

# On the path of contemporary Tunisian art

*By Khadija Hamdi*

After 23 years of dictatorship, the Tunisian revolution broke the silence of the country's oppressed people. After January 14th, all sorts of "engaged art" showed bravery and daring, fighting the injustices of the system. It was clear that the stifling atmosphere experienced by Tunisia had impacted harmfully on several domains, beginning with art and culture. Thus, when sticking to a particular area, namely that of "contemporary art", it remains difficult, even today, to speak about a real art scene in Tunisia. The reasons are clear: What is considered contemporary "recognized" art, particularly in Europe, is inevitably a circle/set of networks whose elements consist of a fixed number of galleries, museums and, above all, a dependent art market. The contemporary artists, confronted with these facts, are forced to become one of the players in these circles; thereby participating in the international global market in order to stand a chance of exhibiting and expressing their art.

In Tunisia, with the absence, among other things, of a cultural policy specific to the art market, and the lack of the appropriate cultural and ideological conditions, the emergence of a "system" of "contemporary art" itself (in the Western sense) has not yet been possible. We can say that, so far, (apart from a few governmental "artistic events" whose interest is often none other than looking after the "cultural image" of the country) only a few private galleries have helped make some Tunisian artists 'visible' on the international art scene. Added to this, we note that no publication exclusively dedicated to contemporary art exists in the country. It is regrettable to observe that the number of "good sports analysts" (soccer in particular) is so huge compared to the number of art critics that are emerging, and that the football hype extensively practiced by the former regime has greatly reduced theoretical support for the creative arts! Moreover, in the academic side, one can also note the lack of technology available to students, especially those who are studying in the Institute of Fine Arts. This creates many real pedagogical obstacles in the

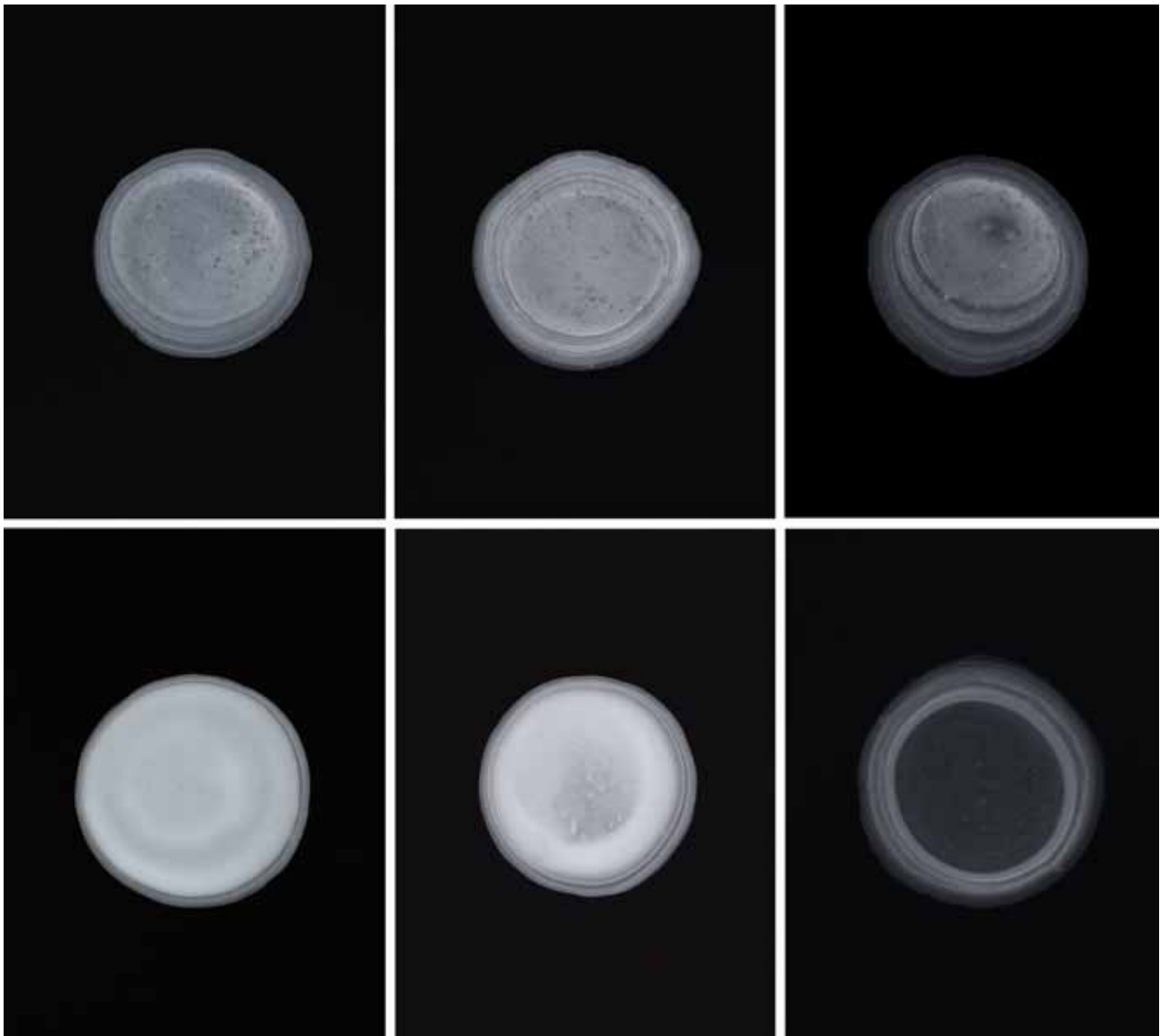
teaching of new techniques that contemporary artists continue to explore (such as photographic and video media), and is compounded by the censure and absence of any national museum of art that can at least provide a "visible history" of local art in which any artists may place themselves. It is for these reasons that some artists left the country, to look for other more favourable conditions for creative freedom.

