

A Nomadic Artist's Journey Through the Ancient History of a French City

Anna Boghiguian's exhibition in Nîmes draws inspiration from the city's history, from its days as a Roman outpost to its important role in the global textile industry.

[Benjamin Sutton](#) February 10, 2017



Anna Boghiguian, *A Walk in the Unconscious* installation view (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

NÎMES, France — Ancient Romans, Catholic Popes, cardinals, bullfighters, soldiers, swimmers, gods, Cleopatra, and mere mortals parade through the central installation in [Anna Boghiguian's](#) exhibition at the [Carré d'Art](#)

[museum](#), [A Walk in the Unconscious](#). Though this procession of painted and collaged paper cutouts has elements of a jubilant carnival, it also evokes the mass displacements wrought by war that have marked so much of human history. The ominous overtones are amplified by the cutouts' placement against a large wall painted a gruesome shade of red, and beneath a large, crimson swath of dyed denim bisected by a zigzagging blue line — a triple reference to the Nile of Boghiguiian's native Cairo, and the two symbols of Nîmes, the palm tree and the crocodile.

Informed by this French city's incongruously tropical civic icons, as well as its glory days as a [Roman metropolis](#) during the reign of Augustus, Boghiguiian peppers her procession with palm trees, crocodiles that appear to be either venerated or roasted, and references to Nîmes's Roman vestiges, including the superbly preserved [temple](#) next-door to the Carré d'Art. There are delightful details to be found in the compositions of cutouts, like a collage in which ancient marble sculptures of Roman gods seem to unleash their fury upon Earth, references to the city's formerly prominent role in the global textile industry (denim takes its name from this city), or the toreros who to this day take part in bullfights in the city's Roman arena.

Taken as a whole, the installation seems to represent a literal march of history, a stylized timeline of the various groups that have passed through this region and continue to shape the city's identity. The connections between Boghiguiian's groupings of cutout figures are sometimes obvious, but elsewhere they suggest rips in time or demand inventive storytelling to reconcile.



Anna Boghigian, *A Walk in the Unconscious* installation view



Anna Boghiguian, "Little Nîmes" (2016), mixed media

The central installation of *A Walk in the Unconscious* is preceded by a room of paintings and sculptures, and followed by a quizzical installation of plants, dirt, aviary sculptures, architecture, honeycombs, and more; taken together, the three rooms suggest a kind of inner journey of becoming rooted in a new place. The exhibition's opening gallery features three large paintings and a sculpture depicting ears, an important part of the anatomy for Boghiguian not only because it helps us to understand and make sense of the world around us, but also because the artist is legally deaf. Her ear paintings in particular, in which she renders the organ at roughly the size of an adult person, take on metaphysical airs as gateways into the inner mind — indeed, one of them is even titled "The Metaphysical Ear" (2011). The ear works are accompanied by another piece musing on the city's symbols, "Le Petit Nîmes" (2016), with a canvas in which a palm tree seems to sprout a crocodile, which is flanked by a taxidermy crocodile mounted directly on the wall. Here Boghiguian, an Egyptian Armenian born in Cairo who has spent most of her adult life traveling and making work in response to each new city — as illustrated by her politically pointed project for the Armenian pavilion [at the 2015 Venice Biennale](#) — seems to be getting acquainted with Nîmes and inviting the visitor to join in her journey of discovery.



Anna Boghigian, "The Physical Ear" (2011, left) and "The Metaphysical Ear" (2011, right), both mixed media on canvas



Anna Boghigian, "Birds" (2014, detail)

If that first gallery finds Boghigian getting acquainted with the particulars of Nîmes, and the second is a catalogue of figures, characters, and chapters

from the city's history, what to make of the exhibition's final room, in which a gazebo of sorts is surrounded by small palm trees planted directly into the gallery's floor? Texts about history, philosophy, and alchemy play across the X-shaped structure's walls in French, Latin, and English, while bird sculptures are suspended or perched overhead. The small pavilion's inner walls and ceilings are dotted with drawings and paintings, some taking up the history of Nîmes yet again, others depicting anatomical fragments and nude bodies. For Boghiguan, this elegant garden is a representation of the verdant estates in Nîmes that Augustus gave to the generals who were instrumental in his victory in the [Battle of Actium](#). But, per its title — "The Garden of the Unconscious" (2016) — it is also a symbolic space where the curiosity of the exhibition's first room and the overwhelming span of history in its second room reach a kind of equilibrium. All those past lives and cultures, assimilated through the metaphysical ear, are integrated into the collective unconscious represented by the show's final installation.

For the visitor unfamiliar with the city's history or unwilling to trace Boghiguan's journey through it, *A Walk in the Unconscious* may remain essentially indecipherable, but its two large installations are sufficiently rich in formal details and intriguing imagery for the work to hold its own. And for those eager to follow the artist's line of thinking, the exhibition is a bold, playful, and inventive engagement with local history that never devolves into didacticism.



Anna Boghiguan, "The Garden of the Unconscious" (2016)



Anna Boghiguan, "The Garden of the Unconscious" (2016, detail)



Anna Boghiguan, *A Walk in the Unconscious* installation view



Anna Boghigian, *A Walk in the Unconscious* installation view



Anna Boghiguian, "The Procession of Dionysus" (2015–16), cut-outs and mixed media

[Anna Boghiguian: A Walk in the Unconscious](#) continues at the [Carré d'Art](#) (Place de la Maison Carrée, Nîmes, France) through February 19.