

## INTERVIEW

« *Barbara Sirieix interviews Ismail Bahri* »

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*Ismail Bahri was invited to participate in the project Working for Change, proposed by Abdellah Karroum for the Moroccan Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. This interview was conducted with Barbara Sirieix as part of the project.*

**Barbara Sirieix :** *In your practice, you use ordinary and familiar objects – milk, ink, paper, containers (cups, bowls), pins, threads. They change and become minimal achromatic or transparent forms, reflective surfaces, ways to mark shadows and trace lines. What determines the choice of these materials, and how do you make them work together?*

**Ismail Bahri :** I choose materials for their ability to reveal things and for the processes they can bring about, not for the materials themselves. Among the elements you mentioned, some are, on the one hand, receptacles, welcoming surfaces. A cup, skin pores, glass plates, and walls, or on a larger scale, a snowy landscape, become surfaces of manifestation. Various elements like ink, water, thread, milk, and others are conductors of vibrations, presence, or images. For example, threads allow me to capture the course of a water droplet (*Coulée douce / Soft flow*) or reveal the movements of my hands, which remain off-screen (*Dénouement / Unraveling*). Ink reveals. It can uncover a landscape or accentuate the contours of skin by seeping into the folds, as depicted in *Sang d'encre (Ink blood)*. I never fully control these materials but aim to initiate their transformation. Once deposited in the pores, ink diffuses along the folds of the skin, and the drawing unfolds before my eyes. When I tie knots in *Unraveling*, it's the thread stretched toward the camera that reveals and amplifies the movement of my fingers, acting as an intermediary. These materials serve as intermediaries in the same way as chance did for Marcel Duchamp, acting as agents of serendipity. The materials I use generally amplify a simple gesture.

**B. S. :** *What do you mean by "simple gesture"?*

**I. B. :** Tying a thread, holding a cup full of liquid, inserting a pin, or dripping ink... I don't develop any specific technique but rather aim to explore gestures - simple gestures that I try to refine. When I say precision, I mean a clearly defined gesture, often repeated, varied, and refined over several weeks, sometimes months, or even years. I'm reminded of a quote from Jean-François Lyotard about Duchamp, "precise but inaccurate" (1), which has intrigued me for a long time. How does one develop a precise yet inaccurate gesture? It requires imagining an abbreviated, sharpened gesture that, once executed, circumvents questions of technique and measurement. A gesture that carries incalculability and opacity. Sometimes, what's interesting is to see how a gesture or a specific activity can influence bodily posture and the body's place in the social landscape. Holding a cup of ink while walking, eyes fixed on the container, is a gesture of great simplicity (*Orientations*). Yet, it took me several days to learn how to master walking solely by relying on the images reflected in the cup, resisting the urge to lift my eyes, to observe the alleyway or passersby. Naturally, this somewhat unusual activity affects your relationship to others, with pedestrians, for instance. All of this is subtle, almost imperceptible, but there's a peculiar physicality at play here - a withdrawal that paradoxically

attracts attention.

**B. S. :** *You've undertaken several itinerant experiments in the city of Tunis; the first that comes to mind is Ligne fantôme (Phantom Line) in 2003, where you traced a line using the shadows of pins placed on city walls. In 2010, with Orientations, you walked around with a cup filled with ink, capturing the reflections of the city in opaque liquid. You've discussed encountering the "other" within a context with "geopoetic" parameters during Ligne fantôme. What significance do these interventions hold in relation to the urban context?*

**I. B. :** Perhaps it's necessary to explain the nature of the Ligne fantôme. The intervention involved tracing a line of shadows on city walls. This line was embroidered, sewn in a manner of speaking, by inserting pins into the wall based on the shadows they cast. Each pin extended the shadow of the preceding one, forming a delicate line spanning over ten meters. The drawing was done according to the sunlight. This activity allowed me to navigate narrow streets on a centimeter scale, pressed against the wall, with no horizon other than the next pin. The line was nearly imperceptible due to its delicacy, yet paradoxically, it could be monumental in length. This paradox intrigued me deeply at the time, as it sought to render both the line and my physical presence publicly imperceptible. It was as if I traversed the city like a shadow, evading the gaze of passersby, melding into the folds of walls and light. However, despite its harmless nature, this method of navigating the city often elicited reactions from people passing by, typically surprise and avoidance. Residents whose walls I worked on sometimes approached me, questioning my presence; once, a girl even destroyed part of the line with a hose while cleaning the alley. These interactions were always brief and timid.

In *Orientations*, the objective was to traverse and film the city from the perspective of a nearsighted person, navigating the streets while fixated on a surface of ink. Here, the ink acted as a dark compass, guiding my journey. I aimed to glimpse the city through this black hole, akin to peering through a keyhole onto the landscape. The moments when the camera captured fragments of the city in the cup were mesmerizing, as they unfolded a horizon of the city. Suddenly, I saw something new within the hometown that I knew very well – now fragmented, inverted, feverish, and sometimes on the brink of dissolution. It's about appearance, as the ink became a kind of photosensitive fluid. What interested me a lot was transforming the cup into a vessel capable of containing fragments of landscapes, enabling me to capture images of the city and carry them with me. My relationship with the city and the landscape was made by these captured images.

