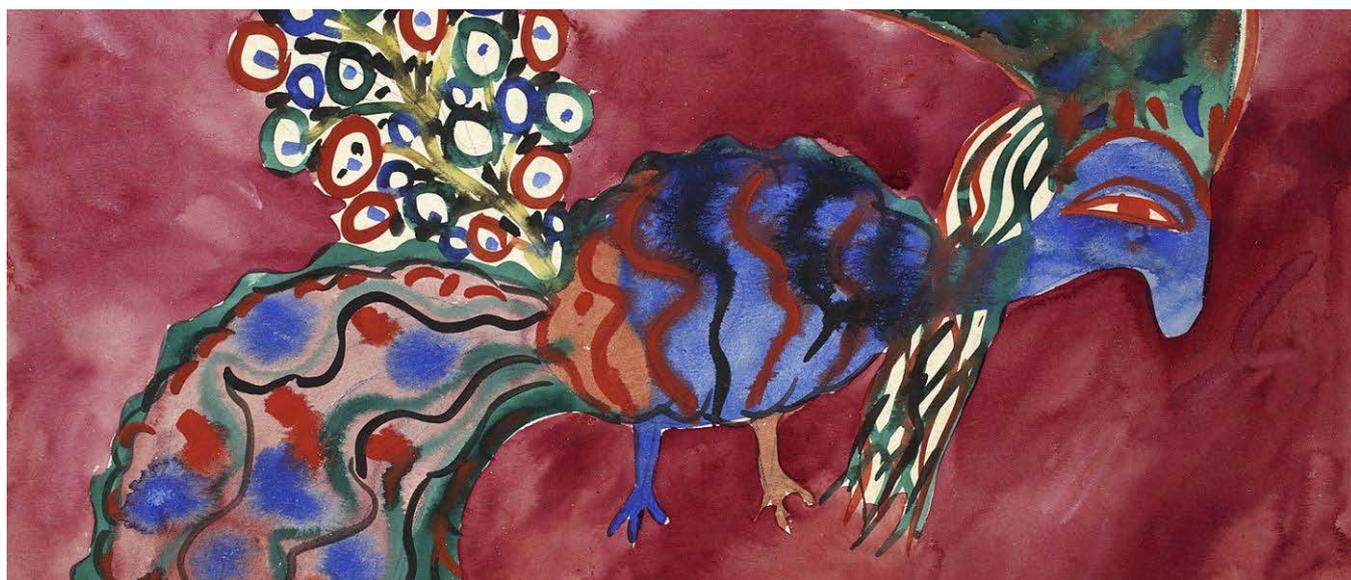


She just wanted to be Baya

01 MAY 2019 DANNA LORCH



Arguably the most significant Algerian artist from the 20th century to the present day, Baya Mahieddine (1931-1998), lived life and made art entirely on her own unapologetic terms. Her exhibition at Dubai's Elmarsa Gallery is a celebration of a self-taught icon from the region, and the lasting impact of the elaborate universe she created with just her brushes, papers, and gouache pigments.

Although the more than 15 works included here aren't installed in chronological order by any means, the oldest, a gouache and watercolour portrait of a wary-eyed peacock, dates back to 1945, composed when Baya was a young orphan of nine years old. The work came at the encouragement of Marguerite Camina Benhoura, a French public intellectual who took the young Baya in (and eventually adopted her), armed her with inexpensive art supplies and access to a private library of art history books, and propelled her young charge to cultivate an innate, uninhibited artistic language.

What is fascinating about the works selected for this exhibition is the way that Baya's voice can be traced so clearly unchanged over time. For example, an untitled 1998 gouache on paper (100 x 150 cm) depicts three

female figures, two of whom strum the *oud*. Although certainly more sophisticated in technique, the eyes are the same as the peacock composed some five decades before, though here they are lined in thick black reminiscent of *kohl*. Rather than being weighed down by their traditional robes, the voluminous fabric is swaying to movement of the music, dappled in protective evil eyes to ward off danger, and completely under the control of the women. Their half smiles project an all-knowing female authority.



Baya, Untitled, 1998, gouache on paper, 100 x 150 cm

Elmarsa Director Lilia Ben Salah cautions against dismissing Baya's work as simplistic or childish. "Baya's style is the repetition of figures and patterns, mainly women and nature including animals, birds, fruits, and musical instruments," she says. "Her language is seemingly naïve, but she actually uses colourful, happy symbols to express profound ideas."

And some of those ideas are a response to the traumas that the artist endured in her lifetime— from the loss of her parents to surviving the brutalities of the Algerian Revolution. Perhaps, the patterned order to Baya's work, which certainly incorporates the symmetry of Islamic art, derived from an effort to create order and balance in an uncontrollable life that lacked those qualities.

Baya was famously “discovered” in Algeria by the eminent French dealer Aimé Maeght, who offered her an exhibition at the precocious age of 16 in his prominent Paris gallery, with André Breton penning the accompanying catalogue’s preface, no less. As her star ascended on the art world’s horizon, Baya certainly had access to increasingly sophisticated materials and mentors (both in Algeria and France), but stubbornly maintained gouache as her main medium—although she did famously collaborate on ceramics with Pablo Picasso during the summer months of 1948-1952, at the Madoura Studio in the French seaside town of Vallauris.

Frustratingly, Baya’s power is colonised and reduced when she is referred to *ad nauseum* in Western publications as “The Frida Kahlo of the Maghrib” or the Arab woman who inspired Picasso’s Orientalist *Les Femmes d’Alger*—which famously topped auction records when it [sold](#) at Christie’s in 2015. She is also often mistakenly named as a Surrealist or an Outsider Artist—both labels she reportedly rejected during her lifetime. The only association was with the *Aouchem* Group, founded in 1967 with a formal [manifesto](#) which Baya signed, and a dedication to “aesthetic de-colonisation.”



Baya, *Joueuse de mandore*, 1986, Watercolour and gouache on paper, 65 x 50 cm, Courtesy of Elmarsa

Why do Arab artists—and female Arab artists at that—always need to be connected to or praised by Western artists, particularly Western male artists, or contextualised in Western art history movements in order to achieve legitimacy—even within the eyes of the Arab world? Ben Salah explains that while Baya is certainly highly valued by Arab collectors, she isn't a household name by any means. She says, "I am happy to have this show in the Arab region because important Modern artists that come from our region, like Baya, are not always celebrated enough. Many people don't know her here yet."

Curiously, Baya has achieved more renown in the West than in the Arab

world, perhaps in large part to the 2018 retrospective [*Baya: Woman of Algiers*](#) so masterfully curated by Natasha Boas at New York University's Grey Gallery, marking the artist's first major solo show in North America.

It's both commendable and intriguing that Baya so strongly influenced noteworthy artists, and yet her own practice remained stubbornly authentic to Baya alone. Ben Salah believes, "She didn't want to be categorised in one way or another. She just wanted to be Baya. As a woman coming from Algeria, she stood for herself and her [own] identity."

Baya Mahieddine (1931-1998) runs at Elmarsa Gallery in Alserkal Avenue until 15 June 2019.

Image credits:

Baya, *Le Paon*, 1945, Watercolour and gouache on paper, 31 x 47.6 cm, Courtesy Elmarsa.

Baya, *Village aux oiseaux*, 1987, Gouache on paper, 75 x 100 cm, Courtesy Elmarsa.

Image credits:

Baya, *Le Paon*, 1945, Watercolour and gouache on paper, 31 x 47.6 cm, Courtesy Elmarsa.

Baya, *Village aux oiseaux*, 1987, Gouache on paper, 75 x 100 cm, Courtesy Elmarsa.