

MEMO
Middle East Monitor

31.01.2020



Defusing violence through humour is one aspect of artist Massinissa Selmani's work

'Even today it's really small. In Algeria there is no real cultural strategy, and outside Algiers it is really difficult to do something in the arts. But over the past few years the situation has started to change, thanks to a few private initiatives'

Naima Morelli



Algerian artist Massinissa Selmani's 'Do we need shadows to remember #1', 2013; [Courtesy: Collection of Centre Pompidou, Paris]

Artworks that are originally meant to be on their own, were combined together. That resulted in new associations. The process is similar to what Selmani usually does within the drawings themselves, associating different images to create new meanings.

According to Algerian artist Massinissa Selmani, he is obsessed with making work with the minimum of materials and components. For him, simplicity is not something you start with, but something you arrive at. He removes excess to get to the essence.

"In the studio I'm spending more time removing than adding," he says about his delicate yet striking drawings. "In the process I stop to see what's working and what's not. Having few elements, you strive to find the perfect balance, to create something powerful."

The artist has just wrapped up his latest solo show, "Le calme de l'idée fixe", at the Centre de Création Contemporaine Olivier Debré in Tours. In the show, visitors can admire different series of drawings, where political and historical innuendos meet an interest in architecture and landscape.

Most of these works are from the past three years of Selmani's work. During this time, the artist has had a text of Algerian writer Malek Haddad in mind: "There is a beautiful passage about the gesture of writing, which for me corresponds to the gesture of drawing. The show focused on the act of drawing itself, and the pieces were displayed so as to form a scenography."

To have this show in his adoptive city of Tours was particularly significant for him. He first moved there to study in 2005: "I was supposed to stay here for three years and then go back to Algiers. However I had the chance to exhibit very quickly straight out of school, so project after project I never had time to plan a move."

Selmani grew up in Algiers and studied computer science, but he always had an interest in art. "For me it was really clear since I was a kid that I wanted to become an artist. I have always been drawing for as long as I can remember."

While his family wasn't into art, they welcomed his passion, sending him to drawing classes. As an 18 year old, though, he picked a more "practical, job-oriented" faculty. "The arts felt so far from our everyday life in Algeria," he points out. "Computer science was nice, but writing code all day was not for me. I wanted something different. One day I started checking the internet with a friend, and he we looked at Tours. I applied for the art school there and got in. It was the only art academy I ever applied to, so it was meant to be like this."



Algerian artist Massinissa Selmani's work, at the Ce qui coule n'a pas de fin, solo show Palais de Tokyo Paris. Curated by Yoann Gourmel. with the support of SAM Art Projects [Photo: Aurélien Molle]

In Algeria back then the art scene wasn't really developed. "Even today it's really small. In Algeria there is no real cultural strategy, and outside Algiers it is really difficult to do something in the arts. But over the past few years the situation has started to change, thanks to a few private initiatives."

Another problem, notes Selmani, is that the art scene in Algiers is not really known outside the country: "Although with this protest movement a lot of new artists are coming up and being discovered. And this is really exciting."

Growing up in Algeria deeply inspired his more of expression in his art: "My first inspiration were the cartoonists in Algeria when I was a teenager. Especially during the '90s, when the situation was really tough. You'd have the headlines telling us about bombs and terrorism, so we would look for the cartoons first, to laugh first, and then after that we would go back to read the news. You'd have this breath of fresh air first, before confronting the news."

This mix of the comical and dramatic is still very much present in his work. We always find the surreal, out-of-place elements appearing in serious images from magazine clips or the news. "In Algeria we grew up like this. Paradoxes were on the agenda. And I feel that, not only in Algeria, humour can really help people dealing with the most disheartening scenarios." Defusing violence through humour is one aspect of Selmani's work.

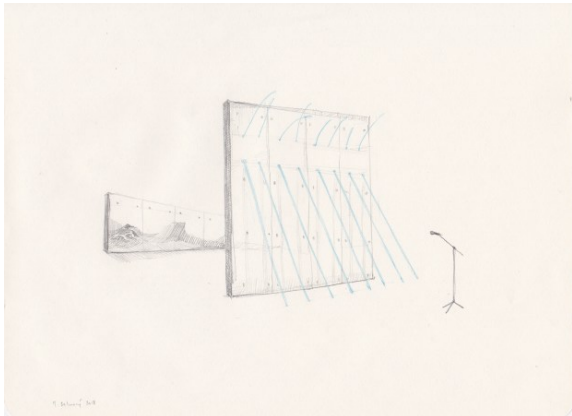
Another strong influence has been French-Algerian literature; Algerians writing in French, with Chawki Amari above all: "In most of his novels there would be a very tough setup. However the characters will find themselves confronting surreal,

even funny situations. It's this balance of comedy and tragedy again. This way the violence is somehow defused, it's never crude and direct."

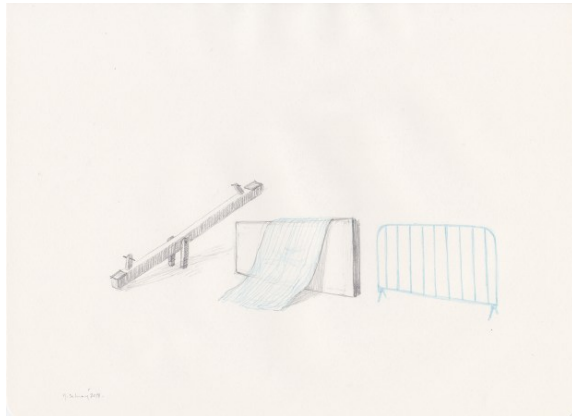
While his preferred medium is always drawing, Selmani is constantly working on expanding his personal expression, overflowing into different mediums like installation and animation. For him, drawing is always conceived as something dynamic which doesn't exhaust itself on paper.

Animation allowed him to explore historical research. In his 2018 show at the Palais de Tokyo he looked at an episode involving the French anarchist Louise Michel. She was deported to New Caledonia in the 19th century. There she met Algerians sent to the penal colony after the insurrections of March 1871 in Kabylia. Resolving to meet them again, in 1904 Michel travelled to Algeria, where she gave a series of talks denouncing religion, militarism and colonial violence.

"This story was really fascinating to me," explains the artist. "When I talk about history I choose not to use archives or video interviews. I try to use drawings only. The impossibility of telling the whole history through drawings is also part of the work."



Algerian artist Massinissa Selmani's Untitled (Escale#5), 2018; [Courtesy: The artist and galerie Anne-Sarah Bénichou, Paris]



Algerian artist Massinissa Selmani's Untitled (Escale#4), 2018; [Courtesy: The artist and galerie Anne-Sarah Bénichou, Paris]

At the same time, there is always a great element of fictionalisation. "I'm an artist, I'm not a historian, a researcher or a journalist. Artists work with subjectivity, with the small history. Fiction is useful in this sense because it helps in taking distance from the subject. My work is very much based on emptiness, and I invite people to fill this empty space somehow. They can collide different images together to create their own meaning."

This idea of a gap that viewers will try to fill themselves, goes back to Massinissa Selmani's use of empty space. In its minimalism, his art reveals the gaps in history, in news broadcasts and current events.