





CHALLENGING *PERCEPTION*

FAYÇAL BAGHRICHE



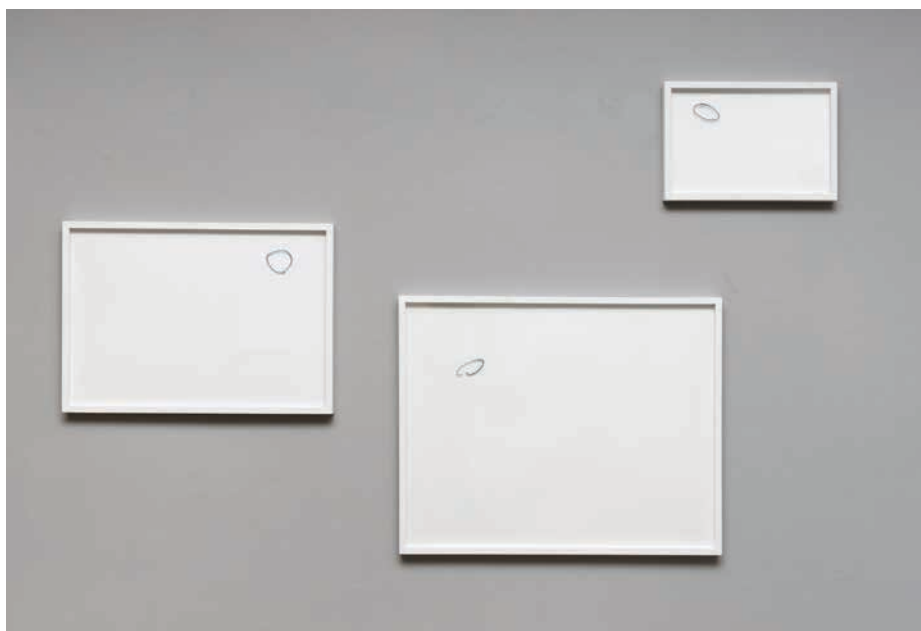
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Behind the French-Algerian artist's nimble wit lies a complex interrogation of representation. **Kevin Jones** takes a ride with Fayçal Baghriche and never sees things quite the same way again.

he dizzying blur of glowing glass skyscrapers and floodlit billboards lining Dubai's Sheikh Zayed Road seemed to mesmerise my tousle-haired passenger as I stepped on the accelerator. "It's almost like a theatre set... or a surface for a projection," he mused. On this mid-March night in 2013 with Art Dubai in full throttle, Fayçal Baghriche's preoccupation with Dubai's fragility seemed well-grounded. The Algerian-born French artist had just wrapped up his three-month residency in Dubai, resulting in two fair-commissioned works: the twin sculpture/installations *Nothing More Concrete* and *Nothing More Real*, sly interrogations of architectural surface over substance, constituted a wry jab at Dubai as a perpetual construction site. As he turned to face me, his broad features outlined against the fleeting urban backdrop, his sanguine expression and forthright gaze suddenly summoned the candid humour that threads through his works. Baghriche is humorous, his work witty. Yet something seditious lurks below this surface, something vaguely akin to anarchy. "The things you see," he cautions, "are not how you think they are." A warning that aptly applies to both artist and practice.

CULTURAL TENSION

Baghriche has navigated two cultures since he left his native Algeria at the tender age of five. He often describes this bi-culturalism in terms of oppositions: an Arab culture in the private sphere versus a Western culture in public; a popular upbringing, devoid of art books and museum outings, versus an art school education geared towards elitism; an Islamic religion sceptical of images, versus a French art historical canon that venerates the nude. "I was confronted with two ways of seeing the world," he admits. His early work draws on the urban landscape as the backdrop to this cultural tension:



“Becoming an artist was like a vow one would make in Islam.”



in the video *Le sens de la marche/Facing Forward* (2002), Baghriche walks forward, counter to a world of city dwellers moving backwards. “When you are an immigrant in a country like France,” he explains, “you try to distinguish yourself less by your race than by your personal qualities.”