January 14, 2011; the voices were raised and a creative energy is freed. It is as if the artists intend on catching up on the 23 years of losses, passivity and sterility. There is a strong desire for "historical revenge" to enable those involved in the art scene to set up new structures and thereby attempt to create artistic events in order to establish the conditions for the emergence of "contemporary art". There is a great hope that the revolution will have beneficial impacts on the area of artistic creation. It is time to begin the construction of this long project.

In this brief overview about contemporary art in Tunisia, no specific selection criteria led us to present the work of the four contemporary Tunisian artists mentioned, except that of their regular engagement in this domain, and above all, their admirable quality of being a "researcher". This being said, it does not exclude the fact that as these sorts of "profiles" assert themselves more and more in the contemporary art scene in Tunisia, future studies will inevitably shed more light beyond the scope of this article.

Ismail Bahri, Nadia Kaabi Linke, Mouna Karray and Nicene Kosentini deserve to be presented, respectively, because they are immersed in their native culture and in other cultural contexts, developing techniques and means of expression acquired thanks to time spent in Europe. For them, as for any other contemporary artist, the road is long, especially because the contemporary language of art is not just about the language of plastic art, but also about philosophy, literature, politics, geopolitics, history and aesthetics.

Ismail Bahri : Born in Tunis in 1978 to a Tunisian



**Ismaïl Bahri**, *Latence ensemble, Latence Series*, 2010/2011, 24x18cm, drawings, white ink and milk on glass - Courtesy of the artist and Les filles du calvaire gallery, Paris.

father and Swiss mother, has since 2000 shared his life and work between Paris and Tunis. After studying at the 'Institut Supérieur des Beaux-Arts' of Tunis, he completed a PhD in "Art and Sciences" at the Sorbonne University, focusing on "The fragility in contemporary art." This topic has become a major focus of his artistic vocabulary. Ismail has participated in group exhibitions such as the *Rencontres de Bamako*, *Fotographia Europea 2010*, *Lumière Noire* at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, and *Human Frames* at Kunst-im-Tunnel,

Düsseldorf. His work has been featured in various places such as the Georges Pompidou Centre, the gallery of Filles du Calvaire, the Fabre Museum (Montpellier), the Johannesburg Art Gallery (South Africa), the National Gallery in Cape Town (South Africa) the Centrale Electrique (Brussels), the British Film Institute (London) and the Fondazione Mertz (Turin).

The plastic approach of Ismail, who uses drawing, installation, video and photography, questions the

concept of “fragility”. He expresses this subject through many minimalist objects of such delicacy as wire, glass, milk, ink, and pins. An overview of each piece of his work shows that he explores the ephemeral, the imperceptible and the vulnerable, as reflected in the series “Latence” and “Ecume”.

