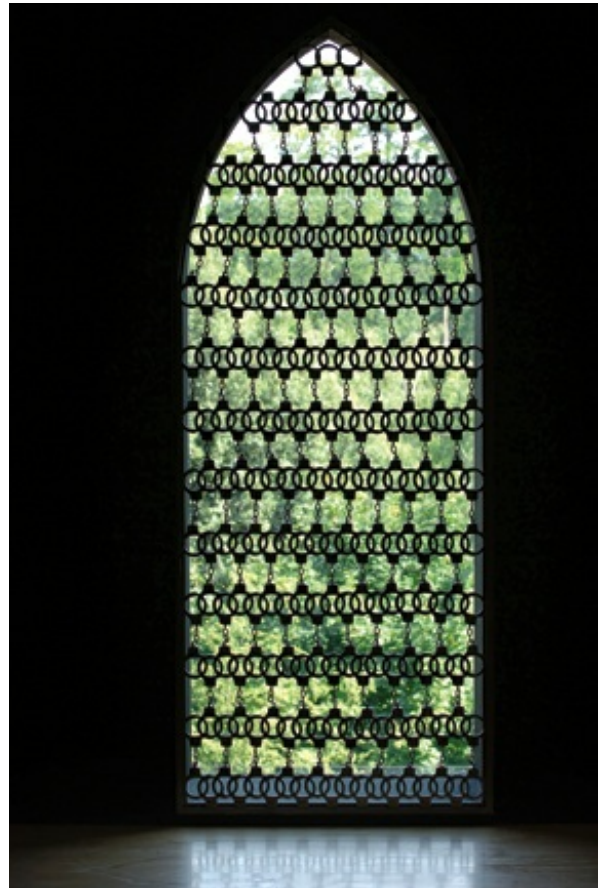


Article | France-Algérie, Go-betweens

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Kader Attia, Moucharabieh, Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, France, 2006.
Photo: Blaise Adilon, courtesy : private collection



France-Algeria, Go-betweens **By Florence Jaillet**

Two years after the opening of the Cité nationale d'histoire de l'immigration in Paris, and at a time where French public opinion is increasingly acknowledging the reality of a History and memory of immigrants, one can begin to consider the place and questioning of these issues in contemporary art. In this regard, the work done in France and around the world by young artists of Algerian origin makes it possible to draw the contours of an art that has caught hold of the immigration reality, dual culture and the painful history that links the host country to the country of origin.

Uprootedness, multiculturalism, religion, living conditions, personal history and History writ large, are among the subjects treated by artists born after 1962, who are daughters and sons of Algerian immigrants, or Algerians exiled after the civil war that erupted in the 1990s.

Thread by thread they recompose this complex tale of exile in works that ask questions regarding ties, heritage, and hybridization. The parents' culture and that of the host country—yesterday's colonizer—are opposed and mixed together in works that are directly in tune with identity issues confronting these young generations.

Transfiguring Cultural Heritage, Undoing Clichés

Hybridizations are increasingly frequent on a contemporary global art scene characterized by multiple influences. *Détournements*, citations, borrowings are part of a dominant tendency, expressed in all mediums from photography up to installation.

The work of art makes it possible to question and rethink cultural productions. In confronting them or combining them the artist brings out statements, identities, points of view, and creates a surprise effect through a sudden mixing of apparently opposed reference systems.

This hybridization principle—the germ of any culture—constitutes a particularly important axis for artists whose life path is marked by multiculturalism, and more specifically for those who hail from former colonies. The London-based artist of Nigerian origin Yinka Shonibare has constructed his work on an inversion of values. He designs eighteenth-century style clothing using Dutch wax fabric (batik), the colonial fabric par excellence, which was manufactured in Holland and England and then exported to the African colonies where it had a lasting success. These hybrid garments are used, among other things, to clothe headless characters, inspired by Gainsborough or Fragonard masterpieces, in what is an often scathing cultural syncretism.

In a manner similar to Shonibare's, Zolikhha Bouabdellah incessantly hybridizes in her works. This artist, who arrived in France in 1994 at the age of seventeen in the wake of the Algerian civil war, merrily draws from the semiotic reserve of both cultures. In *Dansons*, a 2003 video work, a shot frames the hips of an oriental female dancer who slowly puts on blue, white and red scarves decorated with pendants, before launching into a belly dance to the tune of the Marseillaise.