But in 2008, things changed. He acquired French nationality, for a start, putting an administrative end to his status as Algerian ‘resident’. That year, Parisian gallerist Enrico Navarra published his triple-tome watershed opus *In the Arab World... Now* – a luscious overview of the Middle Eastern arts ecosystem. Just as Baghriche was getting catalogued on the French scene (his work was critically validated in the tri-annual Parisian exhibition *La Force de l’Art 02*), he was suddenly swept up by the wave of international hoopla about the Middle East. “Once I featured in Navarra’s book,” admits Baghriche, “I was quickly associated with artists from the Middle East and North Africa.” His inclusion in Lina Lazaar’s pan-Arab *Future Of A Promise* col-

lateral exhibition at the 2011 Venice Biennale and his nomination for the Dubai residency via London’s Delfina Foundation the following year cemented this debatable MENA provenance. “I’m not an artist from the Middle East,” he resists. “It’s questionable whether I am even a North African artist, having barely lived there.” Relating how the *Future Of A Promise* wall texts labelled him as Algerian rather than French, he brushes it off as harmless marketing, a mere justification for institutional decision-makers. “I don’t mind if they want to pigeonhole me as French, Middle Eastern or African,” he laughs. “I’m only interested in my practice. What is ironic, though, is that the moment I became French, in 2008, I never felt more Arab.”

SMILE, THEN THINK

Works like *Elective Purification* (2004), a vastly enlarged ‘flags of the world’ page out of the dictionary, from which everything has been erased

Opening spread:
Installation view of *Nothing More Concrete*. 2012. 30 bundles of gypsum boards. 560 x 720 x 240 cm. Photography by JB Wejmann.

This page:
Left: Installation view of *Imperfections*. 2012. Felt-tip pen on glass. Variable dimensions. Image courtesy Galerie Campagne Première, Berlin.
Right: *Souvenir*. 2012. Illuminated terrestrial globe and motor. 40 x 75 cm. Edition of eight plus two artist’s proofs. Image courtesy Galerie Campagne Première, Berlin.

Facing page:
Installation view of *Envelopments*. 2010. 28 country flags. Variable dimensions.

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except the flags' stars, and *Envelopements* (2010), a series of 28 wall-mounted, rolled-up national flags whose specific motifs are concealed, directly – and poetically – tackle this question of national specificity. *Souvenir* (2009), perhaps Baghriché's most widely shown work to date, is a motorised globe that spins so fast, it is impossible to discern not only nations, but even continents: the world is subsumed in an aquatic blue blur. Yet behind *Souvenir*'s apparent simplicity lies an unsettling set of questions on representation, identity and belonging. Like much of Baghriché's work, it instantly makes you smile,

then compels you to think.

Baghriché's culture is at the root not only of much of his work, but also of his very career choice. "Becoming an artist was like a vow one would make in Islam," he explains. On 11 October 2001, during the Parisian art fair FIAC, Baghriché solemnly entered the world of art. He was not showing any work, per se, nor was he even officially invited. He simply staged an impromptu performance, *Falling* (2001), in which he fainted amid crowds of unsuspecting fair-goers, forcing them to react. "It was almost like an individual ceremony or a testimony to myself," he recalls. "To declare that I am an



Facing page:
Above: The artist carrying
Philippe, the mannequin.
Below: Installation view
of *Philippe*. 2008. Plastic
mannequin, golden Lycra
fabric and mask.
210 x 50 x 25 cm.

This page:
Falling. 2001. Performance
during FIAC, Paris.

artist." At its core, *Falling* is a straightforward yet socially disruptive gesture. It echoes the late Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader's clips of himself tumbling out of trees and careening into canals, but re-visited with a seditious twist. In the early years of his practice, Baghriche employed his body ("the only medium I had at that time") almost as a political act. Yet his skill at honing succinct, poetically charged actions stems perhaps more from his love of theatre than his training as an artist. "Before art school, I wanted to be an actor," he reveals. "That was my real desire. Art came later." Integrating this interest in the "game" of acting into his artistic practice, he slowly shifted from the early "self-staging" works with their Situationist-like social critique, to a more profound examination of representation and interpretation, the culmination of which is undoubtedly his astounding 185-minute video, *The Message Project* (2010).

