

Visual Arts

Anna Boghiguian at Tate St Ives: pilchards, salt and philosophy

The artists's encyclopaedic, multimedia work is receiving its first UK solo show



Anna Boghiguian, 'Untitled (Cavafy)' (2007)

Maya Jaggi

Published FEB 6 2019

Unlock the Editor's Digest for free

Roula Khalaf, Editor of the FT, selects her favourite stories in this weekly newsletter.

Enter your email address

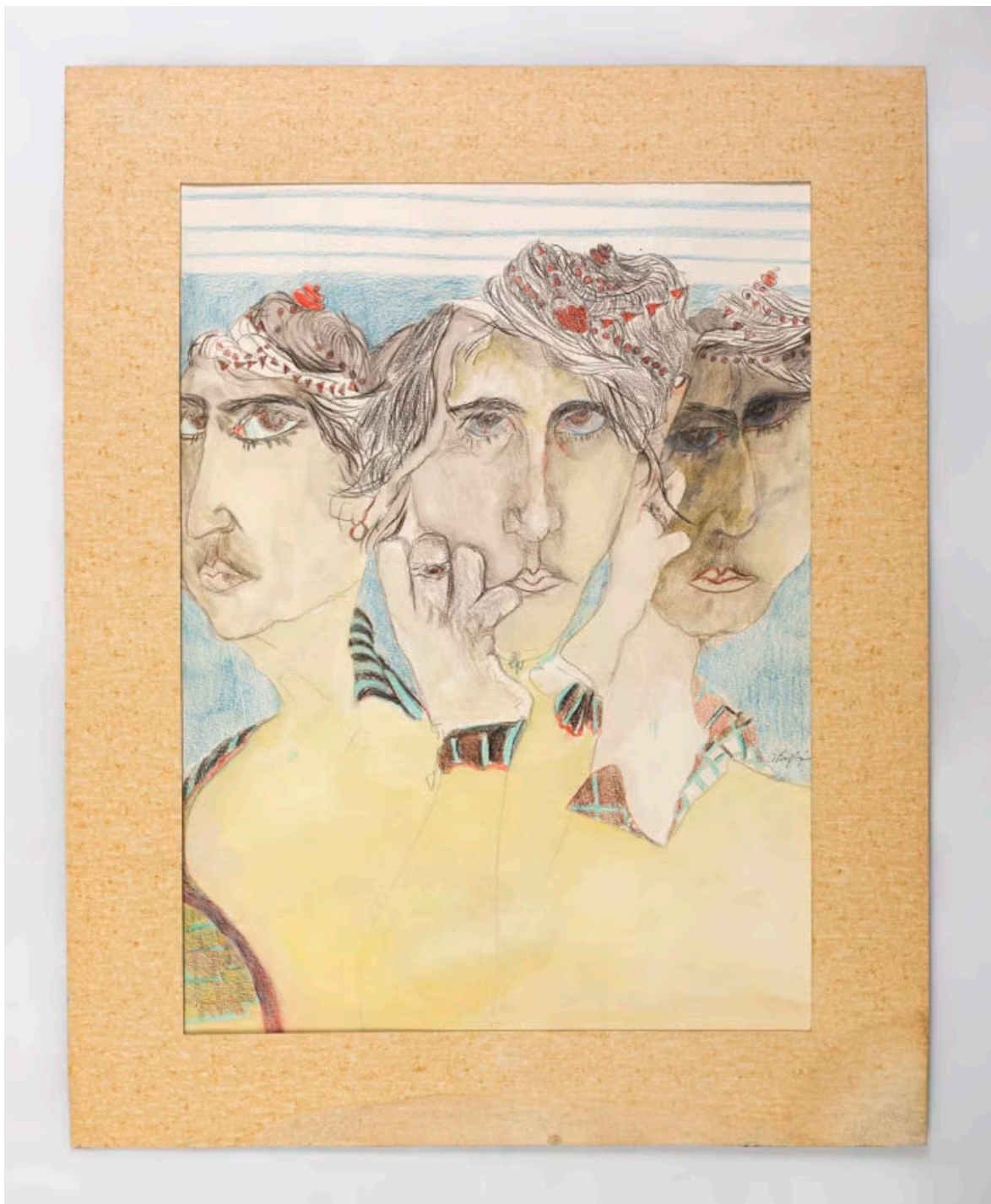
[Sign up](#)

Transplanted from a sultry island in the Nile, Anna Boghiguian's Cairo studio is taking shape at Tate St Ives, on a freakishly frosty Cornish coast. Her suspended papier-mâché birds — first seen at the Venice Biennale — are not seagulls but the African crows she reveres. Amid carpets, paintbrushes and sepia photographs of old Egypt is a striking drawing, “Self-Portrait as the Three Corinthian Women”, from 1981, perhaps capturing a multiplication of selves after this Cairene of Armenian descent moved to Montreal to become an artist.

A wall of the expressionist paintings on paper for which Boghiguian, now 73, became known draws on her “Indian Trains” series of the mid-1980s. The spontaneous visual journal of a ceaseless itinerant, these intimate carriage interiors in watercolour and gouache recall an age of slow and sociable travel. She has been on the move since the 1960s.

