

"Baya: Woman of Algiers"

Grey Art Gallery 100 Washington Square East New York University January 9–March 31, 2018

Some two dozen women are currently haunting the lower floor of the Grey Art Gallery. They aren't exactly ghosts or malevolent spirits. Neither are they just figures in the normal painterly sense, although they *are* painted, gorgeously, in twenty-two gouache-on-board works, wearing outrageously patterned dresses below complicated hair. They are the women of Baya, the Algerian artist of Berber and Arab heritage who was orphaned at five, adopted by a wealthy French patroness, and dropped into the heart of the Parisian avant-garde in the aftermath of World War II. She wanted to be known by her first name alone. Indeed, she turned her name into a movement and pledged her allegiance to Baya-ism. André Breton, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso hung on her every word.

All of her women here are painted singly or in pairs, including the catty *Femmes attablées* (Women at Table), 1947, and the dreamy *Femme et enfant en bleu* (Woman and Child in Blue), 1947. Baya's subjects are set against vibrant wallpaper and often seen in the company of exotic birds. The images are certainly mind-blowing, but they are also eerily circumscribed. All but two are dated 1947, the year of Baya's solo debut at Galerie Maeght. She was sixteen. She couldn't read or write. Baya wasn't even her real name; she was born Fatma Haddad. In 1953, she returned to Algeria. She married, had six children, and stopped painting for a decade. Then she started again and painted for the rest of her life, exhibiting continually in Algeria until her death in 1998. In this exhibition, she is contextualized by Picasso's ceramics and Zineb Sedira's wonderful three-channel video *Mother Tongue*, 2002. But what of Baya's own later work? For that, we'll have to wait, hopefully not for long.

— Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

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