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A Return to Revolutionary Algiers

A curatorial research trip became a profound reckoning with resistance, anti-colonialism and the power of art

B BY BILAL AKKOCHE IN OPINION | 29 JAN 25



Last year, I returned to Algiers for the first time in almost two decades. Instigated as a curatorial research trip, the visit ultimately evolved into a deeply personal journey. Having travelled there with my Algerian father, we stayed together at my grandfather's house and, over the course of two weeks, undertook a profound exploration of modern and contemporary art, personal identity and memory.

One of our first visits was to the city's Musée National des Beaux-Arts. There, as I stood before *Les Casbahs ne s'assiègent pas* (The Casbahs Are Not Besieged, 1961–82) by Mohammed Khadda, one of Algeria's leading modernist painters, I recalled wandering the same labyrinthine passages that the artist depicts in his work as a site of resistance against French colonial occupation. (France annexed Algeria in 1834, with the country only regaining independence in 1962.) A stronghold of the Algerian Front de libération nationale (National Liberation Front), the Casbah's dense architecture and narrow, winding alleys rendered it nearly impenetrable to French forces, making it a site of refuge and resistance.



Mohammed Khadda, *Les Casbahs ne s'assiègent pas*, 1961–82, oil on canvas, 1.2 × 2.4 m.
Courtesy: Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts of Algiers and Mohammed Khadda Estate

Alongside important pieces by Khadda, the Musée National des Beaux-Arts also holds a significant collection of works by Baya (Mahieddine) and M'hamed Issiakhem, who, along with Khadda and others, helped establish modern painting in Algeria. In 1963, just one year after independence, Khadda and Issiakhem were among 12 co-founding artists of the l'Union Nationale des Arts Plastiques (National Union of Plastic Arts). Four years later, in 1967, Baya became the only female signatory of the Manifesto of Aouchem, a postcolonial artistic collective that took its name from the Indigenous Amazigh practices of body art. Members of Aouchem sought to ground their work in visual heritages they believed had evolved from the prehistoric cave paintings of the Tassili Mountains. Baya's vibrant, imaginative paintings speak volumes about resilience, cultural lineage and the centring of the matrilineal experience in an Algerian context. Over her decades-long career, Baya depicted solely women, often portraying them within lush floral gardens as protagonists in their own worlds and incorporating Kabyle motifs.

Having lost both parents at a young age, Baya was raised by her grandmother whilst working on a colonial flower farm, before being taken in by Marguerite Caminat, a French woman residing in Algiers. Her art, showcased at Galerie Maeght in Paris when she was just 16 years old, can be read as a symbol of defiance against reductive colonialist readings of art from 'non-Western' geographies and contexts. Inspiringly, Baya insisted on defining her practice on her own terms, referring to it simply as 'Baya-ism'.



Baya, *Femme et maternité à la cage aux oiseaux*, 1985, gouache sur papier, 1 × 1.5 m. Courtesy: Elmarsa Gallery, Tunis/Dubai; photograph: Romain Darnaud

Issiakhem’s youthful *Self-portrait* (1949) in the Musée National des Beaux-Arts contrasts starkly with his later melancholic works, including *Femme et Mur* (Woman and Wall, 1977–78), a striking depiction of a woman in traditional Kabyle dress standing before graffiti referencing both the Front de libération nationale and the Organisation armée secrète (Secret Armed Organization). The latter work, which speaks to the violent tensions and triumphs of Algeria’s fight for independence, was included in ‘Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere’ at last year’s Venice Biennale. The Organisation armée secrète was a far-right French paramilitary group formed in the early 1960s with a mission to prevent Algeria from achieving independence by any means necessary, often employing terrorism, including bombings and assassinations, targeting both Algerian civilians and those who supported independence. In opposition stood the Front de libération nationale, the primary nationalist movement leading the charge for Algerian independence.

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Issiakhem himself became an emblem of resistance after enduring great personal trauma. At 15, he suffered a life-altering accident: believing a grenade left behind by soldiers was inactive, he brought it home, resulting in a devastating explosion that claimed the lives of his two younger sisters and a nephew, and cost him one of his arms. This traumatic event had a lasting impact on his life and deeply influenced his artistic expression. Issiakhem’s practice captures the struggle and hope of oppressed people finding their voice, a story that resonates in contemporary conversations about anti-colonialism and solidarity against colonial occupation.