“Latence” is a series of drawings on glass, black background, made up of interlocking transparent bubbles of froth milk. The artist achieves this result by a brush soaked in milk, which evaporates, leaving a fine slide of coagulated milk. By a slight rotation of the glass plate, the slices of milk take a circular shape. This purely experimental approach recalls the painstaking research of the alchemist in his revelation of the philosopher’s stone. “Latence” reflects the famous formula of the physicist ‘Lavoisier’, who said “nothing is created, nothing is lost, and everything is transformed.” Through this process, the artist waits for vulnerable pictures that evolve and change constantly to finally reveal insight; the act of drawing is slow and it needs a great deal of patience. “Latence” gives a view of shapes reminiscent of the moon, the stars and the galaxies that immerse the viewer in its serenity.

“Ecume” has almost the same technique; a series of 30 pencil drawings, made by milk and varieties of dust on paper, revealing the forms of eggs, jellyfish, spectra and sea foam. This series, like the former, is obtained by the superposition of thin milky strips, which soak up dust. We are still in the act of the revelation of the image, which could evoke the daguerreotype process (a photographic process that produces an image with no negative, exposed to direct sunlight). The extreme fragility of these drawings gives them the appearance of lace on the brink of extinction. Through the series “Ecume” and “Latence,” Ismail Bahri uses the subtle nuances of his technique to spread the drawing by “capillary action”.

Following this brief insight into the plastic art that surrounds the drawings of Ismail Bahri, and to dive deeper into the spirit of his work, it is worth mentioning the video “Resonances” (Ranin). This work was filmed in the bathroom of his childhood home, where cracked tiles and a porcelain bath tub can be seen; the bath gradually empties itself of its water while containing the words recorded in Arabic and black ink that spread

gradually across it. Meanwhile, the bath leaves black spots that appear connected by lines, like a starry sky. A sound of water in the drain, mixed with the sounds of crickets animate the video and evokes the childhood of the artist. The bath tub looks like a parchment on which we can read words like night, memories, horizon, cloudy horizon, floating, shadow, film that intertwine and drown under the water, transforming the space into a resonance box. As it absorbs the words, the surface of the water turns black and invades them until they totally disappear. The bath tub becomes like a blank screen that delivers us evidence that the artist is challenging us to decipher ; the images and the sound make this video haunting and evocative.

In the work of Ismail Bahri it is important to stress the omnipresence of black ink, as shown in the videos “Resonance,” and “Orientations”, and the series of photos “Sang d’encre”. This can attest to the sensitivity of the engraver he is. “Orientations” is a video consisting of a sequence of shots of a subjective camera depicting a stroll in the city of Tunis ; a full glass of ink takes the form of a compass that guides the artist in his walk and it also looks like a camera that collects images. If the video “Resonance” reveals the absorption of the image, “Orientations”, like the two sets of drawings “Latence” and “Ecume”, show the unveiling of the image. Through these two poles, the artist explores the concept of “appearance” and “disappearance”. The first, reflects the search for self, for the other and for the outside world, a sort of “recall” that aims to show what is hidden and buried in the subconscious of man. The second creates a space where the traces are erased, where the paths are lost and only exist in the evocation of memory.

The series “Sang d’encre”, consists of six photos showing two people (the artist’s parents) whose skin wrinkles are filled with ink. To achieve this, the artist begins by drawing the lines formed by wrinkles. Once the drawing is complete, the artist photographs his models. The goal of this work is to capture the traces of the past and to confront the challenges of the moment. Ismail’s only desire is to make “visible” that which is “invisible” by using the poetic language of art.

Whatever one may say about the work of Ismail, which has known only perpetual renewals, we feel that “something” moves inside us, like the grains of sand



**Ismail Bahri**, *Sang d'encre*, 2009, 40x40cm, 6 color photography, lambda print, edition of 10 - Courtesy of the artist and Les filles du calvaire gallery, Paris.

slipping through the fingers of one's hand. Is there anything more daring than the passage of time and the delicacy of the incredible moments time contains? Ismail, through his pursuit of absolute lightness, teaches us the "lightness of human being" and invites us, thereby, to enter the delicacy of the "immensity of intimacy" of substance that our artist continues to explore in depth. From one subtle universe to another, we move to Nadia Kaabi Linke. Like Ismail Bahri, she increases the research and uses objects to translate her ideas into visual form. Born in 1978 in Tunisia, Nadia has lived in several countries including : Ukraine, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and France. She studied at the 'Ecole des Beaux-Arts' in Tunis and Paris, where she combined her artistic work with an academic background in Philosophy and Sciences of Art. Later, she defended her doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne in 2008, entitled "From the invisible, to the aesthetics of the picture surface."

