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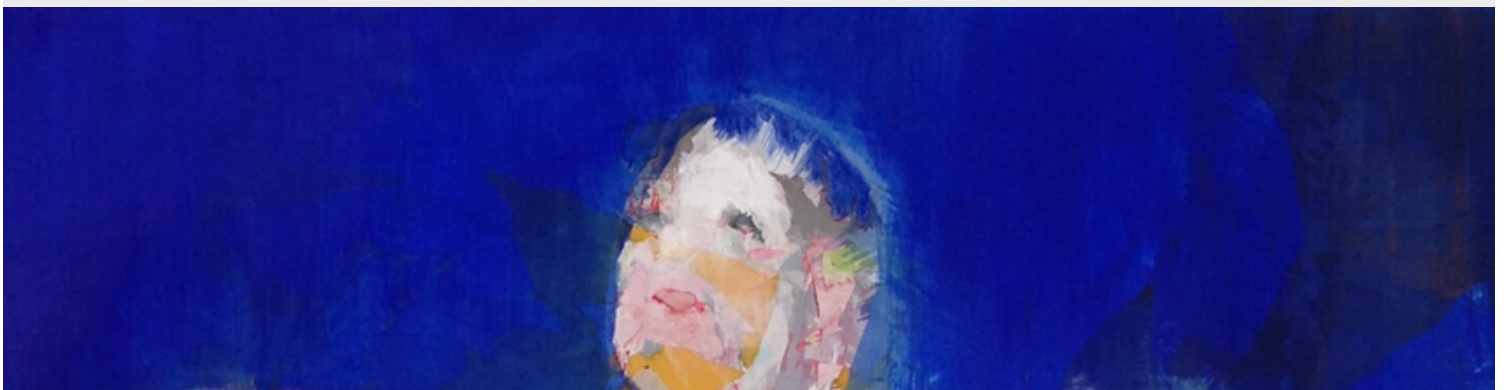
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TUNISIAN ART

Words Helen Jennings



Tunisian art flourishes with JAOU and a young generation of artists as its critical voice

Tunisia has been in the headlines for the most tragic reasons this year. In March the act of terrorism at the Bardot National Museum resulted in 21 deaths and in June 38 people died at the hands of a lone gunman in the tourist resort of Port El Kantaoui. Sandwiched between these two devastating events was JAOU, the annual symposium discussing arts from across the Maghreb organised by the Kamel Lazaar Foundation. Now in its third year, JAOU (which means FUN in Arabic) was postponed due to the Bardot attack but instead of cancelling, it redoubled its efforts and held a series of talks at the Bardot in late May taking as its theme Visual Culture In The Age Of Global Conflict. Hotly debated topics included the need for a contemporary art museum in Tunis and ways in which cultural practitioners can unite against the rise of Islamist fundamentalism.

“JAOU has opened up a space for dialogue,” says JAOU founder Lina Lazaar, financier Kamel's daughter who is one of the most influential global voices in Middle Eastern art. “At one point in time, culture was being neglected and took a defeated approach. It's sad to say that it takes tragedies to wake society up. This event allows communities and thinkers to ignite networks and relationships that will shape the future.”



There were also numerous openings and events around Tunis, culminating in All The World's A Mosque, a temporary exhibition space made up of 22 deconstructed sea containers perched on the Carthage cliff tops. Inside the raw vessels were the works of over 20 artists that examined new ways of receiving faith. "It's a performance of different voices stripping Islam of all dogmas to get to the essence and beauty of the religion that is so dear to us," Lazaar explains. "We're living in a moment where a minority have hijacked the religion and declared themselves as the absolute truth. Meanwhile the West has become obsessed with secularisation and declares all external signs of religion as bad. There is a rise in misunderstanding on both sides of the spectrum. So we remember the time of the prophets, when the mosque was open to all." Contributing artists included Asma M'Naouar, who carved a site-specific mural into plaster that came alive with light, and Aicha Filali who assembled perfume bottles and incense into the shape of a mihrab.

