Private preview: Wednesday, June 09 from 7:30 PM
Exhibition dates: June 10 – July 23, 2010

An exhibition supported by Ruinart

Couples of giant colorful Arabic letters cut out of aluminum sheets or formed of flashing neon hang randomly on the wall in a playful and lighthearted manner. They are deceptively simple. The elements are familiar - strings of neon twisted to form colorful letters. Yet their unconventional positioning and movement mount a remarkably visceral spectacle, with the suggestive title Hobb (Arabic for Love) functioning as an integral part of the beguiling ensemble.

Hobb elegantly exemplifies Algerian Zoulikha Bouabdellah’s consistently challenging practice since she graduated from the Ecole Nationale Superieure d'Art de Cergy in Paris in 2002, favoring video in her debut. She was the recipient of the Contemporary Art Prize Le Meurice in 2008 with her sculpture The Kiss, and shortly after was one of the three winners of the 2009 Abraaj Prize with her installation 'Walk on the Sky, Pisces'.

A product of a rigorous process of conceptual and formal reasoning, Hobb defies the border between representation and abstraction. It constitutes not simply the materials and the flashy colors installed in the space but also, perhaps more importantly, the set of conditions or limitations that have been their source of inspiration.

The work is inspired by the extensive heritage of Arabic love poetry, a treasury of sexual innuendo with a conspicuous absence of the human body. Zoulikha finds its literary opposite in Indian culture, where sexuality is largely uninhibited, with works like the Kama Sutra always having been illustrated. Thus tackling the subject of representing love and its physical expression, she uses calligraphy to achieve a scantily veiled abstraction of the human form.

Zoulikha’s work is about expressive subversion. Not limited to the exact meaning of a shape or a word, it allows poetry, imagination, and reflection to add sense to a situation.
“I can’t be accused of representing human shapes. At the same time, I’m totally representing them, it’s subversion. The way to divert is to be smart and be wise, the means to escape for a woman is subversion. I think it’s a good way to get things moving on”

As a child growing up in Algeria and raised by the women of her family, subversion was a tool of daily life, a mode of survival she calls ‘woman’s best ally’. In a society dominated by men, the wisdom of women derived largely from knowing how and when to subvert.

‘Set me Free from my Chains’, the body of works which also lend its name to the title of the exhibition, comprises hanging sculptures where the letters forming the sentence “Set Me Free from My Chains” are carved in wood and hang from a giant paper nail. Reminiscent of the way to do notes are nailed on a board, (that’s how Zoulikha’s mother used to remind her daughters about their chores, nailing little notes ‘broom the court, make your bed, etc … on the curtains of their bedrooms). Playfully and ironically, the ‘chore’ here is Umm Kulthum famous phrase ‘Set me Free from my Chains’. Extracted from a song evoking a past love story emblematic of the typical themes of love, longing and loss extensively explored in Arab poetry. Called the fourth pyramid, Umm Kulthum's fame and influence grew beyond the artistic scene, and in patriotic fashion, Zoulikha interprets Umm Kulthum's song as more than just a love song but a clear stance for the rights of women in the Arab world, and even a lyric evocation of the act of love.

A third body of work comprises monochrome drawings on paper, in which the artist reproduces sequences from a scene of the Egyptian movie ‘Afrita Hanem’ (Genie Lady, 1949), where the famous Farid Al-Attrach wakes up to discover Samia Gamal performing a highly seductive oriental dance. The actor’s discomfort and shyness escalate in front of this female companion before he falls back asleep. Was it fantasy or reality? Zoulikha’s drawings are accompanied by the words ‘if only, if only, if only…’. She painted in red lacquer the lines of the silhouettes to emphasize their curvature and sensuality.

To complement these drawings, the big Odalisque of Ingres is reinterpreted with Zoulikha’s minimal monochrome technique and fragmented in eight different panels. The famous slave with her languid pose and elongated back looks back over her shoulder, as if from a distant, antiquated past. Assumed to be an oriental woman, her stare and distorted proportions embody a woman’s complex thoughts and feelings. Entitled The Ruins, this work marks an implicit conclusion, echoing the artist’s battle for women’s cause and her penchant for romance.

**About GALLERY ISABELLE VAN DEN EYNDE (prev. B21)**

Located in an industrial area near the centre of Dubai, GALLERY ISABELLE VAN DEN EYNDE (prev. B21) opened its doors in 2005 with the founding objective to discover young promising contemporary artists from the Middle-eastern region. Under Isabelle van den Eynde’s tutelage, a new generation of artists began to attract the attention of adventurous collectors and curators, as well as prestigious institutions. Providing a platform for Middle-Eastern contemporary art, GALLERY ISABELLE VAN DEN EYNDE has showcased an intense and innovative program of exhibitions, publishing of a catalogue for each. Represented artists include: Shahriar Ahmadi, Ahmad Amin Nazar, Reza Aramesh, Fereydoun Ave, Lara Baladi, Bita Fayyazi, Shadi Ghadirian, Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Nargess Hashemi, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Nadine Kanso, Afshan Ketabchi, Jeffar Khaldi, Farshid Maleki, Sabah Naim, Leila Pazooki, Hani Rashed, Arnaud Rivieren, Jinoos Taghizadeh, Shantia Zaker Ameli.

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