

DISCONTINUED
ORDER

LATIFA ECHAKHCH



With her expressive works, at once familiar yet always startling, **James Parry** examines how Latifa Echakhch has set about dismantling the very foundations of society and its systems.

*Opening spread: Globus (b), 2007.
Print, 15 x 15 x 15 cm. View of
the exhibition Shifting Identities –
(Swiss) Art Today, Kunsthau Zürich.
© Latifa Echakhch. Courtesy the
artist and kamel mennour, Paris.*

There was little in Echakhch's background to indicate that she might end up as an artist. Her parents were not keen on the arts, although they hailed from a region of Morocco with a strong tradition in poetry and oral storytelling. Echakhch recalls her father's collection of vinyl records by figures as diverse as Bach, Santana, Verdi, Piaf and The Rolling Stones. "For Moroccans of my parents' generation, France was something of a cultural dream, so although they didn't really relate to what was going on culturally in Aix and beyond, they always encouraged us to get involved."

More significantly, Echakhch's parents had definite views on what sort of outlook they wished to engender in their children. "They were always keen for us to be French," she recalls. "We spoke French at home, and when I went back to Morocco to see our relatives it felt like a foreign country to me." Although there were other families of North African origin living in Aix, the young Echakhch felt little if anything in common with them. She did not speak Arabic, and felt disconnected from the other Moroccan kids in her neighbourhood.

VOLTE FACE

Everything changed with the bomb attack by Islamic terrorists on the Paris Metro in 1995. Eight people were killed, and the mood in France changed. "The whole question of identity suddenly came into focus for me," recalls Echakhch; "People started to look at me differently. Never before had I felt 'different'. I'd felt French." That one event, and its aftermath, had a clear and profound impact on Echakhch and her approach to her work. She began to articulate and explore her hitherto sublimated sense of Moroccan-ness and investigate cultural angles that she had previously regarded as irrelevant or of which she had been totally unaware.

By this time Echakhch was studying at art school in Grenoble. At secondary school in Aix she had enjoyed maths, economic and politics,



ust how will Latifa Echakhch approach a forthcoming show in Tel Aviv?

"I may just pack a suitcase, turn up and take it from there," she explains, "that way, I'll learn more about where I am and probably produce better work. I don't like to plan ahead too much." Such a devil-may-care attitude certainly comes with risks attached, but it is all part of the edginess and innovation that has recently brought Echakhch to the attention of critics and curators alike. Her trenchant yet artfully romantic sculptures and installations stand out as particularly individual commentaries on a range of contemporary preoccupations.

Born in the small Moroccan town of El-Khnansa in 1974, Echakhch arrived in France at the age of three with her mother. Her father was already there, an economic migrant who had preceded his family and found himself work in the Alpine ski resort of La Plagne. Here the Echakhchs stayed for a year before moving to Aix-les-Bains, where Latifa and her two brothers grew up.



“The whole question of identity suddenly came into focus for me. People started to look at me differently.”

developing a keen interest in systems and structures. “There was something about the mechanics of how things operated that fascinated me,” she recalls. The discipline and rigour involved perhaps explain her schoolday passion for athletics and particularly long-distance running, at which she excelled. Personal calculations about how far and fast she could run fuelled her commitment further, and she soon became respected as a gifted and successful runner. Ultimately, however, she lost her appetite for the sport and gave it up, a decision that hinged largely on her dislike of competitive racing; “I’m not sure even now exactly what it was that I didn’t like. Perhaps a fear of winning? Who knows. But I certainly found the fame and publicity difficult to cope with.”

Meanwhile, the situation at Grenoble reinforced Echakhch’s newfound sense of “otherness”.

In her second year (of a five-year course) at the Ecole Supérieure d’Art, she realised that she had been one of only three students of North African origin in an intake of some 150. Furthermore, she was struggling to settle in. It had been a major achievement to secure a place at this prestigious establishment, but Echakhch felt disconcerted, under pressure and unhappy with what she was producing. A suspicion that her tutors felt that she was failing to meet the standards required served to focus her mind; “I realised that I needed to do something, and do it quickly,” she explains. “So I went into overdrive, taking in loads of exhibitions, going to poetry readings, watching films, reading philosophy. It was a crazy time, but it really made a difference. Suddenly I felt confident, and that I had something worthwhile to express in my work.”