The confrontation of the two reference systems also offers the opportunity to consider the difficulties French youth of North African origin have in finding their place in contemporary French society. This is what Kader Attia reveals in works that show the magnetic poles consisting of religion on the one end, and consumer society on the other. Born in 1970 in the Seine-Saint-Denis department, Attia spent his childhood and adolescence in Sarcelles before studying at several art schools in Paris and Barcelona. In *Mosquée/Night Club* (2003), he displays the identity options available to youth of immigrant descent in the French suburbs. On this neon sign, the red light successively displays two choices: the nightclub (symbol of secular society and its pursuit of pleasure) or the mosque (identity by way of religion). Likewise, *La machine à rêves* (2003) is a vending machine with a content that bears witness to an astonishing reference system of intertwined religion and consumerism. The

offered items are actually quite surprising. Gin, whisky, chorba, and even halal syringes, Fashion Chador and a Gold credit card are among the products presumably providing an identity compass to find one's way in contemporary western society. Furthermore, an Arab translation of a guide called *How to Live with a Homosexual Brother* and a "kit" for marriage with a French citizen bear witness to the tension generated by these two, at times, contradictory cultural systems.

These symbolic hybridizations often draw on the North African formal repertory. Traditional crafts, furniture, geometric décor motifs and calligraphy are taken out of their original context to be associated with foreign elements in meaning laden collages of a decidedly postmodernist aesthetic. In going beyond the modernist approach, contemporary artists actually propose a new reading of their North African cultural heritage. Through the power of the sign they can evoke precise situations, and construct images that partake in the tight mesh of cultural and social representations. Attia's *Moucharabieh* (2006), a work in which a skillfully executed interlacing of pairs of handcuffs is transformed into a moucharaby décor, is certain to unsettle viewers. The artist diverts the customarily refined ornament of this furniture to reveal its true function: imprisonment, interdiction, and submission. In *Quatre générations de femmes* (1997), Zineb Sedira also diverts Islam's decorative tradition. The work consists of a room covered up to the ceiling with wallpaper. Hidden within the interlaces of the traditional geometric drawings is an autobiographical text that can be gradually made out. A very similar process is applied in *Une génération de femmes* (1997), in which minuscule portraits are inserted in the stars of an oriental décor. Running counter to the tradition of the image ban that usually governs this kind of décor, Sedira places pictures of her daughter, mother, grandmother and herself within it.

These geometric patterns, typical of Islamic cultures, are also reexamined by Adel Abdessamed in *God is Design* (2005). In this video, ornamental motifs borrowed from all three monotheistic religions are mixed together with drawings of human cells to form an infinite arborescence. This succession of compositions, encounters and re-compositions takes place against a background of repetitive music and, in a purely graphic manner, makes visible a form of hybridization in progress.

Reconquering the Memory of One's Parents

Appropriating One's Origins

Beyond formal explorations, borrowings, détournements and hybridizations, artists raise intimate questions regarding exile, their parents' nostalgia, and their countries of origin. In works that are often self-referential, and in which collective and individual memory overlap, they focus on this difficulty of being from here and from elsewhere.

In his video triptych *Mother Tongue* (2002), Sedira tackles the essential problematic of the necessity and difficulty of dialogue. This artist, who was born in France of Algerian parents and who has been living in the UK since 1986, juggles cultures as well as languages. The triptych shows three filmed dialogues, one of the artist with her mother, another between

her and her daughter, and another between her daughter and her mother. The work speaks of the need for exchange, for handing down, and the necessity to forge ties through language, but also of the barrier language presents: Arab for the artist's mother, English for her daughter, and between these two generations Sedira is the only one who understands both languages. "A narrative break occurs when my daughter and my mother no longer understand one another's spoken words. Unable to communicate verbally, their exchange of smiles, glances and moments of silence evokes another story." (1) In commenting on this work Sedira speaks of the "experience of diaspora"; this experience, analyzed by Julia Kristeva, consists of being a foreigner everywhere and of never being able speak one's mother tongue. (2)

The emergence of these questions in the artistic domain is linked to their growing recognition by the social sciences. Since the 1990s historical research has been devoted to the memory of immigrants and this consequently led to finally legitimizing these long repressed experiences, even by families who were first and foremost concerned with the integration imperative. (3) For many artists the gap to be breached involves a dialogue and a return to their parents. This is what Sedira bears witness to with *Mother, Father and I* (2003), a video that shows the fortyish artist listening for the first time to her parents' recounting of their story of the Algerian war, their sufferings, fears, and then the exile and immigration. The work makes it possible to reconquer a memory that goes far beyond a simple personal and family history.

