



AFRICA, MOROCCO, REVIEWS

Moroccan artist Bouchra Khalili gives voice to the stateless

In her work, currently on show both in Athens and at the Venice Biennale, Moroccan Artist Bouchra Khalili highlights the power of storytelling for the disenfranchised subjects of history.



July 9, 2024 at 11:31 pm



Moroccan artist Bouchra Khalili



by Naima Morelli



naimamorelli



As a child in Casablanca, artist Bouchra Khalili was impressed by an ancient world map created by Moroccan traveller, geographer and botanist, Muhammad Al-Idrisi. This map, which showed south as north and vice-versa, offered a decentralised representation of the world, which left a long-lasting impact on her.

It seems that, since then, all Khalili has done with her art practice has been “decentralising”, and slanting the viewer’s perception of north, south, up, down.

Known for her complex and multilayered narratives and a gist for plunging into the folds of the intelligentsia and the cultural world of the past century, today her profoundly intellectual art touches on the most pressing issues of our time, especially in regard to migration, colonialism as well as the intermingling of North African and European politics.

Her multimedia practice mainly involves film, video and art installations, aimed to spur critical and ethical reflections on citizenship, community and political agency, from the point of view of those who lack them. And, not surprisingly, maps and our biased perception of geography remain an ongoing interest for her.

Her “Mapping Journey Project”, currently on display at the Venice Biennale, captures migrants’ journeys across the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. Poetic and informative at once, this project was developed over three years, from 2008 to 2011, investigating the Mediterranean migration routes, and it remains a powerful and relevant work today.

REVIEW: Expert panel at SOAS discuss accountability for Israel's Gaza war crimes and Genocide

Like most of Khalili’s artwork, this project was also based on interviews, a method that the artist uses to bring out personal stories that resonate on a broader scale. Khalili’s research for her projects often involves extensive collaboration with refugees and stateless citizens from North and East Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.

By listening to their stories and making them the subjects of their narratives, she empowers them and gives them a voice. These collaborative storytelling strategies are central to her work, which aims to include communities often excluded from citizenship.

“The Mapping Journey Project” is one of the first works visitors will encounter entering Venice’s exhibition space of the Arsenale. Projected on eight screens are videos of long, static shots without any cuts, where hands of different

Latest news
See all

Macron protests Israel's...

Amnesty urges Egypt to L...

Trendy appointmen Australia’...

UN experts: Israel’s targeted...

Turkiye's unemployment rate hits...

Subscribe to our newsletter

Er

Sign up

“It is a must read for anyone engaged with the Palestine issue and interested in an honest introduction to this important Palestinian movement.”
- Prof Ilan Pappé

Order Now >

ORDER NOW

migrants are seen holding a permanent marker and tracing their routes on a map of Europe. As they draw, they narrate their arduous and perilous journeys from their homes to Europe.



Artwork from Moroccan artist Bouchra Khalili

This simple yet powerful visual and auditory experience brings the migrants' stories to life, highlighting the human aspect of migration, and having

viewers emotionally participating in the journey.

Complementing this project is another work that uses embroidered fabrics to translate these migrant routes into constellations of stars. This approach connects the migrants' stories to ancient astronomy and mythology, giving their journey a heroic and legendary stature.

The theme of reimagining geography and power dynamics between North and South of the world is also present in her first solo exhibition in Athens's National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST). Khalili's EMST's exhibition is part of a series titled "What if women ruled the world". This umbrella title included programming of the museum, taking place from December 2023 to November 2024, exclusively dedicated to the work of women artists or artists who identify as female, aiming to balance out the dominance of male artists in museums.

Bouchra Khalili's specific exhibition is called "Lanternists and Typographers", and includes three interconnected works previously created by the artist: "The Magic Lantern Project" (2019–2022), "The Typographer" (2019), and "The Radical Ally" (2019), as well as two minor installation pieces.

