The Changing Roles of Female Visual Artists in Morocco

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Abstract
Female artists are actively participating in the development and growth of visual arts in Morocco. This article seeks to highlight their important contribution in the Moroccan visual arts. It deals with the access of women to the field of visual art, delineates successive categories for understanding the types of work female artists have engaged in since the independence of the country in 1956, and the challenges that these artists have been facing. It focuses on the artistic experiences of specific artists, believed to be, representative of some historical era or artistic trend. Moreover, it tries to put these artists into a cultural and historical framework to contextualize their artistic production.

Keywords: Female artists, gender equality, visual arts, contemporary art.

Today, the number of female artists in the Moroccan art scene is increasing. They are actively participating in the development and growth of visual arts in Morocco. From different cultural backgrounds, intellectual levels, and social strata, they have campaigned through pictorial expression for environmental causes and for the emancipation of women overcoming a long repressed and ignored freedom of speech. This article seeks to highlight the important contribution of female artists in Moroccan visual arts. In this respect, it deals with the access of women to the visual art, the successive groups of female artists since the independence of the country in 1956, and the challenges that these artists have been facing. However, this article neither claims to provide a comprehensive anthological study of female artists in Morocco nor does it aim at outlining an aesthetic or art history. Rather, it discusses the artistic experiences of some artists, whom I believe to be representatives of some historical era or artistic trend. Moreover, it tries to put these artists into a cultural and historical framework to contextualize their artistic production.

Creative Yearning in the Harem
In the Arab Muslim worlds, women were historically associated with the privacy of the harem. More for cultural than religious considerations, women were...
compelled to spend their lives secluded within the protective walls of the harem. Regardless of their family positions (wives, daughters, mothers, or servants), they had to perform household duties that often seemed like drudgery. However, despite their Sisyphean housework, they managed to transcend their restricted lives by indulging in more refined artistic productions. They took refuge in some artistic activities that allowed them (figuratively) to go beyond the walls of the harem and enjoy freedom. Habiba, in Fatima Mernissi’s autobiographical book *Women’s Dreams*, expresses this yearning for freedom in 1940s:

Aunt Habiba was certain that each of us had in herself a kind of magic, hidden in her most intimate dreams. “When you're imprisoned, without defense, behind the walls, stuck in a harem, she said, you dream of escape.” … Liberation begins when the images are a dance in your head and you start to translate them into words. The words don't cost anything!” She kept telling us that we all had this inner power. (Mernissi, 1997, pp. 147-148)

*Figure 1. Samir El Azhar's photograph of Lalla Essaydi: “Harem #14,” used by permission from the Museum Mohamed VI of Modern and Contemporary Art.*

When they finished their tedious work, they indulged in some activities that were believed to be far more positive in nature and often more agreeable to do because they were - according to those women who have written about these experiences - a source of revelation and creation. In a mystical way, they focused their creation
on embroidery patterns, henna\(^2\) shapes, silk decorations on caftans\(^3\) and sherbils,\(^4\) and carpet (rug) designs. These creative works enabled them to escape the rigid social code that imprisoned them within confined walls. They created their own symbols and motifs that transcended their limited space. In *Women’s Dreams*, Fatima Mernissi (1997) highlights this point:

That day Aunt Habiba was trying to embroider a green bird with wings of gold. This kind of bird, aggressively spreading its wings, was not part of classical designs. … Of course, birds existed in traditional embroidery designs, but they were tiny, and often completely paralyzed, stuck between giant plants and large bushy flowers. Because of Lalla Mani, Aunt Habiba always embroidered classical patterns when she was in the yard, and kept for herself her bird with wings deployed, in the privacy of her chamber. (pp. 193-194)

In the first half of the 20th century Morocco witnessed important social changes that shaped its future. One major leap towards the future was allowing girls to pursue secondary and university education. Young girls were formerly allowed to go to primary school but had to leave school as soon as they got their elementary certificate. In the 1930s, leaders of the Nationalist Movement,\(^5\) who were religious scholars in the University of Al Quaraouiyine,\(^6\) allowed their daughters to leave the harem for high school. This brought about dress changes that allowed young girls to walk easily in the street. About this change, Fatima Mernissi (1997) wrote,

My mother also wanted to replace the traditional haik of women by the djellaba, the male mantle, which many women of nationalists had adopted. The haik was made of seven meters of heavy white cotton in which her body was enveloped. … When the nationalists started to send their daughters to school, they also

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\(^2\) Henna is a plant that has been used since antiquity to dye skin, hair, and fingernails, as well as fabrics including silk, wool, and leather.

