

Stir World
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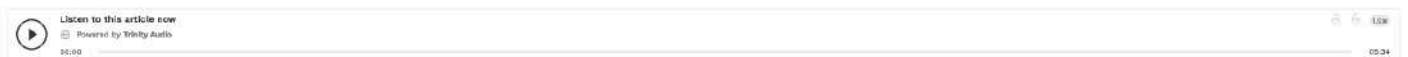


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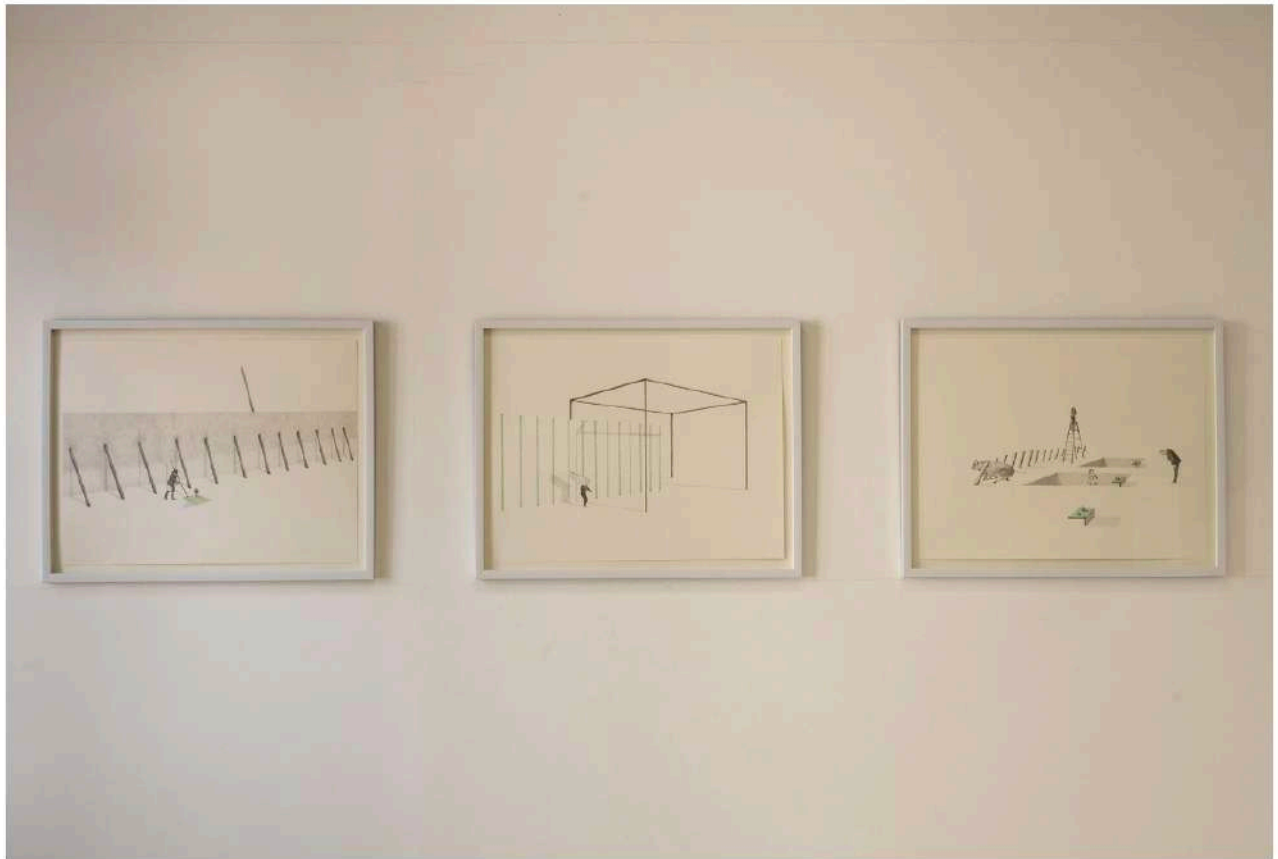
Borders, conflict and territory through a satirical lens at Kochi-Muziris Biennale

Artist Massinissa Selmani discusses his exhibition of drawn forms that question militarisation, surveillance and media in what can be seen as a world in perpetual conflict.

by Sukanya Deb | Published on : Jan 26, 2023



At **Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2022**, artist Massinissa Selmani presents a set of **drawings**, photo collages and **animations** as an assemblage of sorts, that acts as a site for political and social commentary. As an artist, he speaks about being interested in drawing as a medium and a ground for experimentation, where objects and figures are composed within the pictorial frame to create unlikely situations. In a conversation with STIR, Selmani talks about his interest in cartoons since he was a teenager, and how absurdism took shape early in his work, as the **comic** and the tragic were equally part of his everyday life while growing up in Algeria.