Today, Nadia lives and works between Tunis and Berlin and has participated in several exhibitions in London, Berlin, and Cairo, as well as the 25th Alexandria Biennale, the 9th Biennial of Sharjah, UAE, the 30th Biennale de Pontevedra, Spain and the Venice Biennale. Her art is rooted in many cultural, historical, social and political references to specific locations and certain events the artists perceives as special to her life. Indeed, a mixture of cultures and histories seem to intimately animate the works of NKL (Nadia Kaabi Linke) and every idea generated is related to a place and a well-defined social context. Her work, which came from urban areas, is also closely linked to socio-psychological issues. She creates her artwork after several months of thinking and debate; and as needed for the project and the issues raised, she uses different media, "I meet every time a new situation, a new context or object that gives me an idea of how to combine the material." Even if she

changes her form of expression, this does not prevent the consistency of her artistic work : the work of a single pattern that results from a kind of “archeology of the present” and the use of conceptual materials and objects. We can discover her archaeological approach through her work titled “the archives of the banality of Tunisia.” It is a pictorial work in which the artist traces cracks, nicks and scratches engraved and inscribed on the walls of the city. These scribbles are a confession of love, superstitions, insults, vulgarities, horrors, desires, wishes and tributes to local heroes and football clubs. She picks up these scribbles on the surface of her paintings using silk paper on the wall, then she raises the writing through a wax paper technique before applying Indian ink and pigments. These traces give birth to the richness of life, the life of the streets where she worked for hours, where passersby become an integral part of the work mainly by asking questions about what she does. Moreover, she keeps records of the dialogues initiated by her work and etches them on a plexiglas support and joins them to the painting. “Archives of Tunisian banality” is integrated in the context of visual archaeology that recaptures the contemporaneity of the

recent urban history and subscribes to a cultural and historical reality. Through this approach, NKL guides to us the faiths of the cities’ walls that she visits to collect “relics”. If we cannot cry our pain and express our ideas, we entrust the cities’ walls, which become the caskets of our secrets. Nadia is in a perpetual search for the way in which she can translate her ideas into visual form. The example that best shows this approach is her magnificent sculpture “Flying Carpets” for which she was awarded the Abraaj prize in 2010, and which was shown at Art Dubai and the Venice Biennale. The work is composed of chromium, aluminum and wire in which the shadow game created by these materials plays a major role in the installation, echoing the shape of the UAE. The subject is inspired by the peddlers who sell counterfeits on the streets of Venice and who use their mats to group all their goods in order to flee the authorities. “Flying carpets” also refers to the flying carpet, which is one of the most universally recognized symbols of the East, found in the legendary stories of King Solomon and the stories of the “Arabian Nights”. The sculpture takes the form of the bridge Ponte del II Sepolco in Venice, situated between San Marco and the



**Nadia Kaabi-Linke**, *Flying Carpets*, 2011, chrome plated aluminium, threads, 1,300x340x420cm - Courtesy of Abraaj Capital Art Price and the artist.



Giardini, and on which the sellers lay their carpets. The artist has translated this scene to the identical details: indeed, the carpets are reproduced in the original size and concentrated on the upper deck above the bottom, because in reality it is a flat surface, which allows sellers to better see the police. In addition, this part is closer to San Marco which is the most touristic area and where the police are the most concentrated, so it is riskier for them to go in that direction. This reveals the careful observations that the artist expresses in exact terms. For her, it is the best way to honour these peddlers, who took the risk to immigrate knowing that they could be arrested at any moment. The artist thus treats the subject of immigration, which is rooted in human life, in order to optimize the conditions of life. This work breaks the barriers of immigrants, as it represents the object that allows them to get from one place to another without borders or checkpoints or visas.

The approach of NKL, shows how her art is inspired by life and urban contexts, the people she meets and the situations that occur around her are the stimulators of her creation. Indeed, each of NKL's works refers to several subjects simultaneously, as shown in the work "Parkverbot" (looted art) ; a public bench 'looted' in a park in Berlin by the artist herself and covered with anti bird-droppings. It converts something where people sit to take a break in to a space where it is forbidden to 'park', as stated in the title "Parkverbot". This work alludes to a paradox in democratic Western countries between claiming human rights and freedom at the same time as neglecting the natural right of the birds, for example, putting checkpoints preventing them from landing on public buildings and private places. This is a strange act in the eyes of the artist: " In the Arab imaging, the doves are considered as a symbol of freedom and peace, that is why these checkpoints seem strange." Also, the act of plundering the bench is an integral part of the work, which refers to the ideas of cultural restitutions and the economic and legal status of looting works of art. As far as Nadia is concerned, the sociocultural question remains a subject of fascination and a philosophical dream. By handling the symbols to develop two-way devices, all her works are part of the prospect of revealing a reflection on the world around us and to point out areas of friction. Nadia Kaabi

Linke will never cease to amaze and surprise us with the subtlety and intelligence revealed by her work.