\(^3\) Caftan is a loose female garment that can be made of wool, cashmere, silk, or cotton, and may be worn with a sash. The word is ultimately from old Turkish "kap ton," meaning "covering garment."

\(^4\) Sherbils are female shoes of Andalusian origin that are embroidered with silk and gold threads to fit the rest of women garments.

\(^5\) The Istiqlal (Independence) Party, which provided most of the leadership for the nationalist movement, released in 1944 a manifesto demanding full independence, national reunification, and a democratic constitution. King Muhammad V (1927–1961) had approved the manifesto before its submission to the French authorities, who answered that no basic change in the protectorate status was being considered. The Nationalist Movement continued its political and military struggle until Morocco gained its independence in 1956.

\(^6\) University Al Quaraouiyine is the oldest university in the world. It was founded by Fatima Al-Fihria in 859. It became one of the leading spiritual and educational centers of the historic Muslim world. It was incorporated into Morocco's modern state university system in 1963.
allowed them to wear a djellaba, much lighter and convenient than the haik in order to do four times a day the journey from home to school. The girls therefore wore djellabas of men and, soon, their mothers imitated them. (pp. 153-154)

Another step of equal importance was late King Mohamed V’s decision to allow girls to study at Al Quaraouiyine University in 1948. This opened the doors of modernity to Moroccan women and paved the way for an era that called for gender equality. King Mohamed V made another symbolic act to show Moroccans his firm support of the education of women. He sent his daughter Lalla Aicha, wearing modern Western clothes, to deliver an important political speech in Tangier in 1947. In Shahrazad is not Moroccan, Fatima Mernissi, the Moroccan sociologist, argues that the decades of the 30s, 40s, and 50s in the 20th century brought about enormous achievements that changed completely the ideological and economic structure of society, particularly regarding outer places, especially important places: the school (as a place of knowledge) and the labor market (as an economic location) (Mernissi, 2010, pp. 72-73).

These first steps towards modernization initiated a process of struggling for equality in social, economic, judicial, and political domains. Women played a crucial role in building a modern society based on the ideal of equality of opportunities between the genders. According to scholar Moulim El Aroussi, Moroccan women made major contributions in building a free and modern Morocco (El Aroussi, 2017, p. 185). Thus, women have become active members of modern Moroccan society. Their presence in both the public and private sectors is striking. They do widely varied jobs: teachers; university professors; deans and presidents of universities; doctors; engineers; CEOs of companies; bus, taxi, and tram drivers; policewomen; judges and lawyers; and members of parliament and government, to name only a few. It is not surprising then to see the strong presence of women in the artistic world as a logical outcome of their struggle to win their place in the public sphere which was, until the mid-1900s, the domain of men.

**From Utilitarian Production to Artistic Culture**

Throughout Morocco’s history, Moroccan women have preserved a rich, tangible cultural heritage. They have woven carpets (rugs), embroidered silk and cotton fabric, decorated pottery and leather products, manufactured jewelry, embellished the skin with tattoos and henna designs, and designed and embellished clothes. For women who had mastered these skills and techniques, the transition from the creation of utilitarian material culture to producing artwork was relatively easy and smooth. Instead of working on objects for everyday use, they created works for artistic contemplation. From mere women performing ephemeral utilitarian activities, they became artists who produced inspirational works of art.

Some Moroccan women artists have turned traditional symbols, colors, and forms into aesthetic productions that reveal the depth of human experiences. In this respect, Rita El Khayat (2011) argues that “a[n artist learns and masters an art and, for this, he or she is creative. He or she is close to the craftsman because he or she makes material objects, but unlike the latter, most of his or her work is to create...
works that constitute new sources of emotion and reflection” (p. 17). In this sense, women, as artists, started to produce art (in the fullest sense of the word) when they created artworks intended for aesthetic enjoyment in and of themselves. According to Moulim El Aroussi, the transition of painting from a traditional craft industry to modern artistic production has relied on objects produced by both women and men. Woodwork, plaster, mosaics, and metal were traditionally made by men while quite a number of products and handicrafts were produced by women. For example, in fabric, leather, embroidery, and sewing, women played a significant role that in many cases exceeded that of men (El Aroussi, 2017, p. 184).

