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[ARTISTS IN FOCUS]



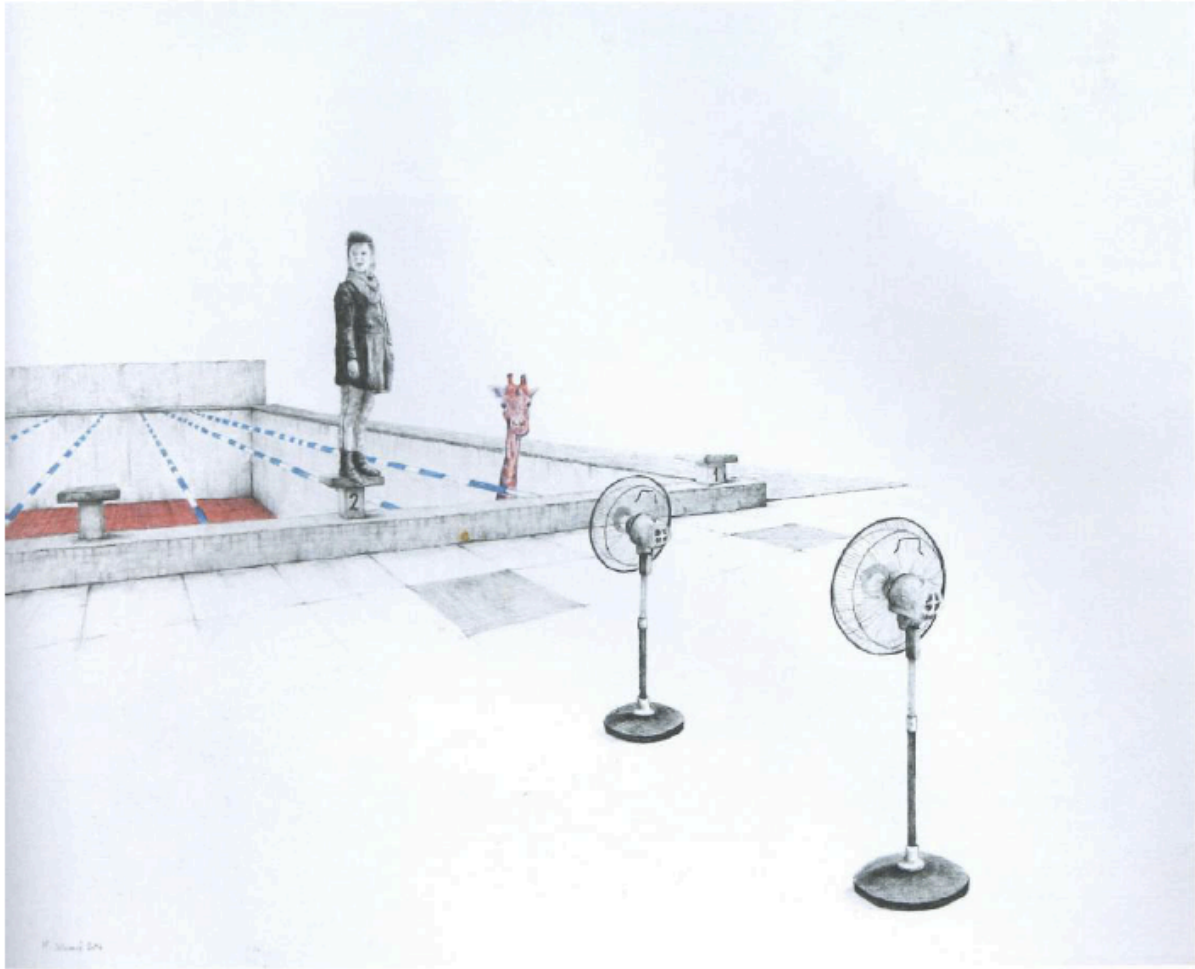
Massinissa Selmani

Born Algiers, 1980

When reading a newspaper during his youth in Algeria, Massinissa Selmani would turn first to the cartoons at the back. Only after that was he ready to read the 'bad news' at the front, where the headlines, he recalls, were invariably 'very violent and tough'. In 'confronting' tragedy with comedy, he found absurdity, and this is what underlies his meticulously composed drawings, where a fragile semblance of order and logic may seem to prevail, but actually nothing quite makes sense, and some sort of disruption is always afoot.

Look at the images in his 2013-15 series, *A-t-on besoin des ombres pour se souvenir?* (*Does one need shadows to remember?*), which received a special mention at the 2015 Venice Biennale. Seven works from the series are now in the collections of the Centre Pompidou in Paris; in one, the head and neck of a red giraffe poke above the surface of a swimming pool (Selmani uses colour, he says, as much to divert attention from what else is going on, as to attract it). In another, a zebra stalks towards two figures kneeling and seated on a piece of AstroTurf by a washing machine. 'When you





Above, Massinissa Selmani, *A-t-on besoin des ombres pour se souvenir? #9*, 2014. Opposite, clockwise from top left: *L'aube insondable*, 2018; #2, *Resolutions series*, 2017; the artist

first look, you find a lot of things that bear no relation to the first thing you saw,' he says. 'But then you start to connect them, step by step.'

It comes as no surprise to learn that, along with the 19th-century French caricaturist and painter Honoré Daumier, the *New Yorker* cartoonist Saul Steinberg, the Marx Brothers and the films of Peter Watkins, the major influence he cites is the Belgian surrealist Paul Nougé. He happened upon Nougé's photographic *Subversion des images* at the Musée de la Photographie à Charleroi in Belgium and was 'absolutely fascinated,' he says, recalling an image in which a group of people peer at a blank wall. 'It looks like nothing is happening, but there is clearly something wrong. It captivates you more and more.'

As a child, Selmani knew he wanted to be an artist. 'When I was in high school, I tried to be a cartoonist,' he says, 'but you have to find an idea every day. It's a question of rhythm, and it was absolutely not my rhythm.' His parents were against the idea, and in any case, he says, 'there is no real art scene in Algeria'. But after a degree and a first job in IT - really to placate his father - Selmani

moved to France at the age of 25 to study at the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Tours.

News remains critical to his work, however, and his studio is packed with newspapers from all over the world, which he combs for images. He then reinterprets them in pencil, creating graphic montages that hint at a new narrative. Sometimes, the context in which a figure has originally been photographed is evident despite having been stripped of its background. More often, though, it isn't. 'So you have to make your own reading of it.'

In light of Selmani's background in computer science and his hunger for news, has he never been tempted to work digitally and read the news online? 'I have a graphics package,' he says, 'but I can't use it. And anyway, drawing enables you to make art with the minimum of means. I like its lightness, and there is something about the feeling and texture of paper. I love the physical relation you have with it.' Ultimately, it's the sense of serendipity he would miss. 'With computers there are no accidents,' he says. 'And all my work comes from accidents.'

www.annesarahbenichou.com

[059]