The wide separation gap and the fragile means to remedy it are also at the heart of *Correspondance* (2003) by Kader Attia. The only one in his family in France who wants to return to Algeria, he gradually put an image correspondence together. "I am forging the links between the Parisian suburb and the Algerian village," he explained to Larys Frogier in 2003, "I took a lot of photographs of my mother, my six brothers and sisters, and of the streets around the projects where I live in Garges-les-Gonesses. I then mailed these photos to my family who live in Algeria in the Atlas region, notably my father, my cousins, my uncles and aunts. I show them what our world looks like. And when I go to Algeria I do the same thing. I take pictures of my family, of their homes' interiors, the village, of the landscapes in which they live and I post them to France and show them to my relatives from Garges-les-Gonesses. I also use video to do this." (4) Attia's taking on of the role of intermediary in this intimate exchange has a reach that transcends the family circle. This has nothing to do with retreating into a defensive identity position, for the artist here acts as an intermediary; he becomes a go-between.

For Mehdi Meddaci the reconquest of a personal history is shaped slowly, with the starting point being the place where one lives, in the present. The first part of his trilogy *Corps traversés* (2004-07) is made up of images of the La Paillade neighbourhood in Montpellier, where he grew up, and where immigrants have gradually settled over time. Four screens placed end to end show still and moving images that speak of the daily family and social

life, rundown buildings, children's rooms, youth boredom, and uprootedness. Several years later, between Algiers and Kabylia, Meddaci once again set out to film and photograph. This work led to the third part of *Corps traversés, El Djazaïr/Les îlots*, in which he uses images to explore and immerse himself in the land of his father and grandparents. Between these poles of his own history, the Beyrouth part opens another perspective and a different stage in the reconquest of a dispersed memory that is not only personal. "In one word, my film is the search for an origin that I lacked and tried to find and re-imagine through images... I consider my film to be like a recorded memory that I deposit before the audience."(5)

The concept of hybridization, though used abundantly in current years by critics and artists, and which has become a commonplace in so-called "multicultural" or "diasporic" art, nevertheless has had the merit of showing that identities are far from being stable and definitive givens. If semiotic hybridization is a mainline in globalized artistic production, its systematic use runs the risk of a corresponding loss in relevance. In parallel to this practice, one can discern the emergence of works that go beyond a mere play on signs and appearances by going more deeply into questions of exile, dual culture, but also the blind spots in memory, particularly between generations. The work currently being carried out by artists of Algerian origin in France and around the world reveals the far-reaching complexity of being from here and from elsewhere, and of constructing a body of work based on reality but that goes beyond individual memory to reach on contemporary History.

[Translated from the French by Bernard Schütze]

NOTES

1. A discussion between Zineb Sedira and Larys Frogier, in *Ouvertures algériennes, créations vivantes*, catalogue of the exhibition presented from June 6 to August 14, 2003, Rennes, La Criée–Centre d'art contemporain, 54.
2. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 19.
3. In this regard the exhibition *Génération. Un siècle d'histoire culturelle des Maghrébins en France* (presented in Lyon during the summer 2009 and then at the Cité nationale d'histoire de l'immigration in Paris from November 17, 2009 to April 18, 2010) marked a turning point in French cultural history. See Naima Yahi, Yvan Gastaut and Driss El Yazami, eds., *Génération. Un siècle d'histoire culturelle des Maghrébins en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).
4. A discussion between Kader Attia and Larys Frogier, in *ibid.*, 16.
5. A discussion between Mehdi Meddaci and Slimane Aït Sidhoum, *El Watan*, 29 November 2007.<