

The artist Eliahou Eric Bokobza returns to the wealth of the Jewish community in Tunis

In the exhibition "Family Affair" Eliahou Eric Bokobza presents
nostalgia full of humor

Gilad Melzer art critic, HA-ARTEZ 14 february 2024

Perhaps on the fringes of the promise of a new Middle East that accompanied the Oslo Agreements, and perhaps simply from the human emotion called longing, in 1996 "A Summer in La Goulette " was released. Created by Tunisian-French director Férid Boughedir. The film takes place in the town of La Goulette which is located near the port of Tunis and which for nearly two hundred years was a home to a large Jewish community that lives next to the Muslim majority, and to an Italian and French minority so large that the area became known as "Little Sicily".

The summer mentioned in the title is that of 1967. The time when the pretty good relationship between the communities, all in all, ended. Nearly 2,300 years of magnificent Jewish community, which then numbered close to a hundred thousand people, reached their end by the migration/flight of Tunisian Jews, mainly to France and Israel. In the end, credits Boughedir dedicates the film to his Jewish friends, and calls them to return to their homeland.

I remembered Boughedir's romantic comedy when I visited the exhibition "Family Matters" of Eliahou Eric Bokobza. The artist was indeed born in Paris, but his parents immigrated there a year before bringing along a lot of Tunisia in their luggage. Bokobza could just as well call the exhibition a "community interest".

Solo museum exhibitions are a highlight in the career of most artists, who take advantage of it to summarize a period, present the best, demonstrate presence and make a mark. Bokobza, in an act of rare generosity, invited the descendants of the Tunisian community to offer objects, clothes, tools, jewelry, souvenirs and various documents that they or their parents brought from their homeland.

Identity, memory, migration and community are a constant element in Bokobza's Art, which this time deliberately, blurs the line between an anthropological display, a heritage museum and an Art exhibition. This liminal space between crafts, design and art, and in between Aesthetics associated with Arab countries to that associated with Europe and the West, mixed In order to raise questions about the connections and contexts between those fields. Weaving applied art and decorative items with and alongside works of art skip over the rigid separation between the fields of visual culture. Motifs and elements appear, for example, both in the bracelet and in the carpet painting in the bedroom.

The rich selection that is presented together with Bokobza's works of art in a variety of mediums, Not only points to his sources of inspiration, but is an immanent part of the concept That structure the exhibition as a huge installation simulating a typical apartment of a Jewish family in Tunis

Because the exhibition is presented in the The Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures, which is located In an Ottoman mosque, the environment in which the apartment is located is similar to the one seen from the windows of the Jewish apartments.

The interlaced and complex relationship between the communities, the cultural influences and the mutual aesthetics, between them and Western culture in general and French culture in particular, are the central axis of the exhibition.

Bokobza's unique combination of Pop and Naive Art, the right use of details from The Muslim architecture of the building, and the simple division into rooms in the apartment, allowing him to focus on different aspects, motifs, and issues in each area.

Already at the entrance to the exhibition-apartment, Bokobza emphasizes that the main hallmark of the Tunisian Jewish community is the multicultural mix. The inscription on the linoleum print in size 1:1 of Rachel Lelloush's tombstone is in four languages: Hebrew, Jewish-Arabic, Arabic and French. The sound of these languages echoes in the space, also in an Arab-Arab-Jewish performance of the song "Tikvatnu"

an early version of the national anthem recorded in the 1930s by a Tunisian bard. In the background, in the animated video, the silhouette of a Belly dancer looms covered in a blue and white fabric.

Zionism, like the modernity that emerges from the multilingual version of "Titina" from Chaplin's "modern times" also permeated the traditional societies in the metropolises of Arab countries. Just as Europe was intrigued by the "charms of the East" The erotic-orientalists, colonialism and the proximity of the coastal cities in north Africa to France, Spain and Italy also imported technologies, tastes and fashions as well which can be seen in furniture, clothing details and electrical appliances.

Bokobza does not look at this mess with gloomy nostalgia but mixes it with Lots of humor. His series of holiday paintings recalls the striped canvases of The French artist Daniel Buren, the American flag, and Dush's Israeli cartoon character named Sroulik. Guffi, The ridiculous cartoon dog, popped up in the animated video "Had Gadia", and from everywhere Big eyes are peeping, not only against the evil eye, but because everyone peeps and examines everyone all the time. And despite the cheerful colors, Bokobza doesn't present a sticky nostalgic pulp either. Maybe some longing mixed with curiosity. The video animation "Window to Sidi Bou Said" looks towards The neighborhood next to La Goulette, which in recent years has become a Mediterranean artists' village.

It is likely that many years will pass, if at all, until the wish of Boughedir is fulfilled and his Jewish neighbors will return to Tunisia. But we can certainly hope that it will be possible for us to visit, to be a tourist, and to paint there. In the meantime, go to Be'er Sheva, Bokobza will take you as close as possible To a world that was and is no more.

Eliahou Eric Bokobza, "Family matter", curator: Sharon Laor-Sirak.

The Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures, 50 Ha'Atsmaat, Beer Sheva.

Monday-Saturday 14:00-10:00, Monday and Wednesday also 19:00-16:00. until May 13