Out of this social, political, and cultural context the first women artists emerged. In the 1960s, women rarely engaged in artistic pursuits. Not well acquainted with art culture, only a handful of women used visual art to express themselves professionally. According to Farid Zahi (2007), a Moroccan art critic, these pioneers were either wives of painters (Fatima Hassan), mothers of painters (Chabia, the mother of the painter Talal or Radia, the mother of the painter Miloud), or daughters of painters (Fatima El Ouardiri). Other pioneers were in one way or another in contact with European culture and were encouraged by Europeans to use the brush, paint, and the table easel, which was a quite new experience for women used to producing utilitarian crafts in the domestic sphere. A prominent figure of this period is Meriem Meziane.

Meriem Meziane was born in 1930 in Mellilia, a city in the north of Morocco that is still colonized by Spain. She attended the elementary school in Larache, a small Atlantic town in the north of Morocco. With her father, an officer in the Spanish army, she migrated to Spain. She held her first exhibition in 1953 in Malaga. She then entered the school of fine arts of San Fernando in Madrid. In 1959, she received a degree that allowed her to teach visual art. She organized numerous exhibitions in Morocco, Tunisia, Spain, France, the United States, and Canada. She passed away in Casablanca on March 29, 2009.

Although Meriem Meziane spent a long period of her life in Spain, she never forgot her native country, which was omnipresent in her paintings. She borrowed her subjects, colors, and forms from her home in the Rif Mountains. She was inspired by the beauty of the landscape, and the generosity of the people and their ancestral traditions. She painted Moroccans, especially Moroccan women, performing social, ritual, and festive activities. Mohamed Adib Slaoui believes that her realistic paintings were concerned with Amazigh (Berber), Saharan, Fassi, and Tetouani women with their costumes, jewelry, and social traditions, which granted her works a special ethnographic and cultural vision (Adib Slaoui, 2012, p. 54).

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8 Morocco was colonized by two colonial powers: Spain in the north and south of the country and France in central Morocco. In 1956, Morocco gained independence from France and Spain but two cities in the north, Ceuta and Mellilia, are still under Spanish rule.
Another pioneer is Chems Eddoha Ataa Allah who was the first Moroccan female artist to graduate from a Moroccan School “des Beaux Arts” in Tetouan in 1960. In the same year, she organized her first exhibition. Following the Agadir earthquake in February 1960, which destroyed the whole city killing 15,000 and injuring more than 25,000, she generously offered to donate the profits from sales of her paintings to the victims of this earthquake. Since then, she has devoted her art to helping some associations such as those of cancer and brain surgery who need financial support (Ezzakari, 2016).

Chems Eddoha paints Moroccan faces and portraits with a special interest in Moroccan women, Moroccan weddings, women working in the countryside and their hard everyday life, etc. She has organized exhibitions in Morocco and abroad. About her artistic beginnings, she stated,

… at the beginning of independence women were not allowed to practice any artistic activity. Art was believed to be dishonorable and disrespectful to traditions. … Many believed that women had to stay at home and raise children. But I joined the field of art, thanks to my mother, Malika El Merini, an open-minded woman who believed in change and had revolutionary ideas … After Morocco got its independence in 1956… there were many education opportunities for Moroccan women to fill in the gap left by the colonial administration. I was among the students who
benefited from this situation as I did a training of six months to get a job in education. Afterwards, I joined the Tetouan school of “des Beaux Arts” as the first Moroccan woman, in 1957. (Ezzakari, 2016)

Figure 3. Samir El Azhar’s photograph of a poster advertising Chems Eddoha Ataa Allah’s exhibition in Rabat; June 4-30, 2015.

