

Driving Forces – Women artists from the Islamic world

Vanessa Branson, 3 July 2017

Good evening

Before focusing on the role of contemporary women artists from the Islamic world I thought I should give you a little insight into my adventures in the world of creativity and why the arts, matter more to me, than just about anything else in the world!

When I was sixteen I went hitchhiking around Italy with friend of mine who was studying History of Art at Cambridge. As we travelled from one romantic hilltop town to another, I became overwhelmed with the heady combination of love. Love for both my travelling companion, even though he was utterly unaware of it at the time, and the emotional intensity of the architecture and paintings we were immersed in. I knew there and then that I wanted to work in the arts and went on to study History of Art myself.

Learning about history through the arts is deeply rewarding in itself but it wasn't until I was listening to the sculpture, Antony Gormley, talk with such physicality and with such psychological insight about his work that I realized that artists really are extraordinary people. Artists are there to make us look at the world through fresh eyes, to stretch our aesthetic range and to question our values, as well as to entertain us and to confront us.

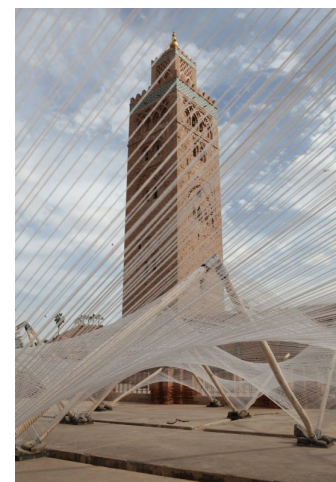
On leaving college I opened a small gallery just off the Portobello road where I was fortunate enough to work with a number of stunning artists. I gave the South African, William Kentridge, his first show in London, his animated films explored the complex contradictions of living under Apartheid. I realized then that art plays an important role developing our political understanding too.

In 2002, along with a good friend, I bought and restored a majestic old riad in Marrakech. The elegance and dedication of our Moroccan team made the experience both fascinating and joyful. We were told, early on in the project by our architect that 'In Morocco, anything is possible, but nothing is certain' and with this in mind, at every stage of the project, we ended up creating something really quite magical.

Then the world started to go a little mad.

In 2004, after listening to a radio broadcast, justifying the reasons for invading Iraq, I became incandescent with rage. How dare they say that 'we were either with them or against them?' I knew I had to do something to redress this inevitable slide into general mistrust and realized that with both experience in the arts and with a hotel as an administrative base I was perfectly positioned to start an arts festival in Marrakech. Having worked in the arts for many years I understood the role they can play in providing a platform for debate. As Neil Macgregor, the then director of the British Museum, said 'The arts are a safe place in which to discuss dangerous ideas' and we had plenty of ideas to discuss.

The Marrakech Biennale was born and over the past decade we've held 6 editions. With each edition getting larger than the last. It's the only tri lingual arts festival in North Africa and provides venues for all art forms, the visual arts, music, film, performance and literature. As you know many art forms employ a mixture of disciplines and many artists collaborate with each other. In the contemporary art world very few lines drawn.



Thousands of people fly into the ancient city and the local population joins in on the vibrant melee of discourse and celebration. I urge you to join us in 2018 too. You just can't help but celebrate. Enthusiasm for the arts is gloriously contagious.

When Paul Gordon invited me to give this talk and to focus on women artists from North Africa and the Middle East, I hesitated at first. For what is it that differentiates the female artist from the male? Any conversation around gender is a minefield, so forgive me if you disagree, however, I do believe there are some defining characteristics to women's art. And possibly these characteristics are emphasized in women's art from the Islamic world.

In some, and obviously not all, cases there's a different sensibility in art made by a women, an underlying emotional empathy, a certain vulnerability. Women's comparative lack of physical strength, their fragility, is often expressed with both their subject matter and use of materials.

In North Africa and the Middle East the tradition of women baring the weight of all domestic drudgery has resulted in many great works of art using every day house hold objects to express the suffering caused by the inequality of their burden. Take the witty photographs of the Iranian artist Shadi Ghadirian, of women in traditional dress, where she's exchanged an iron or a cheese grater for the grill of the chador. Are women literally seen as kitchen appliances or are they hiding behind them?



It's interesting to stop and think, for a minute, about what it is that makes the perfect environment for creativity to blossom. Why was there a great creative wave in New York in the 1950's or in London in the 1990's?

