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ARTFORUM



View of "Meriem Bennani: Party on the CAPS," 2020, Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin. Photo: Alwin Lay.

IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, sometimes known as the here and now, or a version of it, a woman's tangled blonde updo smokes, bursts into flame, and shatters into hundreds of pixelated pieces. A slick and sexy fly, indigo with glinting green highlights, buzzes through a crowded marketplace, rests on a pile of halvah, reclines on a zucchini (leaving an animated gloop of sticky neon residue behind), flits through traffic singing Rihanna's 2016 hit "Kiss It Better." *Been waiting on that sunshine boy, I think I need that back.* The fly's reedy, high-pitched voice strains gleefully for the upper registers: *Kiss it, kiss it better, baby!* Things heat up, move faster. Eyes bulge, bodies ripple and expand, swell, get sucked into vases, each unexpected visual accompanied by a sound effect. Smoke seeps out of the shoes and trouser legs of party guests—*crackle crackle*—though they don't seem to notice. Dramatic music surges. Two women in yellow dance and dance until yellow flings from their bodies like painterly miasma. A crocodile named Fiona teaches us about teleportation.

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These are slivers of scenes from Meriem Bennani's prolific output of the past five years, during which she has exhibited her brilliant and immersive multichannel installations at institutions including MoMA PS1, the Kitchen, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, all in New York; Paris's Fondation Louis Vuitton; and, most recently, the Julia Stoschek Collection in Berlin. Each of Bennani's pieces, which she makes in Morocco and the United States, is distinct, but taken together, they reveal a common language: one of hybridity, humor, collage, surprise, tenderness, and idiosyncrasy. Though Bennani shoots most of her videos using an iPhone and in collaboration with family members, who role-play versions of themselves based on loosely sketched plotlines, the footage's vernacular style belies the artist's careful, intuitive edits. Bennani's art generates its own vivid syntax, one that fuses a wild, associative personal imaginary with high-level, comically reflexive postproduction techniques and technologies, such as 2D and 3D animations created in software like After Effects and Cinema 4D, as well as myriad audio tracks made and found. Surreal, superreal, hyperreal, augmented reality, science fiction, speculative fiction, parafiction, magical realism: These are terms, genres, and processes often invoked to describe her practice. Each is correct, though Bennani seems most intent on refusing singularity in favor of energetic collision and heterogeneity: Why choose just one methodology when you can combine them all?



View of "Meriem Bennani: FLY," 2016, MoMA PS1, New York. Photo: Pablo Enriquez.

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The hybrid quality of Bennani's art extends dramatically to its presentation. Many of her works are elaborate, gallery-size installations whose multiple projections combine with sleek arrays of sculptural objects to provide fragmentary, nonlinear viewing experiences. (Producing these elaborate environments is, for the artist, akin to "offline editing": one that uses "space instead of time.") Other pieces are designed for individual consumption, screened in retro-futuristic, sometimes anthropomorphic "viewing stations." These cartoonish devices, crafted from synthetic materials in bright hues, seem, like the videos they contain, at once identifiable and unreal, pointing to their on-screen origins and to our relationship to virtual space.



View of "Meriem Bennani: Siham & Hafida," 2017, the Kitchen, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

SO, A DOCUMENTARY is a reality-TV show is a cultural-history program is a soap opera is a satire is installation art is a dystopian fiction is VR. This is not chaos, but a kind of world making in which dual-purpose storylines carry both entertainment and analogy. *Siham & Hafida*, 2017, one of Bennani's room-size installations, follows two Moroccan *chikhas*, women who sing in the traditional style of *aita* (the word means "call," "cry," or "lament" in Arabic), a genre that emerged during the early-twentieth-century French occupation. Chikhas, though

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historically associated with the loose mores of nightlife revelry, were rebel activists: The lyrics of aita—performed in the Moroccan oral dialect of Darija, and unintelligible to its colonizers—concealed revolutionary and patriotic sentiment within accessible entertainment. Hafida, the elder chikha, is rigorously trained in a classic genre of aita. Gifted but illiterate, she struggles to understand the social media-fluent Siham, who learned her practice by memorizing online videos and streaming music tracks. Siham hopes to circulate aita further into the world via YouTube and to transcribe lyrics that have until now been only sung, transmitted through the bodies of the chikhas.

This is the story, as it were, of the film, but, as in all her work, Bennani renders daily life strange and magnificent. The two singers have animated spirit animals: Angular orange anime crabs scuttle where Hafida walks, pouring out of open doors, hiding between her couch cushions, and perching on latte saucers; a kaleidoscope of butterflies with shiny metallic wings—white, blue, purple—swarm Siham as she rehearses, landing on her face while she checks her reflection and takes selfies with her iPhone. In these mesmerizing embellishments, we see and hear Bennani’s authorial voice and emotional engagement, at times reticent and awkward, at others gently critical: “My character is the monster of all the reactions,” she says. As in the form of aita, the artist creates art that gives pleasure while smuggling in deeper feelings of disappointment, generational difference, and unresolvable inter- and intracultural conflicts.