Both Meriem Meziane and Chems Eddoha Ataa Allah belonged to the group of female artistic pioneers that included Fatima Hassan, Chaibia Talal, Malika Aguezny, and Latifa Tijani. Chronologically, the second generation of Moroccan female painters includes the following artists: Khadija Tanana, Noufissa Benjalloun, Benhila Regragui, Fouzia Guessouss, Nadia Boulaich, and Najat Al Khatib, to name only a few. The third generation is comprised of the following names: Ikram Al Kabaj, Reem Al Laabi, Nawal Sakkat, Mahacine Al Ahrach, Maryam Al Alj, Asmae Alamy, Kenza Benjalloun, Mounat Charrat, and many others.

To discuss the artistic experiences of these female artists, I have thought it convenient to classify these generations into four distinct groups: naïve painters, secondary career artists, those who have received an academic artistic education, and those who have rebelled against formal scholastic artistic conventions.

Naïve art, a controversial term due to its negative connotations, has been described as simple, unaffected, and unsophisticated art made by artists who have had no formal training in an art school or academy. In addition to this, naïve works, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica, “are often extremely detailed, and there is a tendency toward the use of brilliant, saturated colours rather than more subtle mixtures and tones. There is also a characteristic absence of perspective, which
creates the illusion that figures are anchored in the space, with the result that figures in naïve paintings are often “floating” (Rimsa, 2008, p. 1). Among the naïve artists are Chaibia Talal, Fatima Hassan, Benhila Regraguia, Fatima Najm, Fatima Al Bakouri, and Kenza Al Mukdassni. To deal with the major characteristics of this trend, I have chosen Chaibia Talal as a representative of this group because, I believe, any discussion of naïve art in Morocco without a reference to Chaibia Talal would be shallow and superficial.

Chaibia Talal was unquestionably the most famous Moroccan painter of the 20th century. She is the only Moroccan painter whose works are listed on the stock exchange. Her paintings can sell for more than $100,000. Born in 1929 in a village near El Jadida, a coastal town on the Atlantic, Chaibia’s childhood was cut short by an early marriage when she was 13 years old. At the age of 15, the young woman was already a widow and mother of a child. To make a living, she worked as a housemaid in several French households. She experienced harsh living conditions to raise her child. When Fatima Mernissi interviewed her in 1985 and asked her how she earned her living before she discovered painting, Chaibia answered, “What do you want me to do? What can an illiterate woman like myself do? I cleaned, washed and swept houses. I did what I had to do earnestly. But I had a feeling that I had to go somewhere and put an end to all that” (Mernissi, 2010, p. 113). Her son, Al Houssine Talal, left Morocco for France where he studied visual art. He returned to Morocco and became a painter.

Two important events changed Chaibia’s life. According to her, in 1963, when she was 25 years old, she had a dream: someone offered her some paint, papers, and brushes and asked her to paint. Another event that was a turning point in her life was her encounter with Pierre Gaudibert, the French art curator and critic. Her son, Al Houssine Talal, invited Pierre Gaudibert, to have lunch at home to show him some of his paintings. Chaibia told the French critic that she also painted. When he saw her drawings and paintings, he was more interested in her works than in those of her son (Al Muntassir, 2016, pp. 58-59).

From 1966 until her death, Chaibia exhibited in Paris, Copenhagen, Ibiza, Rotterdam, New York, Tokyo, and many other capitals. In 2003, she was awarded a Gold Medal from the French Academic Society for Education and Encouragement. She died in Casablanca in 2004 at the age of 75 years.
Figure 4. Samir El Azhar's photograph of Chaibia Talal: “Fishermen,” 1979, used by permission from the Museum Mohamed VI of Modern and Contemporary Art.

Chaibia Talal was inspired by her childhood and her rural environment, creating daring, innocent, and childlike paintings. Her work is characterized by the use of colors in their original state. Her sincerity, boldness, and spontaneity earned her the appreciation and respect of the leader of the Cobra movement, Pierre Alechinsky, international critics, and even heads of states. To quote Lahsen Bougdal,

Chaibia Talal, this “paysante des arts” as nicknamed by the sociologist Fatima Mernissi, is probably the one that managed to give her letters of nobility to this raw art. Her spontaneity combined with her simplicity gratified us with compositions where the power of graphism and the harmony of the fresh colours forced the admiration of many specialists around the world. Brilliant and recognized, the painting of these three pioneers [Radia Bent Al Hussein, Fatima Hassan Al Farouj and Chaibia], established itself in a male environment where it was hard to exist. (Bougdal, 2016, p. 15)