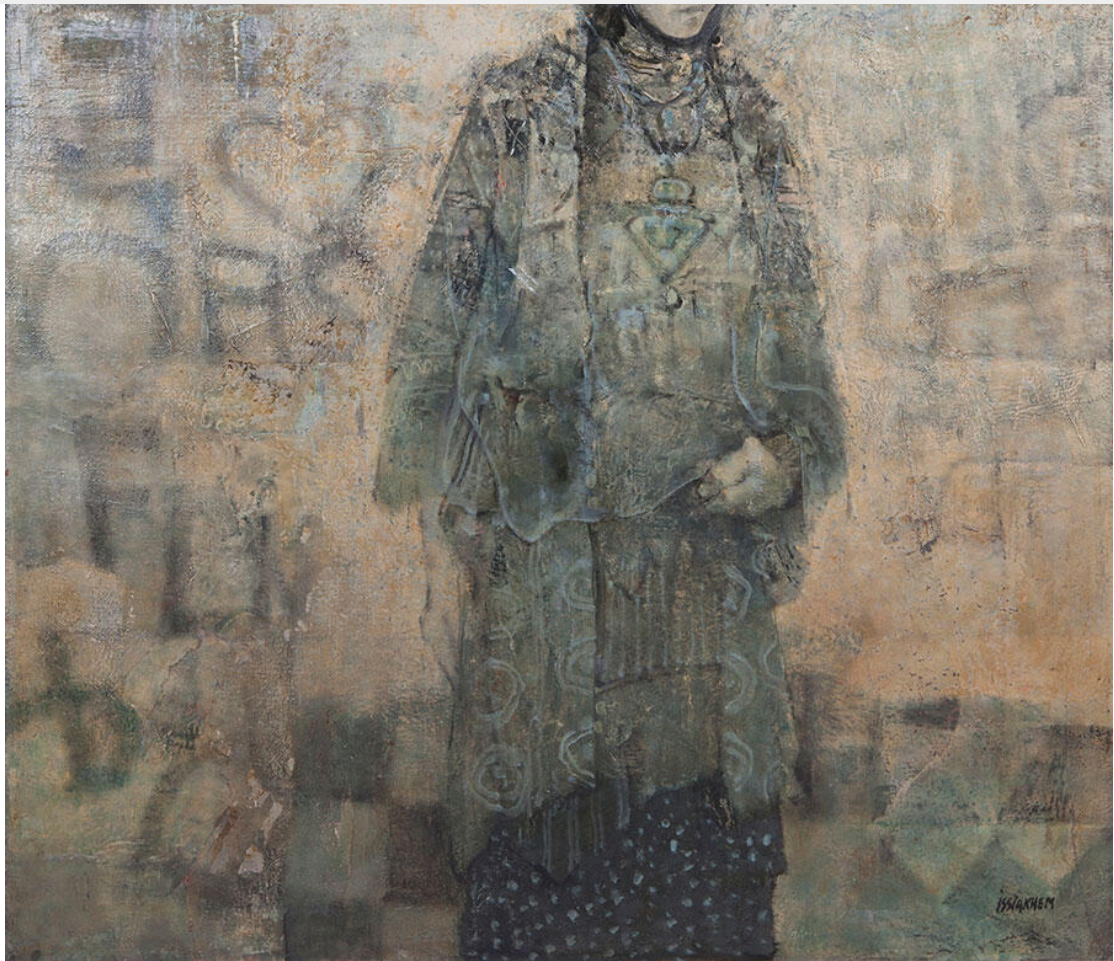


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M'hamed Issiakhem, *Femme et Mur (Woman and Wall)*, 1980, oil on canvas, 1.6 × 1.3 m. Courtesy: Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

During my stay, I also visited Résidence Khadda – the artist’s former studio, which now hosts a residency for artists and curators, thanks to the efforts of his widow, the renowned literary figure Naïg Khadda. The experience was deeply moving. The walls were adorned with several posters, designed by Khadda, that spoke of a time when Algiers was a centre for anti-colonial struggle – including one for the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival.

Today, the contemporary art scene in Algiers carries echoes of the remarkable energy it held just over a decade ago, when the city was alive with a dynamic network of spaces and initiatives, including Artist Residency in Algiers, International Festival of Contemporary Art of Algiers and the Second Pan-African Cultural Festival, which was held in 2009. Such initiatives were integral to shaping a thriving creative eco-system that brought together diverse voices and practices. While the landscape has evolved and the country has faced economic and socio-political challenges, spaces like rhizome, a multidisciplinary platform connecting local artists to global networks, and Les Ateliers Sauvages, a collaborative hub for artistic experimentation, are working to recapture and build upon the legacy of previous endeavours. These initiatives aim to preserve and engage with the city’s creative histories, while fostering new opportunities for artistic growth and community connection.