Tunisia's mature art scene has long expressed the country's social fabric but was stifled under President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's reign. The 2011 Jasmine revolution was partly spurred on by young artists who were plugged into the wider world through social media and demanded freedoms through digital, poster and street art. But after Ali's removal, the Islamist Ennahda party swapped autocratic oppression for religious intolerance. In 2012, a group show at Palais Abdelliya provoked violent protests because some exhibits were deemed blasphemous and artists Mohamed Ben Slama and Nadia Jelassi received death threats.

"There is an influx of young, daring artists and experimentation is soaring. We must remain rooted and authentic in order to support the dreams and the pains of the people"

"It is hard for me to explore topics that are still very sensitive but I continue to be inspired by my society," says Jelassi, who is an established name in Tunisia. During JAOU she exhibited her recent work Fatchata, a photomontage of snapshots taken around Tunisia capturing everyday life. "Before the revolution you couldn't just go out on the streets and take photographs. So I took a mass of pictures showing how things have changed and then fragmenting them to exaggerate gestures."

Since secular parties secured victory in elections late last year, there has been a growing collective energy as the country works toward democracy and the new generation continues to develop a diversity of practice. El Marsa Gallery, which opened in 1994, has guided this progress. It originally showed only modern artists but now supports contemporary talents that weren't visible a few short years ago.

"Young artists are multi disciplinary and collabora-

five in their approach. It's an exciting time," says gallery co-director Lilia Ben Salah who has represented Tunisia at art fairs in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Paris, Marrakech and Miami.



During JAOU they debuted *Under Construction*, an exhibition in a barely-built extension to the gallery that will house a library and artists' residence. She selected rising star Atef Maatallah to christen its walls by drawing portraits onto them of the workers currently constructing the building. These ephemeral works were accompanied by a sound installation. "Atef is very poetic in the way he depicts his friends and community. It has a great social dimension and beauty that touches me," she adds. "I don't care that these works will go – it's about that moment so destroy it. Just let me film it being destroyed," asserts Maatallah, whose grainy paintings of those facing

poverty and alcoholism expose the ills of Tunisia. “I want to bridge the gap between conceptual and street art, tour the country and search for experience.”

Multidisciplinary artist Thameur Mejri is also represented by El Marsa. His collages of dismembered skulls and male torsos address Tunisia’s macho society. “Here the greater audience have to struggle with tradition and religion every day and that influences our concept of our bodies and our spirit. I don’t believe in god, religion, heaven or hell. Living here it’s hard to say that, even now,” Mejri says.

Ymen Berhouma reflects upon the same issues through the female gaze. A self-taught painter and sculptor, her figurative works are fuelled by her experiences as a single mother of two. “My approach is intuitive and organic, forming shapes that remind me of women, children and loneliness. In Tunisia being a divorced woman isn’t easy,” Berhouma says. “But I feel positive about the art scene here. There is no stable structure, which means as artists our work is strong and pure and we are building our own landscape beyond institutions.”

Having studied in both in Tunis and Paris, Hela Lamine uses food as her medium and is influenced by the 1960s Eat Art movement. “I’m not interested in clean, polished food – it’s about how food is shared, how it transforms and perishes, and confronts taboos,” Lamine says. Shortly after the revolution, she made a series of portraits of Ben Ali out of bread and water, each one more decaying than the last. And at JAOU she showed a work from *Dish Of The Hungry People*, a series of abstract scans of traditional Tunisian dishes that she dedicated to Jabeur Mejri, a citizen who was jailed for publishing cartons

of the Prophet Mohamed on Facebook. "I work on a social level, not a political one, but I can say that as artists we're still followed, watched and have pressure put upon us by religion," she says. "There is a gap between the cultural elite and the populace and that creates conflicts. We must take a democratic approach and invest in more interventionist art."

Perhaps more than most though, Slimen El Kamil is driving change. Coming from a humble farming background, he studied in Tunis and was an activist during the uprising. "I was committed heart and soul to the revolution and it has spontaneously infiltrated my work, which questions social constraints and the absurdity of violence," he says. At JAOU he presented mixed media paintings crammed with images ranging from road sweepers to Miley Cyrus. "We have recaptured the public space, which is changing our relationship to art and the world. There is an influx of young, daring artists and experimentation is now soaring. We must remain rooted and authentic in order to support the dreams and the pains of the people. In years to come there will be a remarkable presence of Tunisian art globally."

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