

# A FRICHE WITH FLAIR: 'Ici, Ailleurs' at Marseille's La Friche Belle de Mai

*La Friche Belle de Mai is one of Marseille's most exciting new contemporary arts complexes, and currently has a jam-packed schedule as part of Marseille-Provence 2013 EU Capital of Culture. This includes Ici, Ailleurs (Here, Elsewhere), a major contemporary art exhibition currently exploring modern artistic and Mediterranean identity.*

'Friche means a wasteland' my Marseillais friend tells me, 'maybe this area was nothing, before Marseille developed over it.'

*La Friche Belle de Mai* stands away from the touristic charms of Marseille's famous *Vieux Port*— it is found a bus ride away, in the more cosmopolitan North side of the city, which gives it a down-to-earth feel. It is an unusually large and varied arts complex, hosting exhibition spaces, a Tour-Panorama balcony, a new bookshop, theatres, a restaurant, a skatepark, a crèche, studios for frequent artistic residencies and space left empty for creativity, with plenty more to come.

Like many contemporary art venues, this ex-industrial space was deliberately turned into a living, breathing cultural and artistic space from the 1990s.<sup>[1]</sup> The main building used to be a major French tobacco factory until the 1960s, and reminded me of the old Victorian warehouses peppered along the Thames. The adjacent wall of graffiti, blue modernist buildings and contemporary theatre next to it quickly dispelled this impression, and pointed to the creativity within.



The main ex-tabacco factory building of La Friche Belle de Mai

*Ici, Ailleurs* is its vast, four-floor exhibition, comprising twenty-nine commissioned project works by thirty-nine contemporary Mediterranean artists. It explores the abstract concepts of contemporary identity, with four rooms with different themes.

Challenging works by some big names in contemporary art are included. Mona Hartoum's installation *Cellules*, features glassy red blobs bulging uncomfortably inside iron cages, while Annette Messenger's installation *La Mer échevelée*- appears as a sea of hair deposited on the ground, undulating in the wind gently blown upwards from beneath it, like the sinister rug of an absent giant.

The exhibition also keeps itself accessible to everyday visitors. Enlightening works such as Joana Hadjithomas' and Khalil Joreige's multimedia installation *A Carpet: The Lebanese Rocket Society: Elements for a Monument 2012* reference abstract and very human ideas, while Etel Adnan's works provide an easy route into the exhibition through her simple, pretty, colourful drawings, such as *Mots*. Saying that, I couldn't help feeling a layer of understanding her work was unobtainable- her works comprise Arabic script, and though all exhibition labels are helpfully provided in French and English, her script was unfortunately not translated. [2]

The recognisable and predictable presence of Marseille in the

photographs of Youssef Nabil, such as his colourful, traditionally hand-coloured self-portrait *Ile D' If*, and in Mournir Fatmi's slightly bizarre, ethereal video *Voyages de Claude Lévi-Strauss* will have wide-ranging appeal to tourists and locals alike.

It's also exciting to see that La Friche have pioneered a youth engagement scheme called *Jeunes Médiateurs*, where thirty-five local youngsters have given youthful interpretations of the *Ici, Ailleurs* exhibition, producing audio commentaries and an engaging little pamphlet full of their thoughts on key works. With La Friche's international links and key part to play this year, it will be interesting to see if other places take on and develop this idea too.

The multifaceted appeal of *Ici, Ailleurs* shows that La Friche looks to inspire both the varied local community and the tourists who will be flocking to Marseille this year as part of the Capital of Culture celebrations. Wasteland this certainly is not.



View from the 'Tour Panorama', the balcony and sculpture exhibition space, La Friche Belle de Mai. The sculpture is Sigalit Landau's 'Shelter (Abri)', 2011-2012, bronze, artist's collection.

*'Ici, Ailleurs' runs until the 31st March.*

*La Friche has a vast schedule of events for 2013, including further exhibitions, theatre, cabaret and musical performances, studio days and performance art. For further information, see here:*

<http://www.lafriche.org/>

*For more on the Marseille-Provence 2013 EU Capital of Culture, see here:*

<http://www.mp2013.fr/?lang=en>

[1] La Friche Belle de Mai gives itself the credo 'l'exigence artistique et le croisement des pratiques et des publics' ('artistic demand and the crossing of practise and audiences').

[2] Hadjithomas' and Joreige's work combines abstract and very human ideas. It references a charming story of a carpet presented by Armenian orphans in 1926 to the then US President Coolidge in gratitude for their help after the Armenian genocide, which then graced the floor of the White House for twenty years. The main part of the work is a large carpet, depicting a stamp issued upon Lebanese independence which features a rocket. This stamp depiction references not only the country's independence, but the hopes of an Arab nation through the Lebanese Rocket programme which was dissolved in 1967.

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