



Meriem Bennani: Party on the CAPS
The Brooklyn Rail, October 2019
(author: Shehab Awad)
1/3

BROOKLYN RAIL

For Meriem Bennani's first solo exhibition at CLEARING, the Brooklyn-based Moroccan artist has transformed the gallery into something like a spaceship. The gallery's glass doors are covered in a futuristic lime green that sets the tone for the artist's characteristically playful work. Vivid color persists within the space, which is decked out in textured pleather and illuminated in lime-green and purple mood lighting.

This is the semi-mythological world of *Party on the CAPS*, an eight-channel, thirty-minute video divided across two rooms. The video meditates on themes of postcolonial alienation, through scenes mainly shot in Morocco starring a local cast, including the artist's own mother (playing herself) and a seemingly queer MC presiding over a party who talks about the viral video that propelled him to fame. The viewer is guided through

the video's fractured narrative by a bright green animated crocodile—a regular character from Bennani's past work—who introduces and provides the context for the projections in the second room.

The first room has been converted into a video lounge, complete with padded bleachers upholstered in silver croco-pleather facing a curved screen. The second room houses the remainder of the para-fictional video, seamlessly mapped across an array of screens made of dented wood, one of which looks like it's sinking into the gallery floor. One channel is interrupted by a giant magnifying lens structure. Small cylindrical growths crafted out of that same pleather padding are lit from within by a glowing white light and function as scattered seating. The whole installation is like a playground.



Meriem Bennani, *Party on the CAPS*, 2018-2019. 8-channel video installation, 30 minutes. Wood wrap around screen, wooden dented screen, steel details (ladder between screens, ladder shape by triangle screen, curved pipe going through screen, magnifying glass with plexi), 9 steel and croco pleather stools with LED lights inside. Curved screen sculpture made of a metal structure, stretched rear project screen, wood stair structure wrapped in foam and croco pleather. Overall dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and CLEARING, New York / Brussels. Photo: JSP Art Photography.

NEW YORK CITY

CLEARING

Party on the CAPS

September 12 – October 27,
2019

Meriem Bennani: Party on the CAPS
 The Brooklyn Rail, October 2019
 (author: Shehab Awad)
 2/3



Meriem Bennani, *Party on the CAPS*, 2018-2019. 8-channel video installation, 30 minutes. Wood wrap around screen, wooden dented screen, steel details (ladder between screens, ladder shape by triangle screen, curved pipe going through screen, magnifying glass with plexi), 9 steel and croco pleather stools with LED lights inside. Curved screen sculpture made of a metal structure, stretched rear project screen, wood stair structure wrapped in foam and croco pleather. Overall dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and C L E A R I N G, New York / Brussels. Photo: JSP Art Photography.

In keeping with this futuristic context, *Party on the CAPS* imagines a speculative future dominated by teleportation. “CAPS” is short for “capsule,” an island that functions as a concentration camp in the Atlantic. This is where people are sequestered after “U.S. Troopers” intercept them during teleportation, after their cells have been disintegrated for travel but before they’re recomposed in their final destination. The bodies of Bennani’s characters are already omelets from travelling by this method, so imagine the doubled trauma that the citizens of the CAPS have been through; first teleportation, and then interception.

The para-fictional video centers on a party celebrating the eightieth birthday of the artist’s grandmother (played by Bennani’s twenty-something cousin) and the success of her age-reversal procedure—one of the purported benefits offered to the perpetually temporary citizens of the CAPS. Although Bennani herself isn’t depicted in any of this, her presence is deeply and constantly felt. The documentary-like video is shot from her at-times frantic perspective, whether the characters are speaking directly to the camera or whether she is there just observing like a fly on the wall. You feel like you are in her hands.

Meriem Bennani: Party on the CAPS
The Brooklyn Rail, October 2019
(author: Shehab Awad)
3/3

That emphasis on the personal is reinforced in the gallery handout, which includes an adorable transcript between Bennani and her mother as the artist explains her role to her. This sense of reality introduced by incorporating her real-life family members into the work is also reinforced in the way Bennani preserves her characters' humanity, showing them engaging in mundane conversations or gossiping. They're not in a state of panic, but they're also not fully resigned to their reality: at one point the MC is shown flipping off a trooper in the distance.

The exhibition's design performs what the work is about. It's intentionally difficult to grasp a cohesive picture and fully digest this reality. Although the channel projected in the first room provides integral framing to understand the channels projected in the second, main room, there is no indication that stipulates the viewer must watch it first before entering the main gallery. Even if they did, given the time constraints on most viewers, they'd probably only get fractured snippets of the entire story. Furthermore, the story is narrated by a non-native English speaker, and subtitles are only projected on one central screen in the main room, the type sometimes rendered illegible because the words are tiny or shoved in a corner. But any inaccessibility and time demand is compensated for by the provision of ample comfortable seating.

The work doesn't want to be resolved, but certain resonances still emerge. Bennani's characters are trapped, but there is a semblance of freedom and a strong spirit of conviviality that shines above their struggle. At the same time, there is a sad longing for something that is no longer there, something that was never truly theirs, that they've never felt was fully theirs, or that they've never fully experienced—like so many lovers we thought we were in love with, when we were actually in love with the concept of love itself. On the one hand, the themes and affective dimensions here are topical, but on the other, they're timeless, speaking to a universal human experience of constraint and possibility, communion and longing, resignation and the quietest acts of rebellion.