MUSEU
D'ART CONTEMPORANI
DE BARCELONA

#02 Latifa Echakhch

La ronda

7 July 2010 – 6 February 2011

Capella MACBA



Latifa Echakhch, *La ronda*, 2010. Photo: courtesy of the artist © Latifa Echakhch

> 'I like to work with what is often called "cultural heritage", but the materials that I use are banal and clichéd, like sugar blocks, doors, couscous, rugs, official documents.'
> Latifa Echakhch

Six years ago, Latifa Echakhch (El Khnansa, Morocco, 1974) exhibited her *French Touch (self-portrait)*: a life-size colour photograph of an arm – her arm – held up vertically; the nails of the Moroccan artist's partly closed hand naturally displayed a pale pink French manicure with white tips. The title of the work is a witty pun that makes reference to her ambiguous national 'identity', her adscription to France, a country that she has not only adopted as an immigrant but also incorporated as part of her own biological being, as is undeniably evidenced by her nails, rendered an immanent national ID card.

Fundamental to this artist's contentious strategies are these sorts of slippages of meanings, shifts from the conventions of semantics to those of identity and back again, with all their attendant contradiction, paradox, mockery and even potential scandal. Similarly crucial are the physical displacements of certain marks of identity into contexts or supports where they acquire one or more new meanings or reveal unexpected characteristics that clash with their original meaning (and where they suggest the Surrealist 'found object' in all its riveting subversion). On the basis of Conceptual art, Echakhch makes use of any language and technique available: installation, video, sculptural objects, simple materials from everyday life and happenings.

Alien of Extraordinary Ability (2005), for instance, is a solemn polished gold plaque that reproduces the US visa granted to 'Aliens of Extraordinary Ability'. Or the *Certificat de Vie* (2002), a document that a Moroccan citizen can obtain at his or her Embassy in Paris that verifies that the citizen in question is alive and, hence, serves to demonstrate a person's existence. The strange nature of such official documents is evidenced when they are artistically removed from their contexts; they emit a sense of bureaucratic absurdity or of injustice, and become an invitation to critical reflection.

The artist often makes use of the spaces in which she is invited to exhibit, finding clues to guide the production of a work specifically related to the site. For instance, her video *Untitled* (2005) depicts a sizeable political protest as it progresses along a Parisian boulevard, and the speedy and extremely efficient clean-up job performed by street cleaners who, in the wake of the crowd, leave the avenue spotless. The duration of the march and the clearing of the papers, wrappers, pamphlets and other items that it has left is exactly 23 minutes. The restoration of the protest scene to the daily – and secular – routine is both comic and delirious. The video is, of course, a declaration of scepticism. 'In Paris, there are five public protests a week,' explains the artist, 'but nothing changes. It's as if nothing at all had happened. This is the feeble legacy of the French Revolution and 1968.'

Invited to exhibit in Bangkok in 2003, Echakhch hung on the wall of the gallery space a dozen open airmail envelopes to catch the sawdust produced by drilling holes with a 9 mm diameter – the calibre of standard pistol bullets – into the wall. The return address on these envelopes was her address in Bangkok, and they were addressed to the artist's European residence. Thus, Echakhch issued a subtle, provocative and aesthetically striking call to ponder the bloody events surrounding the struggle against drug trafficking, which, in the brief weeks she was in the capital of Thailand, had caused 1,500 violent deaths.

Latifa Echakhch's invitation to critical reflection – and to heeding ambiguity in the strict linguist sense of the word of which we spoke at the beginning of this text – includes her status as an international artist in this globalised world. Thus, in *Hospitalité* (2006) she clumsily engraved on the upper section of the gallery's wall the words *Espace à remplir par l'étranger* (Space to be filled in by the foreigner), a phrase that appears on the forms that immigrants must fill in to obtain residency permits. 'Chiselled' on the gallery, the phrase was, among other things, an invitation to participate. And, of course, at the end of the exhibition the wall had to be restored and the indentation created by the text 'filled in' so that it would look as it had before: this task was most likely performed by immigrant workers.

For her exhibition at the MACBA Latifa Echakhch presents three installations created specifically for this space. Two of them refer to human flows from North Africa, movements of people who, fleeing poverty or in war expeditions, have traditionally headed towards Europe, some of them settling in Spain. The central piece, *Fantasia* (2010), consists of fourteen flagpoles distributed at different angles throughout the gallery space. The title makes reference to the 'Moroccan fantasy', a traditional Moroccan festive and sports display in which a group of men ride horses and shoot their weapons simultaneously such that all the shots make a single sound. It also alludes to the typical image of the plazas of Strasbourg, the seat of international organisations in front of which a battery of colourful flags are usually on display. Bared of their flags and strategically distributed to suggest different perspectives and volumetric rhythms, the flagpoles in this *Fantasia* are an invitation to contemplate the reversible and relative nature of national symbols and of the identities they represent, thus appealing to the idea of the multicultural.

In the second piece, *Eivissa* (2010), the Spanish playing cards used both in Spain and Morocco are seen from under pieces of the concrete platforms built in Eivissa during the Spanish Civil War to weigh down the tents of the Moroccans soldiers General Franco enlisted in his rebel army. The proximity of the elements, spaces and transaction rituals of two countries and cultures formulates a series of dialectics between play and dogma, the shared and the imposed, as well as between that which is understood to be fluid and transitory and that which declares itself definitive, though equally subject to decline.

In order to modulate the natural light in the Capella, in the work *Gaya (E102) 5, Vitrail* (2010) the artist has painted the apse windows with bright yellow food colouring of the sort used in Middle Eastern cooking as a cheap substitute for saffron (hence the work's title). This piece emphasises both the intellectual and sensual nature of Echakhch's installations.

Latifa Echakhch lives and works in Paris and in Martigny (Switzerland). Numerous solo and group exhibitions of her work have been held in venues such as Le Magasin (Grenoble), Tate Modern (London), CAC (Vilna), the ArtFocus Biennial (Jerusalem), Manifesta 7 (Bolzano, Italy), Kunsthaus (Zurich) and the Swiss Institute (New York). This is her first exhibition in Spain.

Activities

Wednesday 7 July, at 7.30 pm
Special guided tour with commentary by Latifa Echakhch and Soledad Gutiérrez, Temporary Exhibitions Curator
(Exclusive to the Friends of MACBA)
Capella MACBA. Free admission. Limited places

Wednesday 14 July, at 7 pm
Why and how do I make what I make? The artists speak
Latifa Echakhch in conversation with Soledad Gutiérrez
MACBA Auditorium. Free admission. Limited seating

Further information www.macba.cat

Publication

#02 Latifa Echakhch. La ronda, electronic publication of the Capella MACBA Series, available in <http://www.macba.cat/serie-capella>

Exhibition curated by Bartomeu Marí
Organised and produced by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA)

Opening times
Weekdays, 11 am to 8 pm
(from 27 September, 11 am to 7.30 pm)
Saturdays, 10 am to 8 pm
Sundays and holidays, 10 am to 3 pm
Closed Tuesdays (except holidays)
Open Mondays

Capella MACBA
Carrer dels Àngels, 7
08001 Barcelona
www.macba.cat