Born in 1976 in Sfax, a major city of Tunisia, Nicene Kosontini lives and works between Tunis and Paris. She studied interior design at the 'Institut Supérieur des Beaux-Arts' in Tunis and the University 'Marc Bloch' in Strasbourg where she developed a practice of installation and photography by following courses and training at the 'Fresnoy National Studio of Contemporary Arts' and the 'Les Gobelins School of Image' in France. Her work has been featured in several exhibitions in Tunis, Paris, Spain, London and Bamako.

Nicene uses photography and video in her work, and sometimes, her curiosity to explore other media, pushed her to engage in painting on glass and installation : "I'm at a crossroads, I like finding by myself techniques that express my ideas". The subjects that are often recurring for Nicene are memory and the questioning of identity. Her work is similar to that of the archaeologist who comes in the footsteps of the past to rebuild the present : "In the manner of an archaeologist, I search for clues and traces that form the melancholic evidence that a body was there and that there had been a story." The photography series 'Boujmel' (name of a lake, located a few kilometers from Sfax, the birthplace of Nicene) is an example of this approach because the artist associated with each image a portrait shot of the family album, representing her mother, grandmother and great grandmother. Her goal is to find the trails of an era that she has not known but that will always live deeply inside her. For Nicene, "to delve into the family album and track in the photographs taken in the 40's and 60's for veiled clues, faded and even nonexistent, is an act of revealing the secrets to releasing the ghosts." These "ghosts" invite the viewer to dive into a world oscillating between the past and the present, the forgotten and the resurgence. Combining archival photos of her childhood, Nicene Kosontini expresses her obsession with bring together the fragments of history and to shape the past. These photos are also a way for her to address the issues of transmission, language and mobility as well as the representations of cultural symbols and identity. Through the act of documenting her photos, the artist imposes cultural notions that were erased by social and political forces, such as colonization, that have deeply

transformed the “soul of Tunisia” and left no reservoir of intact roots. The quest for the past is also evident through her work “Back”: this is a scene of a video montage of family photos, accompanied by the voice of a Tunisian singer. The most intriguing aspect in this work is the zoom in on a child, hidden behind a door, as if the artist is trying to bring this ghostly figure in to the real world. Through this work, she wants to reveal what has remained on-hold and what remains missing or not present - neither death nor life.

The ‘iconic’ aspect and the graphic of things when not only looked at but ‘read’, reveals in Nicene’s work a desperate desire to revive a ‘lost paradise’ - the past of the artist – of which only the photographer could be the guarantor. Any vision of this kind seems simplistic, even unfair, in respect of the authenticity of her work. But, what are we permitted to see in the work of Nicene, if it is not permanently resistant to the ephemeral, to oblivion and death?

If a slight amnesia, however, promotes creativity, as Nietzsche would have thought, and if at the same time the inevitable subjectivity of the artist thrives as a show of her experiences, what is the meaning of the ‘return’ of the artist to the past? Away from all the longing which presupposes passivity and ‘sentimentalism’, if Nicene is attached to the past and persists to revive it, it is to use it as a ‘material’ in its own right, rather than a pretext. By stripping the ‘family’ aspect of the past and essentially the identity issue of it, one realizes that in reality it is not even the ‘past’ that is, but squarely the ‘time’ is of importance. Nicene has no incentive to ‘go back’ but only the desire to appease the eternal war between creative necessity and the ‘constraints’, ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ of the camera.

From the photographic world of Nicene to that of Mouna Karray. Born in 1970 in Tunisia, Mouna Karray studied film and photography in Tunis and then in Tokyo. In Tunisia, the artist has taught photography and curated exhibitions. She exposed her art in the Art Center of Rades (Tunisia) in 2004, at the Cité Internationale of Arts (Paris) in 2005, and the Civitella Ranieri Foundation (Umbria, Italy) in 2007. Mouna Karray participated in many group exhibitions: at the Museum of the City of Tunis in 2006, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Algiers in 2008, the