Above and below (detail): Erratum, 2004–09. Broken tea glasses. Variable dimensions. View of the exhibition, Pendant que les Champs Brûlent: Part 2, kamel mennour, Paris, 2009. © Latifa Echakhch. Photography by Charles Duprat. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris.





View of the 2009 exhibition Partitas at Bielefelder Kunstverein, Bielefeld, 2009. On wall: Dérives. 2009. Acrylic on canvas. 200 x 150 cm. On floor: Frames. 2009. Floor installation of five borders of carpets. Various dimensions. All images © Latifa Echakhch. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris.

Echakhch's first group exhibition was in Paris in 1999. By now she was studying at the École Supérieure d'Arts de Cergy-Paris and had become interested in using video as a means of expressing herself and her ideas on identity and the significance of positions within society. The exhibition included her first important video work, based around a TV advertisement for a blue couscous. Featuring a woman preparing the dish – Echakhch's own mother, in fact – this work explored issues surrounding the role of women, commodification and the domestic dimension of neo-colonialism. In a nod to Echakhch's own sense of cultural remove, the video had a French soundtrack but carried Arabic subtitles.

AN ARTFUL WORLD

Meanwhile, Echakhch had begun working part-time at Galerie Nathalie Obadia, one of the French capital's most respected Contemporary art galleries. It gave Echakhch a much valued insight into how artists operated and what the context was for the world she was poised to inhabit; "I decided that I had to try and understand what happens around an artist. Once I fully comprehended that, I felt that I would be able to avoid the fear of context, and its dangers, and focus on my own work." So valuable did Echakhch find the experience that she continued working at the gallery even once she started post-graduate studies at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Lyon.

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*Vanités. 2007. Black plastic, fixture.
View of the exhibition Il M'a Fallu
Tant de Chemins pour Parvenir
Jusqu'à Toi, Le Magasin, Grenoble,
2007. © Latifa Echakhch. Courtesy
the artist and kamel mennour, Paris.*





Fantasia (Empty Flag, White), 2008.
Empty flag, Variable dimensions.
View of the exhibition, Speakers'
Corner, Tate Modern, Bankside,
London, 2008. © Latifa Echakhch.
Courtesy the artist and kamel
mennour, Paris.

“The story behind France is one of ornament, geometry and systems ... I liked this once, but now I prefer disorder.”

Whilst at Lyon, Echakhch began to see the artistic opportunities offered by an analysis of cultural symbols and how she might examine – and, indeed, challenge – pre-conceived notions surrounding multi-culturalism and identity. Taking her earlier interest in systems and structures into new territory, she began to favour deconstruction, the stripping away of layers and content to reveal – hopefully – the true essence beneath. In order to achieve this, she takes everyday objects and the stereotypes they often engender and unravels them, stripping them of their recognisable context and thereby replacing their accepted function with a more abstract and unpredictable dimension. They become exercises in reduction.

She attributes much of this direction in her work to what she perceives as a reaction on her part to something she grew up with, namely the French obsession with structure, hierarchy and labels; “The story behind France is one of ornament, geometry and systems, with everything neatly pigeon-holed and given a name. I liked this once, but now I prefer disorder, situations in which things are not well-organised, not what they appear, and where anything might happen – or not.”

This carefully crafted demolition of established norms is more than Minimalism for its own philosophical sake. For Echakhch it is a means of exploring nationality, globalisation and cultural difference, and their inherent fragilities. Some of her most potent works hinge around the dismantling and unpicking of cultural icons such as traditional Islamic carpets – de-threaded so that only the frame or outline remains, as in *Frame (red)* and *Frame (green)*, both 2006 – and Moroccan tea glasses, smashed to smithereens at the bottom of a gallery wall (*Erratum*, 2008).