The second group is that of secondary career artists. Unlike the first group whose members have not received any schooling, secondary career artists are

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9 The Cobra movement was a European avant-garde movement that believed in spontaneity and drew their inspiration in particular from children’s drawings and from primitive art forms.
cultivated women who have worked either as doctors, architects, civil servants, etc., but have left their jobs and become artists. This group comprises Aicha Ahardan, Aziza Jamal, Laila Cherkawi, Rajaa Al Atlassi, Noufissa Benjalloun, Nadia Khayali, Jamila Al Araychi, Asmae Alamy, Fatiha Tahiri, etc. These painters did not have any formal art education. Of different ages and horizons, they started painting and improved themselves throughout their careers by attending art training, workshops, and Biennales. According to Moulim El Aroussi, most female painters in the early post-colonial period did not attend any art schools. With the exception of Meriem Meziane and Malika Agueznay, there were no female painters with academic art education (El Aroussi, 2017, p. 186). As an example of this set, I have selected the experience of Rajae Al Atlassi.

Rajae Al Atlassi was born in 1965 in Casablanca. After university studies in French literature, she had created theatrical sets before she moved to painting. She was spotted at an exhibition titled “Screens of Contemporary Artists” organized by the collector and gallery owner Daniel Couturier, at Forney Library in Paris. She exhibited in Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, Netherlands and France.

Figure 5. Rajae Al Atlassi: “Lumières d’automne,” 2012. [digital image] Retrieved from https://darzampa.wordpress.com/2012/10/28/lumieres-dautomne-le exposition-de-la-rentree-au-musee-de-la-palmeraie/
The path undertaken by Rajae Al Atlashi in Moroccan visual art is remarkable. With literary education, she embarked on an artistic career. In her paintings, women are a recurring and iconic theme, in the guise of enigmatic and closed faces. The huge chunks of bright colors and the discontinuous and unpredictable movements alongside the traditional caftans overlays are reinterpreted with mastery; mystery of life, in this colorful bubbling of swirls, strips, circles, and stars (Benqassem, 2010, p. 38). She also uses Arabic calligraphy in her paintings.

The third group includes an array of artists that had a formal academic artistic education either in Morocco or abroad. This group includes Mahacine Al Ahrash, Ahlam Lemssefer, Laila Sherkaoui, Jamila Al Arayshi, Maryam Al Alj, Amina Benboushta, Malika Agueznay, Maryam Asharaibi, Asmae Alamy, Nawal Assakat, Nadia Khayali, Halima Hadoush, Aziza Jamal, Saadia Pirou, Maryam Belmkadem, Fouzia Guesouss, Fatima Al Alaoui, and many others. These artists paint according to the scientific rules and academic techniques they acquired at art schools. Malika Agueznay highlights the experiences of artists who have received academic artistic schooling.

Malika Agueznay was born in Marrakech. She had studied sociology before she entered the “Ecole des Beaux Arts” of Casablanca from which she graduated in

Figure 6. Samir El Azhar's photograph of Malika Agueznay: “Regard,” 2013, used by permission from the Museum Mohamed VI of Modern and Contemporary Art.
1970. In 1978, she was invited to the International Festival of Assilah, where she learned the art of engraving, encountering printmakers and professors such as Mohamed Omar Khalil and Robert Blackburn. From there, she traveled to New York to study engraving in the workshop of Mohamed Omar Khalil and Robert Blackburn. She also attended the "Counterpoint" workshop in Paris conducted by the artists Hector Saunier and Juan Valladores (Chaouat, 2017, p. 2).

