Zoulikha Bouabdellah’s new exhibition reflects on reality through the guise of fiction in an array of media. The show is named after the illuminated Broadway billboard work that welcomes, warns and appeases the audience upon entry with the words ‘Any Resemblance to Actual Persons, Living or Dead, is Purely Coincidental.’ The familiar disclaimer is the result of a lawsuit filed by Russian princess Irina Yusupov against the film producers of the 1932 film ‘Rasputin and the Empress’. The film was modeled on her life, so she sued for invasion of privacy, yet parts were entirely inaccurate, so she sued for defamation too. Bouabdellah’s works, in line with this, combine reality and illusion, continually provoking us to question which aspects of her profoundly feminist explorations are depicting truth or adversely falsity.

We are subsequently led through a series of self-portraits that express suppressed facets of womankind’s feelings towards the inevitable, the actual, and the expected. We confront grimacing faces that reveal the reality behind perpetually upheld masks. Cut black paper is brought vividly to life by the red sequins spewing out of its slits and voids. These works build up to the ultimate form of expression: the scream. Bouabdellah reclaims Munch’s Scream (all four completed by 1910) which manifested his violent fear of his surroundings, to depict her absolute distress. This giant fractured portrait, reaching four meters, shows snippets of the screaming face’s contour painted in red lacquer that bleeds down the sheets of paper, down the unpainted face.

We move from these overt expressions to two rose windows wryly entitled ‘The Wheel of Fortune’. The rose window is symmetrical, made up of curves, and contained within a circle. It is the glorification of ornamental patterning, and its description could be read as that of a woman’s appearance. The work must be read from a distance at first, as purely ornamental, but to be understood must be studied in great detail, for the realm on the other side of the rose window to emerge.

An installation piece of the eight gates of paradise, three of which are on show, entice us to cross the thresholds between reality and fantasy, woman and man, concealment and acknowledgement. An engraved plaque, a pair of red high heels, glistening beads and vividly coloured walls, all beckon us to venture into a fantastical paradise, a sacred realm of perfection, echoing the realm depicted behind the rose windows.

The sacred is then sidelined by fifteen pop mosques that dismiss ideology and restrictive preconceptions to focus on reality. Only the contours of the mosques are depicted, celebrating each
one’s architectural individuality and highlighting the expansive diversity that exists in architecture across the globe, from Burkina-Faso to Lebanon and Germany.

The lustrous sparkling of the glittered serigraphy prints is picked up by the glistening of a Yemeni woman’s sequin-encrusted veil as she dances in a video where music is replaced by criticisms of behaviour and public appearance. She appears as perfection from the outside, but the voice that follows her graceful movements narrates a different idea.

The exhibition declares from the outset that things are not what they appear to be. By constructing a form of theatre, Bouabdellah shows us that not only is reality not what it first seems, but also that it is constructed, and as such, changeable.

Zoulikha Bouabdellah (b. 1977, Moscow, to Algerian parents) grew up in Algiers and moved to France in 1993, where she graduated from the Ecole Nationale Superieure d’Arts de Cergy-Pontoise in Paris in 2002. She now lives and works in Morocco. Cross-cultural influences and tensions originating in her upbringing are central aspects of the artist’s experiences as she tenaciously searches for freedom from the political, social and moral restraints that surround genders and perpetuate rifts between the visible and the unspoken. Bouabdellah has won several prizes, including the Prix Meurice for Contemporary Art, Paris, France, 2008, the inaugural Abraaj Capital Prize, Dubai, UAE, 2009, the Algerian Prize for young Algerian creation and the Villa Medicis Hors les Murs (AFAA, Cape Town, South Africa). She has been shown all over the world in fairs, institutions and biennales such as the Venice Biennial, Aichi Triennial, Bamako Biennial, Mead Art Museum, Centre Pompidou, MoCADA, and the Brooklyn Museum, and has works in a number of notable public and private collections.

For more information, please contact Minnie McIntryre by email (minnie@ivde.net) or phone (+971 4 323 5052). The Gallery is open from Saturday to Thursday 10am to 6pm.