It seems the perfect recipe should include the following ingredients. You first need the confluence of good teaching along with a backdrop of political tension. Then you add in a heady mix of cultural clashes with an influx of migrants. Allow some time to pass so ideas can ferment, before you round your brew off with a dollop of great patronage, add in a pinch of good criticism and hey presto, artists get to work. The Islamic world of North Africa and the Middle East has been cooking up this fertile stew for a while and its own creative wave is gathering momentum.

The very nature of being an artist is someone who is prepared to take risks, to push and pull ideas, to tease out threads from the every day and to then twist them into cords that transcend reality, helping the viewer experience their everyday worlds differently for ever more.

Working on the biennale has meant that I have drunk many a mint tea into the night with artists from all over the world. I've been lucky enough to visit Saudi Arabia twice now and I'm amazed at the ingenuity and bravery of the women artists I've met there. Baring in mind the restrictions they live under these women produce profound and respected work.

On an aside, the Saudi authorities are struggling with an interesting predicament. On the one hand they are nervous about freedom of speech and independent thinking and on the other hand, they take enormous pride in the fact that Saudi artists are beginning to do so well on the world stage.

I met Maha Malluh who has made distinctive wall pieces, using the wooden trays traditionally designed to hold bread rolls, she has exchanged the bread for Wahhabi propaganda cassette tapes. The very tapes that have been used so successfully to influence society. These tapes were distributed at weddings, and other women's gatherings, throughout the 1980's .

Maha builds monumental towers out of classic enamel bowls. Bowls that families would traditionally all sit around, and eat from. These towers are a tribute to a past life, of communal meals shared by all the household unlike the TV dinners of Saudi Arabia today.



She has made an installation using the black gloves that Saudi women wear. Thick nylon gloves that extend to the elbow, gloves that have to be worn at all times even in the searing summer heat. She has filled the gloves with Saharan sand placing them upright on the floor. A sea of black hands, either sinking in a cry of pain or rising up, in an act of defiance. These works all have a feminine vulnerability and yet are as powerful as any I have seen.

I knew and loved the Moroccan photographer, Leila Alaoui, who produced an outstanding body of work before she was cruelly killed, murdered during an Al Qaeda attack on a hotel in Ouagadougou last year. She was working on an assignment for Amnesty International, taking photographs of the country women of Burkina Faso, she was just 32 years old. Leila's portraits reflected her courageous essence; the women would look into her calm lens. Each portrait is imbued with the gentle honesty of both Leila and her subject.



Two other Moroccan women artists, who showed in the Marrakech Biennale are now represented by important International commercial galleries. Yto Berrada works from Tangier and New York and is represented by Pace Gallery and Bouchera Khilie now based in Berlin, is represented by the Lisson Gallery in London. Bouchera is mapping the migration routes of refugees across Africa and Europe with a series of films and photographs while Yto is also interested in our fragmented world.

These two artists are good examples of the fact that no artist can be classified by their country of residence or origin: it seems that most artists of note live away from their mother country. Maybe some distance helps them sharpen their perceptions or maybe they feel freer to make honest work away from home.

Our curator for the Marrakech biennale last year was a Palestinian woman born in Ramallah. Reem Fadda, Reem's story is one of success over adversary. Her parent's focus on education and ambition prepared her for success however tough the journey to get it. Reem studied History of art and then became a senior curator for the Guggenheim museum in New York and Abu Dhabi. Her engagement and understanding about the role that the arts play in the region is profound. Art for her provides a language that no words can communicate. A lifeline for many, a conceptual means of expressing the layered nuances of lives mired into puzzles of insurmountable complexity.

Working in the art world alongside these extraordinary women has been a continuous exploration and adventure. The joy of knowing that North Africa and the Middle East is

establishing itself, as a serious contender to the West's preconceived ideas of their rightful dominance, is very gratifying.

It's exciting to note, that in societies where the female voice is often silenced by male domination, the arts are one of the few areas where women are judged on an equal platform. These women have another advantage too, by taking up the avant garde artistic tradition, a full century later than their Western counterparts, artists from North Africa and the Middle East, have leapfrogged the slow and painful journey towards equal recognition born by their Western sisters.

How lucky I was to have made that trip to Italy 40 summers ago. How lucky to discover such a fulfilling future role so early in my career. I've played a small part in the creative process of countless artists and learned so much along the way

It has also been immensely rewarding to witness how the creative movement in North Africa and the Middle East is changing the identity of the region. We can't deny that there is a tension between the darker forces, those who wish to destroy this growing cultural identity and the enlightened majority who understand the role that culture plays in driving forward innovation and hope.

I'm confident that artists, with their vision and courage are going to drive us towards an exciting, thought provoking and insh'allah, a more harmonious world.

Thank you