Malika Agueznay was a member of the “Casablanca Movement” (Chaouat, 2017, p. 3). She uses blue color in her paintings to evoke the blue of the sky, the blue of the sea, and the blue of the eyes of women. For her, colors are full of life and meaning. They take different forms and shapes and thus acquire different significance. Her paintings feature intricate interweaving and overlapping organic forms which she calls “algae,” meaning seaweed. “Her work is often abstract, sometimes representational, but always full of movement” (The Culture Mobile, 2010, p. 1). Throughout her career, she has developed an original aesthetic by exploring new techniques in painting as well as in engraving. By using two media, she seeks to express different facets of her sensitiveness. When asked about what kind of mission a female artist has, she answered,

Being a female artist is not a simple thing. … art requires a deep investment of oneself, a large concentration. The mission is to convey, bequeath and share with others one’s knowledge, one’s experience. To this end, one has to be truthful, believing in what one does and leaves traces. (Chaouat, 2017, p. 3)

Female artists who rebel against artistic academic techniques define the fourth group. This group includes Ikram Al Kabbaj, Kenza Benjelloun, Reem Alaabi, Mounat Acharrat, Fatiha Tahiri, and many others. In the 1990s, another era began: a new king (Mohamed VI), a new family code (Al Mudawana), a new concept of power (more freedom of expression), new technologies (computer and internet), and new means of communication (social media). Like in other sectors of life, artists in general and female artists in particular responded to these changes and adopted new ways to express themselves. Hence, a new trend named “contemporary art” emerged.

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10 About her artistic experience, she states: “I attended the school of des Beaux Arts in Casablanca during the years 1966-70. It was the "Moroccan Bauhaus", where the birth of the "movement of Casablanca" took place: contemporary orientation of art directed towards observation, research and innovation. … The training of students was not only academic but oriented to the exploration, research, creativity, and the inspiration from our cultural heritage of a great diversity and wealth. This strengthened our action and our legitimacy in abstraction, geometric shapes, the notion of the essence of this contemporary art (very rich heritage such as arabesque forms, calligraphy, colour, material, carpets, embroidery, ceilings of the South painted with plant colours, brass, skin, tattoos etc...). All this is a great source of inspiration and continuity in the search for our identity in universal art.” Interview with Malika Agueznay in Visages du Maroc, http://visagedumaroc.org/visage/malika-agueznay/. (Accessed October 24, 2017). Translation the author.
Diverse and eclectic, contemporary art is a rebellion against the academic techniques of the third group. It is an art that requires “a dynamic combination of materials, methods, concepts, and subjects that challenge traditional boundaries and defy easy definition” (Silka, 2016, p. 6). It is much more socially conscious than any previous era in art has been and is increasingly global and diverse in its themes. “In its most basic sense, the term contemporary art refers to art—namely, painting, sculpture, photography, installation, performance, and video art—produced today. Though seemingly simple, the details surrounding this definition are often a bit fuzzy, as different individuals' interpretations of ‘today’ may widely and wildly vary” (Kelly Richman-Abdou, 2019, p. 2). When asked to define contemporary art, Professor Terry Smith, author of What Is Contemporary Art? (2009), answered: “it is a bit like trying to describe time: we all know what it is, and that we are in it, but we find it hard to say what it is” (Jackson, 2019, p.7). Visitors to contemporary art institutions, he added, would notice that there are fewer paintings and sculptures than in the “modern” rooms. Instead, there are many texts, videos, photo series, installations, performances, and objects that don’t look like art at all. Yet these are only the tip of the iceberg. Most contemporary art is being made outside of museums, in public spaces, for temporary exhibitions such as biennials, or is being shown online. (Jackson, 2019, p. 7)

Contemporary art marks a break with modern art. It is a rebellion against the spatial frontiers. While modern art is related to indoor spaces, contemporary art is related to outdoor spaces. In essence, modern artists create their works in their work-places and display them in galleries and museums. Many contemporary artists, however, create their artistic works in factories, streets and markets and exhibit them in open public spaces (El Aroussi, 2017, p. 207).

In Morocco, a new group of contemporary male and female artists emerged between 1990 and 2013. They were brought together by their sharp criticism of political and social institutions. For instance, Hassan Eddarssi devoted his energy to drawing people and the authorities’ attentions to taking care of one of the Kingdom’s ancient zoos. Fouzi Laatiriss was interested in the social and intellectual environment from an anthropological standpoint. With the rise of conservatism and the risk of suppressing individual freedoms, Kenza Benjelloun devoted all her works to advocating for greater freedoms (El Azhar, 2016, p. 5).
Kenza Benjelloun is indeed a good example to illustrate this contemporary tendency that abolishes spatial as well as artistic frontiers. Born in 1966 in Casablanca, Kenza Benjelloun graduated from the Ecole des Beaux Arts of Casablanca in 1992 and from the Ecole des Beaux Arts of Aix-en-Provence, France, in 1995. She organized her first exhibition in 2000, the year she was awarded the second prize of Pensar con las manos organized by the Cervantes Institute of Casablanca. Since then, she has organized several exhibitions in Morocco, France, Spain, Italy, and the United States.

