

Soufiane Ababri
YES! Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï ... AM
23/01 – 27/02 2021

Mendes Wood DM, Brussels, is proud to present *YES! Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï ... AM*, an exhibition of drawings on paper by the Moroccan artist Soufiane Ababri.

For this solo show, Ababri has taken as a point of departure a collection of critical essays by the 20th-century French thinker Didier Eribon titled *Heresies: Essays on the theory of sexuality*, in which Eribon posits that the gay community constructs an identity for itself through the literature produced by a “family” of gay writers and thinkers over the centuries. “I wanted to reflect how I (WE) can rewrite my (OUR) own identity and own history using this method, and create blood ties between my homosexuality and the past, and at the same time apply an immigrant gaze, an African gaze and a post-colonial gaze,” Ababri says. In this sense, the repetition of the “Aï” in the exhibition title places emphasis on the self, as if this act of exaggeration, repetition, resistance and pain (“Aï Aï”) were essential for marginalized communities to find grounding, stability and identity.

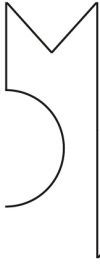
The artist’s desire to construct a historical family sees him conjuring up a pantheon of gay writers and artists whose intellect has changed the course of human history and development, despite their outsider status. Figures as disparate as Michel Foucault, Glenn Ligon, Allen Ginsberg, Jean Genet, André Gide populate Ababri’s works in the artist’s signature naïf style, their homosexuality the thread that connects them.

The kind of militancy proposed here by Ababri is, in a sense, not political activism but art-historical, addressing the imbalances in the way history and art history have been written. The presence of these influential figures form only part of the artist’s resistance, for Ababri’s method of working is also deliberately in opposition to established norms. All the drawings on display are part of a larger body of work, titled “bedwork”, that the artist began six years ago. “I wanted to get away from the idea of working in an atelier, with all its connotations of masculine rigor, and work in a stereotypically female and domestic way, on my bed,” the artist explains. His use of crayons, colored pencil and pastels instead of oil is also a deliberate distancing from the heavily gendered “Beaux Arts” drawing tradition.

“This way of working is also a way of putting myself in the position of the ‘model’ that the mostly heterosexual and white orientalist painters made use of. Those models, often women, Arabs or black slaves, were put in a situation of vulnerability and passivity. To me, my work criticizes and analyzes this process without making use of the preferred artistic tools of the dominant establishment. In this sense, drawing with colored crayons while lying in my bed is an act of resistance,” Ababri says.

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Ababri will also transform the Brussels gallery into a deep-red-tinted, immersive environment, theatrical in its nature, to contextualize his work. The space will resemble the interior of an old cinema or theatre, historically seen as a clandestine space for socializing within the gay community, with obvious connotations of red as blood ties but also red as spectacle, as the red carpet that so many of these figures from history have walked on, even at a time when their kind was forced to spend most of their lives in the shadows.

Soufiane Ababri (Rabat, 1985) lives and works between Paris and Tangier.

His most recent solo exhibitions include *YES! AĪ AĪ AĪ AĪ AĪ AĪ AĪ ... AM!*, Mendes Wood DM, Brussels (2021); *A Circus Act Behind Bars of Lilac And Blood*, Kulte Gallery, Rabat (2020); *Something New Under The Little Prince's Body*, Dittrich & Schlechtriem, Berlin (2020); *Tropical Concrete Gym Park*, Glassbox, Paris (2019); *Call Me By Their Names*, Ravnikar Gallery Space, Ljubljana (2019); *Memories of a Solitary Cruise*, The Pill, Istanbul (2019); *Here Is a Strange and Bitter Crop*, Space, London (2018).

Additionally, his work has been included in institutional group exhibitions such as *Attention*, Glasgow International Festival for Contemporary Art, Glasgow (upcoming - 2021); *Welcome Home Vol. II*, MACAAL, Marrakech (2020); *Lignes des Vies - Une Exposition de Légendes*, MAC/ VAL, Vitry (2019); *Humez L'odeur Des Fleurs Pendant Qu'il En Est Encore Temps*, Marathon des Mots, Toulouse (2018).

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