Museum of Quai Branly in Paris in 2009, at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels and the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Marseille in 2010. She has also shown her work at international events in Europe and Africa, such as African Photography Encounters in Bamako, the 30th Biennale de Pontevedra in Spain and the 2nd Biennial Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo. Photography and sound installations are eminent media in the work of Mouna Karray, which often make use of video. Her art intends to focus on issues of identity, borders, loss and memory. Her stay in Japan in the 90’s was the starting point of a series of photos entitled “Au risque de l’identité” seen as risk-taking for the artist : danger of substitution and identity loss. Mouna went far away to look for what is near. This also aroused the astonishment of her mother who asked her why she went to Japan to take pictures, when she could have achieved the same ends staying home. But as Walter Benjamin denounced: “We must reach the furthest to reach the nearest” and this is probably where the search for Mouna Karray came from.

This work, presented in diptych, consists of meeting a woman, seeing her world, taking pictures of her and then substituting her by wearing her clothes, adopting her posture and gestures, and finally being photographed. In this game of substitution the artist breaks the border that has separated her from the other, entering their world at the risk of getting lost. “I take the risk to go as far as possible in the identity of the other, through this shift, I put into play the two identities, I am confused, I am the other.” With the approach of these photos it seems that the artist seeks a resemblance between the two portraits, but she finally focuses on the difference. Beyond simple portraits, the objective of these photos is to highlight the issue of identity: the identity of self and the identity of the other, which remains uncertain, suspended between the two ‘snapshots’, false and yet necessary. The picture here is a fresh look at a ‘fault sensitive’ identification, which imposes a permanent part of the heart on a project that is perpetually open. Besides the question of identity, this work re-initiates the discussion around the borders, limits, passages, dualities and otherness, which made the universal dialogue impossible. The artist continues her reflection about borders through sound media accompanied by



**Mouna Karray** - Olfa 1 & 2, Identity At Stake Series, 2006, C print, Edition of 5, 90x90cm each - Courtesy of the artist (Mouna Karray).

text; in “object on the shore” she addresses the issue of the border and memory by presenting an image of an object found by chance, having faded writing meaning “Cornish songs”. While in another work, “at the risk of identity”, there is first, a chanted recitation of the Koran, interrupted by external noises of daily life (street, noise, questioning voices and fumbles, barking dogs.) and Arab songs (the songs of Abdel Halim) and another interruption by the radio, culminating in a recital of the Koran. The sounds become embedded in one another and the idea of the shore echoes the broken borders. Does these reflects a desire to break with the borders established or she want to recompose the fragments caused by cultural differences, in order to achieve unity? At the first approach, many features (including technique, medium and the starting point of each) seem separate the two works, yet looking again, we see that one echoes the other. Indeed, the artist who enters the world of others is installing it without embarrassment or hesitation, referring to the sound of the band that come together and mixes, breaking all barriers. This perspective is not about to fragment the world but to return it. “An object on the shore” is the remnant moving away from the borders, it is also the object that refers to memory as it was found by chance by the artist, it acts as the ferryman who offers the discovery

and, revelation, and yet remains behind to ensure transmission and allow the work of memory. When she wants to transmit a message, Mouna continues her work persistently. It is renewed in a series of photos titled ‘murmurer’, which reflect recurrent themes in her work : boundaries, limitations and memory. The photos show fragments of walls located in an abandoned area in Sfax (Tunisia). This is a port area containing phosphate plants, which were closed by the state in 1991 because of the high levels of pollution they generated. Before being totally destroyed in 2008, this area remained abandoned and prohibited, and all that had resisted were enigmatic fragments of crumbling walls of a place torn between a tragic past and a sometimes uncertain future. This architectural complex is haunted by memory, absence and emptiness. The interest of these walls is their ambiguity, which is torn between strength and fragility : they embody the life and pain of the place, the good and the bad. Transformed into social and human tragedy, these photos question and probe the proper vulnerability of humans facing temporal hazards and the torments of life. Mouna Karray has a burning need to preserve such memories. These works meet each other to become a memorial of places and people, while generating questions of identity and culture. The four artists mentioned in this article share their



Tunisian origin, but they all have their own artistic creation which is not related to a particular geographical context or a precise origin. Their language reflects their aspirations while maintaining a rule accessible to every human being regardless of their history and origin. The view of artists in general should remind us that it is dangerous to lock oneself in a unique pattern and established truths.

This article addresses some contemporary art in a specific geographical context, namely Tunisia, but the goal is to break boundaries in order to establish oneself on the international art scene. This is what defines an artist beyond his/her origins, it is how he/she envisages the world through a particular identity.

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