Still from Meriem Bennani's *Siham & Hafida*, 2017, HD video, color, sound, 30 minutes.

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Party on the CAPS, 2018–19, is another example of a narrative exploring complicated political conflicts that have no clear resolution, only the intuitive yearnings of the often-compromised lives of those involved. The CAPS is an island in the Atlantic and in the near future, perhaps even the parallel present, a time in which airline travel has been replaced by teleportation. Migrants attempting to reach the United States illegally are intercepted and redirected to the CAPS, where they live in interminable limbo, many of them in physically damaged states due to the truncated teleportation that has scrambled their cellular constitutions. “Plastic face syndrome” (characterized by a shiny, colloidal visage where once there was flesh) and “mega ear” (just what it sounds like, but with the ear turning a pulsing swamp green) are among these deformities. On the CAPS, where life is surveilled by US Troopers (a thinly veiled version of ICE), bodies can also be remade: Old becomes young, ugly becomes beautiful, baby adults might one day rule the world. These metamorphoses represent one of few emancipatory promises for new generations born on the island, for whom nowhere else will ever be home.

Bennani’s work is often read as diasporic critique. *Mission Teens*, 2019, for instance, her most recent video installation, features the artist as an earnest 3D-animated donkey who follows a group of teenagers at the same French lycée in Morocco she once attended, observing—as in *Party on the CAPS*—the internalized effects of the postcolonial on its subjects. Although Bennani’s practice undoubtedly reflects her experience of growing up in Morocco; being schooled in Paris at L’École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, where she studied drawing; and now living for a decade in New York, her work can also be seen as a wider meditation on the hybrid states we all inhabit to varying degrees, thanks to networked technology and the globalized economy—perhaps even more so, as it melts down around us with terrifying speed, baring its cruel boundaries and excesses: In every home is a kind of foreignness. Bennani’s work embraces this in-betweenness as an inherent but generative, propulsive state. It reminds us, too, that when we are looking at the world, IRL or online, we are never looking at an unmediated version of it. A provocation? A test of the earnest imagination?

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Still from Orian Barki and Meriem Bennani's *2 Lizards Episode 1*, 2020, HD video, color, sound, 1 minute 26 seconds.

I BEGAN TO THINK of the modus operandi of Bennani's work as a kind of meta *what if*. Her videos are filled with seductive animated embellishments, pareidolia, and anthropomorphism: an inner life given free rein, while turning back on itself like a deadly serious joke about tautologies of visual representation in our hyperaccelerated world. Though Bennani is sometimes compared with post-internet artists of a slightly earlier generation, to my mind she has more in common with animators and cartoonists, whose tools are comedic timing, genre-fluidity, and the studied manipulation of hand-drawn visuals: the slapstick of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), the discomfiting weirdness of *Cool World* (1992), the philosophical hallucinations of *Waking Life* (2001), or the melancholy of *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). Animation has the power to make something that is no longer quite itself both parodic and heartfelt. Of course, Bennani's work also descends from a rich lineage of experimental animation—from Oskar Fischinger, Mary Ellen Bute, Robert Breer, and Franciszka and Stefan Themerson to Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno—and the very first cartoons. Early Disney films, wrote Walter Benjamin, provoked a laughter that “hovers over an abyss of horror” (the dangerous political constellations of the 1930s); in Bennani's art, the power of animation likewise springs from its succinct and technologically preternatural twining of the diverting with the disturbing and disturbed.

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Bennani's videos are filled with seductive animated embellishments, pareidolia, and anthropomorphism: an inner life given free rein.

On a dark day, I noticed Bennani had posted a new video, made with filmmaker Orian Barki, on Instagram. Though Bennani has been clear that she doesn't see social media as a venue for completed works, in this period of closed galleries and canceled exhibitions, *2 Lizards Episode 1* was a breath of fresh air. Two geckos on an unmistakably New York rooftop at sunset discuss the first week of quarantine measures. As they chat, Chet Baker-esque trumpet strains drift into the night air: A horse is playing her brass instrument on a rooftop nearby. Across the way, a bear with a keyboard and subwoofers chimes in; then, on another neighboring rooftop, a sheep on upright bass. *This is so beautiful!* The lizards get up on the roof's concrete parapet and shake their shiny lizard bodies in concert in the gloaming.

"An emotional response has to come first," Bennani has said. "Then I introduce subjects I want to talk about." I knew that around the world, in Italy, Egypt, Germany, Brazil, people were singing to each other from a distance—sharing what they could, because sometimes that's enough or has to be. I laughed as I watched the lizards, one of whom has Bennani's voice, and I felt *emotional*. I laughed at myself, so moved by a simulation of collective togetherness that for a moment I believed it to be real. Then I laughed again because, in a way, it was: proof that, as in all of Benanni's work, nothing is virtually impossible.

Emily LaBarge is a writer based in London.