Exhibition view at Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2022. L to R: *Boussole*, *Éclat* and *Échappées*

Image: Nourin CS; Courtesy of STIR

One can reflect on Selmani's interest in the cartoon as a tool of satire and critique as an investment in how media is circulated and how images can substitute language where commentary becomes conflicted. Selmani speaks of humour being a helpful device to think through complex, conflictual situations, where he is interested in replicating and spotlighting familiar gestures of violence that one can recognise but not quite pin down to one source. Because of the replicable nature of the image and gesture, the reception of the work becomes a foray into reading and uncovering the all too familiar structures of violence. Within his work, boundaries, borders and territories feature as impositional logics within the *mise-en-scène*, where they are sometimes suggested through shadows and not structure. This can be seen as the development of police states as an accepted condition and the policing of states purported to be in the name of our own freedom as citizens.



Algerian artist Massinissa Selmani

Image: Marco Giugliarelli for Civitella Ranieri Foundation

Through what he refers to as “drawn forms”, produced from interaction between different materials, figures, objects and shapes, the **visual artist** uses repeated motifs through his body of work to reference the specific language within which they are situated and created. In a conversation with STIR, Selmani speaks about his interest in histories of architecture and how they have always been built as symbols of power. There is an interest in circulation through media, as we see figures, objects and structures in Selmani’s drawings drawn from press clippings. Adjacently, he highlights an interest in documentary **photography** as a form and the capacity for drawing as a medium to equally document.



Exhibition view of *Teyara* (from the *Alterables* series)

Image: Nourin CS; Courtesy of STIR

Speaking to STIR, Selmani talks about the fluid space that references can take, "It's not about describing specific events, like even when I did focus on events in other projects, it was to explore other aspects of drawing, like drawing as a form of documentary in itself." As part of his **visual art** process of translating figures and objects from press material, he often transplants the shadows from the original source as well, while they may not follow the pictorial logic of the new image. This creates an oneiric quality to the works, that be thought through with the logic of dreams, seeing the juxtaposition of characters and a contextless space where time ceases to exist. The new mise-en-scène suggests the suspension of reality and contexts from which the characters arrive. This strain of expression harks back to surrealism's influence on Selmani's work, creating an 'eternal situation'. The animations presented also take form through infinite loops of humorous actions that take on the absurd through the mode of repetition. The comic becomes tragic.



Exhibition view of *Untitled #1*
Image: Nourin CS; Courtesy of STIR

Selmani's citations become universal through the deployment of characters like an army official, a security agent, a sniffer dog with an Elizabeth cone, a businessman, a cameraman. Through the framing of his drawn forms, the artist emphasises inoperative or arbitrary borders that appear in the middle of the image, where patches of green signify territory. Another element that we can see as signifying territory is the repeated motif of the rock, that even appears as a material aspect to the drawing, as a **sculptural art** form within the **art exhibition**. A table with a (bright, artificial) green base, houses an ensemble with a miniature rock with an iron fence, a patch of polystyrene that resembles a depleting sheet of ice, and a fictional map. These elements mirror details from his drawings, and we can see these as keys to understanding the **scenography** that the artist has set up.



Exhibition view of Laps

Image: Nourin CS; Courtesy of STIR

“For a violent situation, I found that the absurd is the best way to describe and speak about it,” says Selmani. Through spotlighting common struggles across borders and speaking to the anxieties that borders create, we can see the constant potential for conflict, where we can see stages of such through temporal frames such as ‘potential territories of conflict’, ‘latent conflict’, ‘suggested violence’, ‘nations in conflict’ and ‘violence to come’.

Architecture is isolated in Selmani’s drawings where they act as signifiers of power, or act on space to either divide or contain. Through the loss of linearity, repetition of signifiers, and the quiet, disarming nature of the drawings themselves, Selmani attempts to disturb readings of political strife, and instead prompt one to think through logic and the lack of.



Distant things, Drawing

Image: Nourin CS; Courtesy of STIRworld