After the Arab Spring, the growth of fundamentalism and the expansion of radicalism, Kenza Benjelloun has devoted her art to advocating human rights in general and particularly to freedom of expression and women’s rights which seemed to be threatened with the rise to power of conservative movements and parties. She therefore criticizes polygamy, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, teenage marriage, and any forms of social injustice to which women are still subjected.
In her last exhibition, *Le Cadi de la Moudouana*, Kenza Benjelloun tackled these social issues in a satirical way. The title of this exhibition was highly symbolic. She has used the Arabic word “Cadi” as a pun. The word “Caddy” in French means a trolley of a supermarket and in Arabic the word “cadi” means a judge. Because the issue motivating the work is teenage marriage, she criticizes the new family code (Al Mudawana) that gives the judge the right to accept such a marriage. He is considered the only authority empowered to permit or deny this marriage. When he consents to such a marriage, the “cadi,” judge, according to her, becomes a “caddy,” a trolley that delivers fresh meat as it is seen in her artistic work.

*Le Cadi de la Moudouana* is a multidimensional and innovative event that includes digital creations, installations, performances, and videos. This exhibition reveals an artist who, faithful to her artistic conviction, deliberately opts for an art of protest. Her social criticism of the status of women in Moroccan society focuses on the female body. She represents how this female body is seen by men and also by laws, traditions, and social representations. She satirizes and ridicules the attitudes and social representations of this patriarchal society.
Challenges

The status of women has evolved since the beginning of the 20th century. Social, legal, economic, and cultural changes have occurred, allowing women to play active roles in society. The 2011 Constitution explicitly calls for gender equality: “The man and the woman enjoy, in equality, the rights and freedoms of civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental character, enounced in this Title and in the other provisions of the Constitution. … The State works for the realization of parity between men and women” (Morocco’s Constitution of 2011, 2011, p. 8). The implementation of this gender equality is, however, very slow, especially in the artistic world.

Female artists struggle to become artists, to work as artists, to exhibit their work, and to assert themselves in the art scene. They face many challenges that hinder their creativity or even compel some to leave art. With an experience of more than 50 years, Shems Adha Ataa Allah, the first Moroccan woman to graduate from a Moroccan School of des Beaux Arts in Tetouan in 1960, believes that she did not get the recognition she deserves. She blames the media, art galleries, and art critics who devote more attention and space to male than to female artists. She was obliged to stop her artistic career for some time because of family responsibilities. In this respect, she stated,

I have decided to go back to painting which I had left because of my family … [A]fter the death of my husband and the social stability of my three sons, I began to spend more time in my studio at home and take care of my garden … I don’t care about fame as much as I care about satisfying a psychological desire to reconcile myself with my talent and my work that I learned more than 50 years ago in the School of “des Beaux Arts” in Tetouan. (Ezzakaki, 2016, p. 3)

Amina Ben Bouchta, another Moroccan female artist, believes that parity has not yet been achieved in the Moroccan art scene. When interviewed about the obstacles she faces, she answered,

… If you analyze how much people are ready to invest, you will find that they are ready to invest a great deal of money on male artists. Many wonderful talented women are completely forgotten from the art scene because the world market is really hard. … They face difficult choices of family life. To be an artist means a full time job so it is difficult to handle a family at the same time. I was personally unable to attend a lot of residencies and to get awards because I have a family that I have to take care of. … Moroccan female artists need to go out of Morocco in order to study, to see museums, and to attend residencies, which is not easy for the

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11 In the academic year 2016-2017, I conducted a seminar on “Art Galleries in Morocco” and I asked my B.A. students to interview some female artists about challenges. The subsequent quotes are part of this assignment.
young artists who very often do not have the means for that. (Amina Ben Bouchta interviewed by Mouna Bazzi on May 9, 2017)

