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4

Amina Boufennara

Recalling

September 24th – November 4th, 2021

Amina Boufennara was born on a mountain-top called “The Mountain of the Beast” in Algeria. I form a vivid visual in my mind’s eye, naturally recalling narrative connections to the infamous mythological origin stories of ancient deities.

Amina Boufennara and I connected on a humid August day in High Park. She tells me that her ancestor led her to the bus stop, guiding her to our meeting place.

Amina sprawled out her colourful and hypnotizing canvases out on the lush green grass. When I gazed, the repetitive eye motifs gazed back at me. They looked familiar, like the nazar¹ I had so often adorned myself with to protect against a malevolent and intrusive gaze. Boufennara’s use of Amazigh motifs enchanted me, not because they were familiar, but wholly unfamiliar and personal.

¹ The nazar is an eye-shaped amulet that protects against the evil eye.

² Amazigh are an ethnic group indigenous to North Africa.

Observable from the street, the spectator is invited to gaze at her soul, which is materially conjured as a work of art in Xpace' window space where Boufennara's work is exhibited. The sun naturally livens Boufennara's work throughout the day due to direct exposure, highlighting certain hue's while subsequently fading them out as time passes.

Boufennara also incorporates reflective eyes through the use of paillettes, which is traditionally meant to reflect energy through mirror-work - even reflecting sun rays back to the spectator. "When I look at all these eyes, I don't feel they are negatively gazing", Boufennara states. She also paints and dyes some of her fabric with henna, and uses fabrics found from around the world - naturally fusing disparate cultural influences as a diasporic citizen of the world. Understanding and honouring the cultural traditions that permeate her practice, Boufennara attempts to visually re-story and disrupt her relationship to these cultural influences.

Boufennara's work is multidimensional, in the sense that it keeps unfolding - recalling stories, memories, dimensions through its depth and range. Using a combination of different materials and mediums in her mixed media works, such as dying fabrics with the spices sumac and turmeric, sewing them together with thread, and painting over sewn patches with henna, ink or acrylic, Boufennara's process unfolds to reveal deeper layers and allows the spectator to glean her multidimensional perspective. But just as we are able to perceive a continuation, the patterns change course, primary colours are combined to create new hues, and materials are in a state of flux. Fragments of canvas are torn apart, and woven together again - conveying the artworks' transient and evolving nature. This body of work feels otherworldly, but human in its nuance and materiality.

“I’m representing the in between” says Boufennara, “I’m finding the space in myself”. Due to her unclear cultural origins, she feels hesitant to fully claim her Amazigh ancestry because of her multi-ethnic background - even feeling she may have other Indigenous origins due to the colonial history in Algeria. It is clear that she does not want to feel boxed in by a single identifier, but would prefer to emphasize the complexity of her identity. Boufennara alludes to her ancestral memory throughout her art, while simultaneously illustrating the tensions that can arise in mending and defining ancestral connections within self. In this sense, Boufennara’s art is not necessarily intended for ancestral reclamation because she already claims it. Instead, her art recalls ancestral memories in order to co-cr⁵eat^e as well self-actualize. Just as she incorporates ancient Amazigh symbols of life like The Yaz (or “The Free Man”) in her art, Boufennara, too, is reclaiming her sovereignty, and determining her connection to her own cultural roots. Amina’s art is therefore referential in the way she incorporates the visual motifs of Amazigh culture, ultimately channeled through embodied knowledge. Body memory can be activated when we return to our ancestral lands. When recalling her experience returning to Algeria, Boufennara expressed: “I felt I could breathe again”. This embodied relationship with her motherland has a strong connection to the way she practices art because as she was sensing her way through these familiar environments, she came across patterns, colours, motifs that instantly moved something in her. Not consciously, but a visceral reaction to sensory experiences she knows deep in her bones - not informational, but an embodied knowing.

Boufennara talks about the process of creating as a force moving through her, something she does not necessarily have control over. Rather than pre-emptively choosing to include certain colours, shapes or motifs that connect to her cultural lineage, Boufennara instead creates work in an almost meditative state. Unconscious

³ Boufennara, Amina. Interview by Özge Dilan Arslan. August 18, 2021.

⁴ In the Amazigh language, “Amazigh” means “free man”. The Yaz is a symbol representing freedom in Amazigh, and also represents the last letter ‘Z’ of the Tifinagh Alphabet.

in her channeling, but conscious of its source. For this reason, Boufennara finds healing through her practice. “We are displaced”, she says, when articulating the experience of the many Indigenous communities in Algeria, but more broadly North Africa. Indigenous people globally are displaced and forgotten. Just as our connection to cultural aesthetics can be a body memory, so is our relationship to imperial violence and cultural genocide. As settlers to Turtle Island, we both expressed the necessity of respecting how we carry legacies of colonization as displaced persons also living on stolen land.

The recent string of tragedies sweeping South West Asia and North Africa, and the continuing displacement of our communities reminds us why the practice of recalling is necessary for psychic survival. While our ancestral lands continue to be exploited, and our people continue to be displaced and erased, it is our responsibility to remember, to strengthen connections and to embody our ancestral knowledge in order to self-actualize and confidently and clearly embody our wholeness.

“When I see butterflies, I know my ancestors are with me”, Boufennara exclaimed while gazing around the park. In this sense, she creates a home within herself, and re-imagines her relationship to her environment – including the fauna. Through divine guidance and cosmic protection, she forges future pathways while honouring the guidance of her ancestors, thus emerging Whole from her chrysalis.

As I walk back home, a monarch butterfly dances around me.

-Özge Dilan Arslan

⁵ 2020 Beirut, Lebanon Explosion, 2021 Israeli occupation of Palestine, 2021 Taliban gain control of Afghanistan, etc. All of these national crises will result in further displacement and forced migration.