Moustapha Akkad's 1976 film *Al-Risalah/The Message* is a monument. Not only is it a mainstay of Arabic cinema – seen, or at least known, by practically the entire Arab-speaking world – it also boasts a Hollywood version filmed simultaneously to the Arabic one. On the same sets, wearing the same costumes as their Arab counterparts, a Hollywood cast (headed by Anthony Quinn and Irene Papas) performed the English translation of Akkad's epic story of Islam. In *The Message Project*, Baghriche unites the two films into one: in a single edit faithful to the script's structure, the American and Arab stars dialogue, the former speaking English, the latter Arabic. A given actor corresponds to a single character throughout: Michael Ansara plays bad guy Abu Sofyan, while Quinn is the Prophet's uncle, and so on. One notable – and amusing – exception is when Quinn's character becomes so angry he



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‘transforms’ into the Arab actor. Beyond its sharp commentary on cinema’s universalism, *The Message Project* functions as a cunning reconciliation between otherwise antagonistic cultures. “It’s like a communion,” explains Baghriche. “There is no more clash of civilisations. Everyone is united in a single film.”

SEEING AND BELIEVING

Sometimes, what can’t be seen in Baghriche’s work is as important as what he chooses to show. “When I was in school,” he recalls, “I was interested in the paintings where you cannot see the Prophet. I remember paintings with an erased body or face.” Harking back perhaps to the iconoclastic nature inherent in Islam, notions of erasure, disappearance and removal run deep through Baghriche’s work. In *Philippe* (2008), for example, the artist placed a gold lamé-clad statue of Tutankhamen (a figure normally filled by an actor pretending to be the statue) near the Louvre in Paris. But Baghriche’s take on King Tut subversive-

ly substitutes a plastic mannequin for the ousted actor. Tourists continued to pose alongside the concocted mannequin-as-actor-as-statue, oblivious to how this simple swap turns the very idea of representation on its head.

By far the most emblematic of Baghriche’s work with erasure is *Le saut dans le vide/Leap Into The Void* (2005). Repurposing the mythic 1960 photograph of the same name in which New Realism artist Yves Klein heroically plunges, spread-eagle, from a building into the empty street below, Baghriche has simply photoshopped Klein into oblivion. Foregrounding considerations of the artist as “hero”, the discounting of the Avant-garde and the iconoclastic urge to suppress a self-proclaimed “divine” figure, *Le saut dans le vide* also reveals the mechanism of trickery behind Klein’s original, itself a photomontage. “The photo I am showing,” asserts Baghriche, rekindling a thorny aesthetic debate, “is the reality.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly for an artist who so consistently fathoms the workings of repre-

This page:
Stills from *The Message Project*. 2010. Video.
3’05 minutes.

Facing page:
Installation view of
Nothing More Real. 2012.
Plasterboard. 250 x 400 x
250 cm. Photography by
JB Wejmann.

All images courtesy
the artist, unless
otherwise specified.



sentation, Baghriche incorporates gestures by non-artists into his own creative process. *Family Friendly* (2012–ongoing), a collection of diptychs of censored images culled from art magazines sold in Dubai, spotlights the graphic intervention of the censor – the telltale black marker obliterating a wayward breast or other forbidden nudity – as a work of art in its own right. “What I see in these actions is more than just graphic intervention,” he explains. “There is added value. Each image becomes unique.” Similarly, *Imperfections* (2010) are pieces of glass from a framer’s workshop on which the artisan had signalled a default (generally an air bubble) by circling it with a black felt-tip pen. Salvaged from the “reject” heap by the artist and framed, they too become invested with conceptual value. Far from being a Duchampian readymade, though, the work is a real drawing, an action. “Imperfections shows something very deep,” enthuses Baghriche. “This bubble imprisoned in the immensity of the glass drives you to think about the condition of the world and your state in it.”

While Baghriche claims to deploy a very straightforward strategy (“Say the right thing in the least amount of time”), his work is deeply complex. In his hands, a seemingly simple gesture can have the potency to unleash successive layers of near-metaphysical questions. Due perhaps to his theatrical bent, he sees a parallel between a work of art and a performer: “A work uses the same strategies of desire and play,” he says. “It must lead the viewer to think, to reflect. Every work should have its own dramaturgy.” One upcoming project (he will film a pianist tuning a piano prior to a concert) accordingly blurs the boundaries between artwork and performance, between artist and doer, between what we expect to see and what we really see. It is the kind of “invisible” art he relishes – a work that isn’t necessarily “read” as art, and consequently challenges what a work should be. Because in Baghriche’s world, ultimately, nothing is really what it seems. 🇸🇦

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