Reem Battal, another Moroccan artist, shares her colleagues’ point of view and refers to other issues such as sexual harassment and daily sexism:

I do not think Moroccan female artists get equal credit as men in the art world but it is not something specific to the art world. It is a general thing that women suffer from and if you happen to be an artist and a woman, of course you are not heard the same way. Women have many barriers to overcome such as ordinary sexism and harassment. Moreover, there are three main obstacles that Moroccan female artists face in the field: social pressure, sexual harassment and daily sexism. (Reem Battal interviewed by Mouna Bazzi on May 18, 2017)

Although Amina Charrat shares the same ideas with our two aforementioned artists, she believes that she was lucky. Her father was a lawyer and was fond of painting. He encouraged her despite his worries about her future on the grounds that one cannot make a living from art. She believes,

Like in other fields, we have some challenges. We do not have a law that really protects us. Also in terms of prices, the price of a man’s work is higher than that of a woman. Same thing is true for exhibitions. Men dominate exhibitions more than women. I have also noticed that female artists are not free to express their thoughts and ideas because we are conservative and we exist in men’s society. …Discrimination exists but it is not shown. It is always hidden. People think that art world is men’s world that is why they invest their money in male artists more than in females. (Amina Charrat interviewed by Mouna Bazzi on May 12, 2017)

On the other hand, Kenza Benjelloun points out that artists, whether women or men, face the same challenges. When I asked her about the kinds of difficulties Moroccan female artists face and about their relationships with art galleries, she answered:

Personally, I have not had any problem in this regard. What bothers me sometimes is to display women just for the sake to encourage female creation as if creation were a matter of women or men. … I have never had any problems with galleries. If there is any problem, it is not because I’m a woman but because of my opinions in my current exhibitions (installations, video, performance...) that are a little too frontal. "Le Cadi de la Moudouana" is an eloquent example. No Gallery has agreed to display it with the exception of the Museum of Mohamed VI at the exhibition Moroccan Female Artists of Modernity curated by Reem Laabi.
Galleries try to sell. They do not care about sex or gender. (Kenza Benjelloun interviewed by Samir El Azhar on November 5, 2017)

The Museum Mohamed VI of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMVI) hosted, from November 23, 2016 to March 8, 2017, the exhibition *Moroccan Female Artists of Modernity, 2016-1960*. To pay tribute to Moroccan female artists, the MMVI displayed more than 100 works of 26 women artists. This event, unprecedented in the MMVI, raised issues of integration and the contribution of Moroccan women artists in the history of art by offering a space for reflection on this plastic creation. To quote Reem Laabi, curator of this exhibition,

> It is an exhibition that explores a specific attitude in the history of art, in this case, a distinct modernity of Moroccan women artists. In fact, they are modern because they have a view of the plural Morocco and the world. It is a voluntary choice and finally a way to look, to feel and to act …. (Laabi, 2016, p. 8)

I have found it necessary to quote at some length these artists to objectively report their struggle to overcome prejudices, correct misconceptions, and transgress taboos. Thanks to their sacrifice and perseverance, they have succeeded in asserting themselves in the art scene and have thus contributed in the richness and diversity of visual arts in Morocco. Soumaya Naamane (2016), the Moroccan sociologist and writer, believes that Moroccan female artists,

> have released the female imagination and freed feminine body, portrayed with a chaste sensuality. Wise transgressors, they have overcome taboos, celebrating love, romance, sensuality, eroticism, sometimes with poetry, tenderness, sweetness and passion, sometimes with anger and severity. All the women's work is a giant fresco, which captures the history and evolution of our culture. (p. 27)

This article provides a glimpse of the contribution of female artists in Moroccan visual arts over the last 60 years. Talented, motivated, and dedicated, they have devoted their time and energy to representing, from their perspective, Moroccan social and cultural realities through their paintings. To avoid any exclusive interpretation, it is important to note that Moroccan artistic production is characterized by its diversity in techniques, trends, and contents. The Moroccan art scene includes, regardless of their gender, artists of different political convictions, plastic genres, and artistic movements, which has made Moroccan artistic experience rich and varied. Art is a human experience that transcends the limiting considerations of gender and frontiers.
References