These works, intellectual and complex, are meant to be absorbed like one might overhear a conversation which has started a long time before. One that does not aim to prove a point, but rather let's the mind explore a series of questions. And, as viewers, we arrive in the exhibition *in medias res*.

Khalili, like many other artist-intellectuals, presents a research which articulates across various mediums, including moving images, printmaking, installations, textiles and photography.

REVIEW: Palestine is everywhere at the Venice Biennale this year

The centrepiece of the exhibition, "The Magic Lantern", evokes the phantasmagoria, an 18th-century technology that combined projected images with storytelling performances. This piece, along with the others in the

show, ties into her long-term investigation into post-independence emancipatory movements in the Global South and its Diasporas.

Informed by the story of this medium, which was used by colonialists and anti-colonialists alike, Khalili's film takes inspiration from "The Nero of Amman", the first and last video work by Swiss feminist video pioneer, Carole Roussopoulos. Khalili has explored Roussopoulos's film legacy in previous works such as "Foreign Office" (2015) and "Twenty-Two Hours" (2018), focusing on the artist's role as a witness rather than a spokesperson.

"The Nero of Amman" was produced in 1970 in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan. To realise it, Roussopoulos used a Portapak, the first battery-operated individual analogue video camera, which she bought on the advice of her friend, the militant French writer, Jean Genet. Sadly, the film disappeared over time due to numerous projections, as master tapes were used for both filming and broadcasting.

In her installation, Khalili reimagines and retells the story of "The Nero of Amman". The centre of the room features a large screen with chairs like those in old cinemas, for visitors to sit and absorb the work. Khalili's goal was to allow an Arab subjectivity to speak through self-reflective visual and sonic forms, exploring agency and self-representation of communities rendered invisible by nation-states.

The Moroccan woman narrating the piece shares a compelling and somewhat meandering story, involving figures from the Western world such as Jean Genet, the Black Panthers and, of course, Carole Roussopoulos. The narration spans various locations like Beirut, Amman, Algiers and Congo, weaving together personal and collective histories.

It is easy to get lost in the work. But, at the same time, in this getting lost, it is possible to articulate non-linear reflections. Khalili's multi-layered works seem not to present a clear thesis, but rather an intersection of voices of colonised subjects reclaiming power over their own stories, and of the History. The Grand Narrative, so to speak.



Artwork from Moroccan artist Bouchra Khalili

Another piece, "The Typographer", a 16mm silent film, focused on the figure of Jean Genet. This time, the artist looks at the writer's brief training as a typographer.

Genet's meticulous attention to the typesetting of his own

volumes reflects his view of typography as an often overlooked element of what makes a book and, consequentially, literature. It is not only about the content – this is what the artist seems to hint to – but also the way this is typed onto the page.

To highlight this work “behind the scenes” of the great masterpieces, Khalili’s film shows a female typographer typesetting and printing the last sentence of Genet’s book “Prisoner of Love”, centred on his commitment to the Palestinian cause, which was published only posthumously.

A final work in the show, a collage called “The Radical Ally” features photos and articles referring to various figures of engaged intellectuals like Jean Genet, Duras, Godard and the Black Panthers. A series of questions pop out from the composition and seems to summarise Bouchra Khalili’s ethos in art: “Who is the witness? The one who cannot speak anymore, but whose memory remains with us? Or is it the one who can still speak? The one willing to speak?”

While the artist might not have answers, she provides us with threads between different figures and overlooked moment in history. Threads that were always there, but we most likely would not – or could not – have seen before. And, before we knew it, our way of thinking has been “decentralised”, too.

REVIEW: Will the new Ad-Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale tackle the fundamental issues of this time?



Unless otherwise stated in the article above, this work by **Middle East Monitor** is licensed under a *Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License*. If the image(s) bear our credit, this license also applies to them. **What does that mean?** For other permissions, please **contact us**.

Spotted an error on this page? Let us know

Trending

Today
This week

NEWS
Left-wing French alliance vows to recognise...

NEWS