TO THE BARRICADES

The nature of political dialogue and expression is also something on which Echakhch is keen to communicate with her audience. Her remarkable exhibition, *Speakers’ Corner*, held at Tate Modern in 2008 and her inaugural show in the UK, was conceived as a commentary and judgement on what Echakhch considers the “poor heritage” of Western democracies generally and of the French Revolution in particular. She was fascinated by *Speakers’ Corner*, a small section of London’s Hyde Park where anyone can go and speak out in the open on any subject; “I was completely amazed by this idea that people in Great Britain are allowed to make wild public speeches as long as they bring their own crate to stand on.” She therefore chose to work with elements related to easily identifiable forms of political expression: “I like the idea of a soapbox as a political tool – it gives politics a materiality.”

Facing page: View of the 2009 exhibition Les Sanglots Longs at Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, 2009. On floor: Chambre II, 2009. Dihedrons in foam and concrete. Various dimensions; Kasseler Parkbänke, 2009. Benches in wood and concrete. Various dimensions. On wall: Resolution Partition, 2009. Charcoal on wall. Various dimensions. © Latifa Echakhch. Photography by Nils Klinger. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris.

Below: Principe d’Economie II, 2005. Installation: loaves of two kilograms of imported sugar. Variable dimensions. © Latifa Echakhch. Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris.





Stripped of its orator, without a speech, however, a soapbox assumes a different character of course. As did elements in *For Each Stencil a Revolution* (2007): carbon paper, so essential in the days of political pamphleteering, and rubber car tyres, a classic symbol of political protest and even of brutality – who can forget the burning ‘necklaces’ of pre-apartheid protest in South Africa, for example? – assume different qualities entirely when stripped of their usual associations. Echakhch’s sculptures and installations are discreet yet powerful, their delicacy belying a potency far beyond their immediate material presence.

Although she has rejected the desirability of an overly structured world as un-free and morally dubious, Echakhch continues to be absorbed by systems. In her exhibition *Movement and Complication*, held at the Swiss Institute in New York in 2009, she presented a site-specific installation entitled *Plaines* (Complaints) that was inspired by the Swiss architect and leading Modernist Le Corbusier and specifically by his system of measurements and calculations entitled *Le Modulor*. She applied Le Corbusier’s measures – which

were designed to provide the ideal proportions to a series of wall paintings made with charcoal and also presented wooden brainteasers on pedestals, an allegory of what she regards as the trickery and obfuscation inherent in Modernism.

In her multimedia exhibition *Les Sanglots Longs*, held at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany, also in 2009, Echakhch tackled a range of socio-political issues. Particularly compelling was her exploration of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The dates and numbers of the various United Nations resolutions were displayed on walls and in turn converted into music for piano, with the endless soundtrack played in the background. This unusual conversion of one medium into an entirely different sensory realm signals Echakhch’s ability to find something new to say on what can be elusive subjects for innovation.

It is for such refreshing energy and originality that Echakhch is now rightly respected, her voice increasingly one that demands to be heard. Yet her works are not overtly didactic or proselytising, and she maintains that she will continue such lightness of hand in future; “I want to take things

to their fullest extent whilst always retaining a Minimalist quality about what I do.” Meanwhile, she continues to divide her time between Paris and Martigny in Switzerland, where she moved in 2006. Despite the latter’s reputation as a highly ordered and disciplined society, it has proved an accommodating and very accepting place in which to live and work as an artist, as she explains: “I’m very sensitive to context and find that the artistic community in Switzerland is much stronger and more supportive than in France. There, as a post-conceptual artist I was not supposed to speak to other artists, we were put into categories and somehow not encouraged to mix. Here, I feel very free about everything.”

Latifa Echakhch’s upcoming exhibition *Le Rappel des Oiseaux* runs at FRAC in Reims from 2 April–23 May. For more information visit www.kamelennour.fr and www.frac-champagneardenne.org In July 2010 she will create a new sculpture at the Museu de Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona. For more information visit www.macba.es