The Casbah of Algiers, 24 April 2024, photograph. Courtesy: Bilal Akkouche

My trip coincided with a symposium at rhizome. With participants from a range of countries, such as Argentina, Libya and Senegal, as well as strong representation by contemporary Algerian artists – including Aya Bennacer, Atef Berredjem, Ludovic Hadjeras, Amina Menia, Lydia Ourahmane, Zineb Sedira and Fella Temzali – ‘Creative Processes and Critical Approaches: Plastic Arts in the Maghreb’ considered how contemporary artists from the region and beyond challenge artistic convention.

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A work by one of the symposium’s participating artists particularly resonates with me. Sedira’s *Mother Tongue* (2002) – a three-channel video installation held in the collection of Tate, where I am a curator – explores generational and linguistic lacunae within her family, using the languages of Arabic, French and English as vehicles of communication and miscommunication. Through her own voice and those of her mother and daughter, Sedira reveals the complexities of navigating cultural identity, shaped and fractured by migration, which itself is tied to colonial histories and legacies. The work centres on the expressive faces of Sedira, her mother and her daughter, framed against a minimalist white backdrop. As they attempt to communicate, the composition underscores their intergenerational bond and the emotional depth of their exchange.



Mohammed Khadda, *Pièges*, 1987, oil on canvas, 84 × 116 cm. Courtesy: Naget Khadda

Mother Tongue's aesthetic beauty is underpinned by a profound sense of melancholy for the fragmentation wrought by colonialism and the poignancy of quiet acts of resistance. Sedira's mother, for instance, resisted fully learning French in defiance at the erasure of her linguistic and cultural identity as an Algerian. The work mirrors my own diasporic experience, reflecting the gaps in understanding between my father's birth city and my fragmented perceptions of homeland and my poor grasp of the language.

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My visit to Algiers became more than just a research trip: it was a reckoning with the themes of resistance, anti-colonialism and the power of art to document and transform trans-national, national and personal memories. The art I encountered in Algiers – especially works tied to the country's revolutionary history and notions of homeland – brought me closer to my father and grandfather, highlighting our shared cultural roots, despite the differences between us in age and language. My visit reaffirmed that artworks are not static: they are testaments to the struggles and dreams of those who came before and those who continue to push for a more just and equal world.



Grandfather picking flowers, 21 April 2024, photograph. Courtesy: Bilal Akkouche

Some of the most poignant moments of my trip were also the most spontaneous: watching a Frantz Fanon documentary with my grandfather; discussing the freedom fighters – such as Krim Belkacem, Mourad Didouche and Larbi Ben M’hidi – depicted on banknotes with a local shopkeeper; visiting the Martyr’s Memorial dedicated to those who gave their lives for liberation. These experiences reminded me that curating is as much about opening up to such moments as it is about academic research. These histories infuse life into the narratives we aim to convey through exhibitions and displays.

My grandfather, who I hadn’t seen for almost 20 years, marked my arrival by showing me around his rose garden, which he has been tending for decades. It was a modest gesture, reflecting his pride in the land and its enduring beauty – a beauty I had long felt connected to from a distance, as part of the Algerian diaspora, and was once again experiencing first hand. This echoed the quiet resilience I saw throughout Algiers and in the works of art – whether in Baya’s depictions of women occupying spaces among flora and fauna, Khadda’s calligraphic compositions embedded within landscapes or Issiakhem’s emotive portrayals of post-independence struggles and the complexities of human existence. For the first time in my adult life, I felt a deep sense of belonging to this place – a tangible connection to the land and its history.

This article first appeared in frieze issue 249 with the headline ‘Father Tongue’

Main image: Baya, Femme au Jardin (detail), 1968, gouache and watercolour on paper, 1 × 1.5 m. Courtesy: Kamel Lazaar Foundation, Geneva / Tunis

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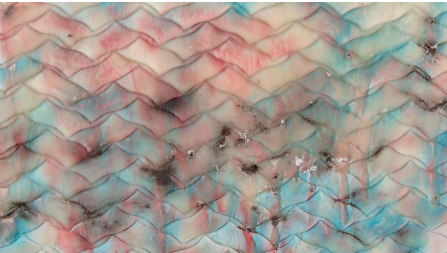
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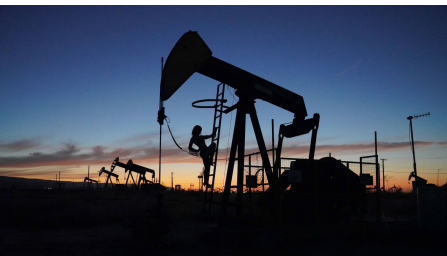
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