

Samta Benyahia: Architecture of the Veil

By Olivia Qusaibaty



The veil: symbol of modesty, privacy and femininity, but also cultural, religious and political emblem. Samta Benyahia lifts this headscarf, so charged in what some claim to be today's clash between Islam and the West, to reveal the life of women in North Africa.

For the Paris-based Algerian-French artist, this endeavor reaches far beyond a geographic region, as she draws "from a heritage where several civilizations have appeared one after the other in North Africa: Berber, Africa, Arab, Western. All of these layers form the richness of this [region]."

For her first solo museum exhibition in the United States, Benyahia presents a site-specific installation spread across the entrance doors and encircling the inner courtyard of the Fowler Museum in Los Angeles. Inspired by the Fowler's Andalusian-like architecture, the artist applies tulle and electrostatic film printed with *mashrabiya* [1] on doors and windows, and surrounds the museum's Galleria courtyard with sixty large sequin-embroidered rosettes.

The *mashrabiya*, usually wooden screens used to separate women from men, "divides outside and inside, public space and private space, plays with light and heat by forming an auspicious shadow, plays with this situation that allows to observe outside without being seen, thus evoking a welcome intimacy," she explains in a telephone interview. "Fatima," the rosette-like pattern printed on these screens, is also a common women's name in North Africa. *Mashrabiya* were prevalent in the early 20th century, at a time when women were often kept from public view.

This refined and simplified Arab Andalusian pattern "has become the leading pattern of my work," says Benyahia. "I began using it in 1992, during Algeria's 'black years.' Women were on the frontline and for me, it was important to integrate a female presence in the installations." Algeria's civil war of the 1990s claimed over 150,000 lives. By

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Algeria





then, Benyahia had moved to Paris, where she has lived since 1988. She had previously studied at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (1974-1980) and taught at the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Algiers (1980-1988).

"I live in both countries, I straddle both countries, I need both countries," she affirms. "Living, discovering life here [in Paris] made me question myself on identity — who I am, where I come from. It was about making this link; this passage, this coming and going between the two shores is what I try to impart through my work." This theme is evidenced in almost every aspect of Benyahia's work, from the recurrent theme of the condition of women, to the key role adaptation to the local environment plays in her installations, to the use of archival images.



In a smaller, more intimate space at the Fowler Museum, the artist hung eight large early 20th century black-and-white photographs of Algerian women, drawn from old photographs of her family members — including herself, her aunt and her mother — and those of her friends. When viewing the photographs from the inner courtyard, one must gaze through the *mashrabiya*, thus reversing roles.

In addition to the Arab Andalusian architectural motifs and photographs, the visitor can also hear recordings of music, poems and chants recited in French and Arabic throughout the installation, thus creating a complete environment where the visitor is entirely submerged in Benyahia's world. Poems can be heard by Algerian poet, playwright and novelist Kateb Yacine who, like Benyahia, was born in the Northeastern city of Constantine to a family with Berber origins. In another bridge between East and West, Benyahia worked with embroiderers from Constantine to create the large embroidered rosettes surrounding the courtyard.

Reflecting on her own postcolonial experience of displacement, the artist introduces elements of the multi-layered Algerian identity in a Western environment. "I inhabit the space that presents itself to me. The *mashrabiya* symbolize a way to meet, to converse, to exchange," she explains. "Whenever I have a project, I bring my plans but I like to be in the space to then adapt the project... It brings me closer to the public."

The particular arrangements here allow the *mashrabiya* to capture the light, at times casting

shadows against the Fowler's walls and the photographs of women. Furthermore, the Andalusian architecture of the Fowler Museum provided an auspicious space for Benyahia's installation, allowing her to "reconstitute the space of [North African] women." She highlights that the museum's architecture "corresponded perfectly to my concept: the square space surrounded by rooms overlooking magnificent large bay windows, an open patio open to the sky with a fountain, the transparent windows, the water, the light... which allowed me for the first time to place my work in a real context."

In the center of the inner courtyard, she has placed 40 meters (131 feet) of tulle that form a wave-like movement in a water fountain. When it rains, the tulle becomes completely submerged by water. Seen from above, its intense navy blue hue recalls the deep blue of the Mediterranean Sea. "It is an installation that lives with time because my work is also very much concerned with time as well," she says. Whether one views the installation during the day or after nightfall therefore reveals a completely different experience.

Against the background of a contemporary context where collective identities are favored, where differences are held up rather than similarities, Benyahia also seeks to counter common misconceptions and misunderstandings. "In light of the current events developing right now, I also like to present a different image of what we can think of the woman, of Arab women," she says. "There is not only violence; there is also culture... It is only this way, through my art, that I can show it." She also underscores her concern with transmitting to the public the constant expansion of her fields of reflection.

And so we are brought to explore not only gender and space, but also a measured dialogue between light and shadow, public and private, exterior and interior, seen and unseen.

Notes:

1. Mashrabiya (moucharabieh in French): Originally a place for drinking (from the verb sharaba, to drink), mashrabiya commonly designate windows or a traditional latticed screen of turned or carved wood that protected from sunrays and shielded women from onlookers.

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