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Meriem Bennani, *Siham & Hafida*, 2017, six-channel projection mapped digital video installation and three monitors, color, sound, 30 minutes.

NEW YORK

Meriem Bennani

THE KITCHEN
512 West 19th Street
September 13–October 21

Meriem Bennani's marvelous new video installation *Siham & Hafida*, 2017, sets up a dramatic, mischievously contrived showdown between two women at odds over the place and future of the *chikha*, a female singer or dancer in the lineage of *aita*, a form of vernacular sung

poetry that winds its way throughout the modern history of Morocco.

Hafida, brusque and to the point, represents an older generation of women who used their performances to entertain, bring audiences to the brink of ecstasy, and honor the subtle art of *aita*, but also to carry messages of revolt against French colonial rule. Colonial administrators, in turn, cast the *chikhat* as women of loose morals or prostitutes. The associations stuck, as did the Orientalist fantasies of academics struggling to understand the erotic ambiguities of *aita*. In a bid to turn *aita* into a tourist attraction, the Moroccan government, independent since 1956, recently reclaimed the genre as national heritage, ushering in a new generation of social-media-savvy *chikhat*, epitomized by simpering *Siham*.

Instead of an earnest or ethnographic film, Bennani runs her subject through what has become an unmistakable, totally disarming style of digital distortion and surreal irruption. (She also fractures what is essentially a single video into a six-channel projection with three monitors and an anteroom of kitsch Plexiglas prints.) *Siham* and *Hafida* meet in a café, and, of course, they despise each other. What sticks in the mind, however, are the moments when Bennani's image breaks apart, when a flurry of insects or crustaceans suddenly takes over the screen and becomes a field of vibrating abstract patterns. In those instances, *Siham & Hafida* does the work of *aita* itself, transporting viewers to another realm of imagination and promise.

— Kaelen Wilson-Goldie