



Moroccan Identity and Digital Culture Connect in an Internet-Age Funhouse

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(author: Mikkel Rosengaard)

1/4



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ART

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Meriem Bennani's dizzying, discomfiting, delightful installation at The Kitchen.



Mikkel Rosengaard October 5, 2017



Installation view, *Meriem Bennani: Siham Hafida* (all images by Louise Borchers, courtesy The Kitchen)

Coming off solo shows at MoMA PS1 and Art Dubai, Moroccan-born Meriem Bennani is emerging as one of the most original artists and animators of her post-internet generation. This September Bennani expanded her kaleidoscopic, emoji-filled universe to another venerable institution, The Kitchen, in Chelsea. The dizzying, amusing experience of her solo show *Siham & Hafida* (2017) leaves you with the sensation of having stumbled into an internet-age funhouse. Playful, internet-driven, and always humorous, Bennani's work enlivens the disorientation and absurdity of the early 21st century through social media-infused storytelling and an effervescent visual language.

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2/4

For whom is the funhouse fun? goes John Barth's classic post-modern question. For Barth, the funhouse is a place of fear and confusion for the self-conscious writer-creator; a fake construct only enjoyable to giddy lovers and docile consumers. For Bennani, the distinction between author and spectator seems to have lost its meaning. In her work, as on the internet, we are all active creators *and* docile consumers: spectators are tasked with cobbling together their own personal narrative from the multiple screens, just as online users are simultaneously enjoying and co-constructing the social media worlds they inhabit.

This self-constructing reality of the internet is a central tenet of the artist's practice — Bennani's work is as much alive on social media as in art galleries. Her treasure trove of an [Instagram account](#) includes digital manipulations (President Trump watching the eclipse through [KKK-inspired glasses](#)), mock documentaries (the fictitious hijab brand [Fardaous Funjab](#)), as well as real-world absurdities (a shopper walking her [balloon Dachshund](#) through a Dubai mall).

For the show at The Kitchen, Bennani has constructed a six-channel video installation that builds on the immersive, multi-screen experience the artist first introduced in her 2016 [solo show at MoMA PS1](#). Adding intimate character portraits, a compelling narrative, and a host of critical social issues to her trademark stew of digital distortions, *Siham & Hafida* is Bennani's most accomplished work to date. Visitors enter an installation of projectors and screens, in various geometrical shapes, creating something akin to the mirror cabinet of the funhouse. One animation is screened inside a tube, another projected onto a series of tiered circles, multiplying the film as in a series of open browser windows. Reflecting the constant stream of visual stimuli encountered through consumer electronics, the thirty-minute video jumps across screens with a plethora of expertly edited visual gags and cartoonish sound effects inserted to short-circuit the viewer's attention.

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3/4

Installation view, Meriem Bennani: *Siham Hafida*

While the work is easily accessible and visually enjoyable (at the opening, a toddler danced delightedly in front of a wavy, pink figure on-screen), the installation is not just digital smoke and mirrors. *Siham & Hafida* tells the story of two rival chickha performers in Safi, a coastal town in western Morocco, and their intergenerational conflicts regarding self-presentation and oral music traditions. Born to different generations, the performers dance and sing the same traditional *Aita* songs, but perform vastly different tropes of femininity: one prescribed by religion and Moroccan tradition, the other molded on a globalized hybrid of consumerism, social media, and Middle Eastern culture. The two performers' style of dance, outfits, and makeup, and their disparate ways of posing for the cameras display the social gulf between the two women and the baffling speed with which Moroccan society has changed in just one generation.

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4/4

Constantly firing from her arsenal of digital tricks, Bennani never loses sight of the humble off-stage lives of her protagonists. The two chickha performers live in a backwater provincial town in an autocratic developing nation and escape their modest surroundings by fleeing into the fantasy worlds of songs, dance, and entertainment. Bennani manages to portray this oscillation between developing-world drabness and virtual fantasy without sentimentality. Instead, the artist projects scuttling emoji-crabs, satellite dishes sparking with electricity, and a swarm of fluttering pixelated butterflies on top of Safi's decay, giving the scruffy town a digitally enhanced sheen of wonder.

Bennani's imaginative use of social media and consumer electronics, and her talent for fusing the real with the virtual, permits her to conjure up physical environments that radiate the glee, confusion, and exuberance of the internet. At the opening, the mostly young crowd sat transfixed for the full half-hour, barely using their phones, suggesting that this constant vacillation between an underwhelming physical reality, and a glittery, entertaining virtual world is something with which most audience members are deeply familiar. For whom is the internet-age funhouse fun? In Bennani's case, the answer seems to be: for lovers, for toddlers, and just about everyone else.