The studio installation originated last year at the Castello di Rivoli in Turin as part of Boghiguian’s first major survey, which arrives in Cornwall via Sharjah and Salzburg. Her first UK solo exhibition, in Tate St Ives’s expansive new wing, follows her first in the US last year, at the New Museum in New York. It ranges from artists’ notebooks of the 1980s to the walk-through installations she has made since 2011 from painted paper cut-outs, collage, found materials and hand-written text.

Boghiguian creates site-specific work for each show. She is assembling her new installation, “A Tin Drum That Has Forgotten Its Own Rhythm”, which reflects Cornwall’s decline as a tin-mining centre and pilchard exporter, and the artists whose creativity was sparked here. The poignant cut-outs of half-size miners and fishermen are made from steel electroplated with the tin, nickel and chrome used in canning fish. Inside a walk-in drum are paintings on metal, from a portrait of Virginia Woolf to an outsize can of pilchards. A metal relief is of a surreal figure with a huge fish piercing his head, his hands grasping emptiness.



'Untitled (Self Portrait as the Three Corinthian Women)' (1981) © Renato Ghiazza

There is a sense of loss: Boghiguian's work traces macro connections between continents but has at its heart those who bear the brunt of forces beyond their control. In Cardiff, where she was recently shortlisted for the Artes Mundi prize, her new installation on the Welsh steel industry, "A Meteor Fell From the Sky", entailed a visit to the Indian-owned Tata steel factory, where many jobs have been lost.

She paints in encaustic, an ancient technique using bees' wax, gum arabic and pigment, to give "transparency and luminosity. I use candle wax, not for religious meaning but for an immortal feeling. Honey bees are the essence of the world."

Born in Cairo in 1946, she was the daughter of a Cairo watchmaker; her mother and grandparents were all Armenians from Turkey. “I think my grandmother was from Ani,” in eastern Turkey. “It was a major city of the Silk Road and had a thousand churches.” A visit there inspired her work, personifying Ani as a woman, for “Armenity”, the Armenian Pavilion that won the Golden Lion at the 2015 Venice Biennale. Ancestral experience informs her scrutiny of power, trade and empires, and her sense of the repetitions of history. “That which is not like you, you punish and mistreat,” she says.

**If it wasn't for Canada,
I wouldn't be an artist
today. It's a very open-
minded, liberal place,
and at the same time
deeply conservative**

While she was studying political science at the American University in Cairo in the 1960s, lessons from a visiting African-American artist, Robert Colescott, opened up a world of contemporary Egyptian art. A surrealist artist she knew, Inji Efflatoun, was jailed in an anti-communist crackdown. Recalling the era of President Nasser after the 1952 Egyptian revolution, Boghigian says, “You could see any

western film in Cairo, read any foreign book . . . Egyptian cinema and songwriting flourished. So did the secret police.”

She had moved to Montreal in the early 1970s to study art and music. “If it wasn't for Canada, I wouldn't be an artist today. It's a very open-minded, liberal place, and at the same time deeply conservative.” Her first artist's book, *ZYX-XYZ*, repeats an image of a human brain with numbered segments, printed from a stamp she picked up in Amsterdam — “like an immigration stamp you get passing a border”.

Poets and philosophers have been central to her work, from Ahmed Shawky and Constantine Cavafy to Hegel — whose master-slave dialectic fascinates her — and Nietzsche. The diasporan Greek Cavafy inspired many works. “Cavafy showed a cosmopolitan Alexandria that didn't exist any more.”

Her encyclopaedic works trace intertwined human history through commodities such as silk and cotton. The “Salt Trader” maps global exploration and conquest through precious salt. Around a sail with a honeycomb painted on one side and a world map on the other are barnacled fragments of hull, and panels with storybook panes. In a futurist archaeology of a shipwreck, the artist imagines a “boat carrying salt that gets lost in the ocean for a thousand years”, and reveals its past as the ocean dries up with climate change. As well as real honeycomb and coloured salt crystals, the panes contain text and images, from an embryo in amniotic fluid to Gandhi’s salt march and today’s Greek “collapse of bread and salt”.

All her work, she says, is “like a book, because the world is like a story, a film”. “A Walk Through the Subconscious” (2016) is like a pop-up book that unearths links between the Nile and Nîmes, where the installation was made. Paper cut-outs ranging from Roman busts to bullfighters recall Max Beckmann in their satirical bite in a meditation on empires. A strip of blue denim in a scarlet sail yokes the city to France’s African colonies as a global textile hub.

The dark-red painting of a giant ear — a recurrent symbol in her work — is an emblem of oral history. “Ears find historical connections; they’re part of the history we hear recounted like Homer’s tales.” It is also an exhortation. “When you have your ears, you don’t listen,” she says. “We tend to listen more to our own voice than to the world around us. The eye is important — but through our ears we connect.”

February 8-May 6, [tate.org.uk/stives](https://www.tate.org.uk/stives) ; artesmundi.org

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Visual Arts

Maya Jaggi