigger.”

"Living in Egypt, being Libyan, and feeling an immigrant of sorts, I use theory to define the parameters I live in, so I don't feel lost"

The project took the form of bi-monthly recorded live cooking and conversational sessions, image production, and writing, where the two women partake in the nurturing act of cooking and eating together via the virtual spaces of gathering that we all became familiar with during the pandemic.

The artists conceived it also as a reflection on time: “In the Abla Nazira book time is understood very different from today, where people can dedicate maximum 15 minutes, 20 minutes to a recipe. But in the Abla Nazira, the quickest recipe took at least two hours,” says Marwa, “Only during the pandemic we had that kind of time again.”

The project finally evolved into a self-directed residency in Sharjah and the aforementioned *Antithetical Domesticity, Attempting Abla Nazira* show, where the two artists invited people to come and join an open studio where they cooked together.



Marwa's 'Attempting Abla Nazira'

Food and politics

Another particular intersection that is the object of Marwa Benhalim's artistic research, is that between food, politics, and language. A work that exemplifies this is *The Devil's Recipe*, a work that highlights the absurdity and redundancy of political speeches, by mixing sounds, words, and a series of images of vegetables and everyday objects.

The artwork was a collaboration with Venezuelan artist Andrea Nones-Kobiakov, and they both reflected on what happens when dictatorial states collapse. "I was coming from Gaddafi and she was coming from Hugo Chavez," she notes. "We looked at the really intense speeches they both gave to the UN. When you listen to them, they sounded different, but the premises they tried to sell to the UN were the same: that the UN was unfair, because it was a Eurocentric institution, and they both criticized the imperialism of the United States."

Marwa notes that if you took the words of both dictators, not knowing how problematic they were in their politics, you would think that they had a point: “But considering who these people were and did, their words are really illogical.”

The artwork she and Andrea developed from that initial observation, was based on words and linguistics, but again, it also involved food: “We have certain words that work metaphorically, being them proverbs or idioms,” she explains. “For example, a typical kind of sexual comment or street harassment to women in Egypt is: ‘You are a banana.’ This has nothing to do with an actual banana. It’s a case when fruit and vegetables are used to connote other meanings.”

In *The Devil's Recipe*, she mixed these idioms and sayings with the political speeches of Gaddafi and Chavez: “I changed all the words in the speech and substituted them with either fruits or vegetables idioms.” For example, she created a speech for the right of having breakfast, to achieve a satirical effect. The audio of these surreal speeches was paired with holograms of foods which were slowly rotting.



Marwa Benhalim's *'The Devil's Recipe'*

Theory as parameters

While travelling between Libya and Egypt, working on *Meals of Celebration and Meals of Death*, Marwa has also other parallel projects going on. She is the co-founder of the Cairo Art Book Fair, taking place in December, and as an art curator, she will organise a big exhibition in Egypt in October.

She recently curated an exhibition about conformity and camouflage, linked to feminism and the theories of Judith Butler: “I’m interested to see how we can use these foreign theses to understand local issues in the MENA region.” Indeed, both her curatorial work and artistic work have a strong link to theory: “I feel it’s important to be reading thinkers from the Western world, but we need to be mindful to not just take the Western canon at face value. We need to understand how these ideas apply to our own reality.”

It seems to me that her own art practice and curation are her tools for navigating the world: "I always felt the need for a sort of theoretical grounding for my work," she concludes. "Living in Egypt, being Libyan, and feeling an immigrant of sorts, I use theory to define the parameters I live in, so I don't feel lost."

*Naima Morelli is an arts and culture writer with a particular interest in contemporary art from the Middle East, North Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. She is also the author *Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione* and *The Singapore Series: a contemporary art reportage*.*

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