**B. S. :** *When you describe Orientations, you mention walking like a nearsighted person, yet the reaction of one passerby suggests a deeper decoding of reality: "Yes... yes... the ink shows you the outline, you lower the cup, it gets bigger and reveals the opposite of what you usually see." If this involves decoding, what insights would Orientations reveal about the streets of Tunis?*

**I. B. :** I think that the two "visions" aren't necessarily contradictory. Nearsightedness already represents a way of decoding the world – an altered version, a way of seeing without a horizon, much like navigating through visual cues. The passerby in the film remarked on this when the cup revealed a fragment of a tree. This particularly curious man really wanted to understand what interested me so much about this cup. And he was quite amazed to see his

street in a different way. This moment is crucial because the image captured by the cup became a catalyst for exchange, and it's not often that strangers discuss images on the street. It was the cup and the image it contained that facilitated the connection. My relationship with this individual was established through this visual intermediary.

**B. S. :** *I find Nicole Brenez's discussion of the political implications of your work intriguing: "...What [Ismail Bahri] wants to convey (...) is that 'the sinking of writings can not only evoke an extinction of voices, an extinction of words, but also a resistance to loss' (2). In other words, rather than focusing on the self-contained interiority of the individualistic subject, it's through sensitive intimacy that one can invent unlimited connections to phenomena. These connections traverse all kinds of psychic and material pathways, characterized by porosity, capillarity, and fluidity, extending beyond identifiable entities and logical processes." How do you approach these issues in your work?*

**I. B. :** What's certain is that, in my work, traces of politics are difficult to detect.. I don't actively seek to maintain a direct and clearly identifiable relationship with politics. Occasionally, traces of politics resurface in reverse; they emerge in fragments, often without my conscious intention. Moreover, it's often others who draw these connections, perhaps due to their need to categorize artists and their works based on current events, origin, or other factors, without always taking the time to appreciate the work for what it is. We tend to seek social reference points to help us make sense of things. Strangely, since the Tunisian revolution, more and more people have seen political connections in my work, even though they are, frankly, faint.... That being said, what Nicole Brenez said resonates with me. If there is any relationship to politics in my work, it's a miniscule one, woven through movements and relationships that are often microphenomenal and appear insignificant at first glance. The challenge lies in creating connections with multiple resonances, without succumbing to discourse or the temptation to communicate. I am wary of such approaches. That's why I often evoke whispers or rumors – in other words, these horizontal and unpredictable modes of dissemination – because what moved me so much in the so-called Tunisian revolution was precisely this type of dissemination. The popular uprising spread through proximity, from one person to another, without hierarchy or discourse. What worries me now is seeing discursive postures and celebrated icons of martyrs emerge, which risks stifling the movement that has begun. It's inevitable and perhaps necessary, but I believe it's something we must be wary of.

**B. S. :** *How do you see Tunisia*

**I. B. :** My perspective on Tunisia is one of intimate distance. In other words, despite being physically far away, I am deeply concerned about what's happening. It's evident that the road ahead for Tunisia is far more challenging and delicate than the December-January uprising. The revolution in the streets was striking because it was self-invented, revealing itself as it progressed. The revolution in the streets was swift because it was invented and discovered as it developed. Now, everything still needs to be invented, and we're already seeing recognizable political rhetoric coming in from all sides. People are starting to worry about a struggling economy and a war that's spreading to the borders. No one really knows what will happen next; in this regard, we are all shortsighted. However, I can't see how another dictatorship could emerge anytime soon.

**B. S. :** *What do you think of the « Jasmin Revolution » and its mythification in the media ?*

**I. B. :** I don't have anything new to add that hasn't already been said. The media were in a frenzy during the revolution, but as usual, they seem to have lost interest in the ongoing situation. The revolution is still unfolding, and it's tomorrow that it's truly at risk. On a broader scale, what concerns me is the possibility that this spontaneous movement could be commodified into a "brand". Tunisian imagery and films have often been reduced to perpetuating post-orientalist clichés. Journalists, artists, and curators, in particular, need to ensure that this popular movement doesn't become a brand – a mere vehicle for recognition and marketing. I've noticed that when people start to take an interest in Tunisian and Arab artists, it's rarely for the right reasons. Simply referencing the revolution isn't enough for artistic validation. Yet, I have the impression that the treatment of the revolution sometimes becomes formulaic. I believe that the best service we can offer to Arab creation, in general, is to hold it to high standards.

**B. S. :** *Have you returned to Tunisia since December 2010 ?*

**I. B. :** Yes, a few times. My last stay was in January 2011, three or four days after Ben Ali left. I arrived in a country that was totally transformed. That's when we saw the emergence of public speakers on Avenue Bourguiba. Anyone could stop and give a speech. We saw sudden, improvised crowds and demonstrations. It's crazy when you consider how much speech was restrained in recent decades. Voices were silenced and thoughts were repressed. Seeing all of these anonymous speakers, I remember thinking of Michel François *Speaker's Corner* (2007), where we see anonymous speakers in Hyde Park giving speeches on big blocks of ice put there by the artist, until the blocks disappear completely. We imagine the speaker descending back to the same level as the listeners, at the pace that the ice melts. The general euphoria as well as the inflation of words and images was incredible. I was wondering what to do, what more to say, what image to take of this general excitement? Now, we're witnessing the come down. A time of reflection and of delicate dialogue.

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Born in Tunis in 1978, **Ismail Bahri** has lived and worked in Paris since 2000. His work takes many forms, from drawing to video, photography, and installation. Each of his works explores its own processes and materials, but they all share the same minimalist, strong graphic quality. His research focuses on epiphenomena where minute mutations are at play.

**Barbara Sirieix** is an independent curator based in Paris. She is the co-founder of Red Shoes, an organization dedicated to art films and videos.

► (1) Jean-François Lyotard, *Les TRANSformateurs DUchamp*, Edition Galilée, 1977, p. 74.

► (2) Nicole Brenez, "Prima delle Rivoluzioni, Avant-gardes arabes des années 2000", *Art Press 2, Cinémas Contemporains*, Trimestriel n°21, May-June-July 2011.