Over the past five years Zoulikha Bouabdellah has developed into a truly multimedia artist, working with photography, video, sculpture, drawings and installations and delving deep into herself to find subjects close to her heart. Claudia Barbieri Childs meets the artist whose works revisit gender issues and questions of race and identity.

Hat Zoulikha Bouabdellah strives for, she says, is to continuously seek the common thread in humanity that links people across divides of religion, gender and culture. She taps into history and universal experiences, inviting her audiences to engage with an art that rejects intellectualism and can be appreciated on many levels. Sometimes the result is not what she had originally intended, but, she maintains, “paradoxically, through my transgressions, I try to tie the bonds again.”

Her second participation at the Pompidou Centre through the *Airs de Paris* exhibition in 2007 was a seminal moment. “It was the 30th anniversary of the Pompidou Centre and my 30th birthday and the stars were all aligned in my favour. It was a turning point in my career,” she smiles. Indeed, *Airs de Paris* led to an invitation to take up a three month residency at Amherst College in Massachusetts, one of the most prestigious liberal arts schools in the USA. There, thrust into a campus bubbling with the intellectual and political frustrations of the Bush era, Bouabdellah was exposed to some of her most revelatory and formative experiences. Amazed by the multicultural mix and exchange of ideas, she experienced firsthand the impact that the Afghanistan and Iraq wars had – and are still having – on American society. Two videos resulted – *Black and White 1* and *Black and White 2*. The first featured footage downloaded from an American military website and taken from a helicopter, along with recordings of bombings in Iraq. In the background, male voices discuss the choice of a target. Over these, a lullaby plays. Bouabdellah also superimposed two boxed films, side by side, of hands playing a piano. There is an explosion. The target has been hit. The whole thing has an unreal, videogame quality to it. But, she says, “it’s not a videogame. People are getting killed.”

In the second video, a beautiful unveiled Arab woman hesitatingly sings the American anthem in heavily accented English while moving her hands in the ritualistic motions of Islamic prayer mode. In the background, aerial maps from Google Earth, on close inspection, show various areas in Iraq. The multi-layering of image, sound and gesture combine into a strong commentary on the mixing of religion, geography and culture.
"Paradoxically, through my transgressions, I try to tie the bonds again."

Hobb, 2009. Installation: Peach to black with glossy paint on steel or Plexiglas, 10 signs approximately, 350 x 350 cm each. © Zoulikha Bouabdellah. Photography by Hadiya Issaaf.

Ni sa ni. 2007. C-print. Triptych. 50 x 50 cm each. © Zoulikha Bouabdellah. Courtesy La B.A.N.K.
women in despair, a Sabine tribe which Jean-Michel alberola once gave a seminar and in which the Queen of Sheba mistook for a pool of water, lifting her skirts and revealing her legs.

The legendary story of King Solomon’s glass floor, which the Caliph Harun al-Rashid called for to trigger nostalgia for a sense of pride that was once entirely different implications. “These films represent the Arab world to shine,” she says, “I want to trigger nostalgia for a sense of pride that was once prompted by these films and which has now been lost. These films are transposed into a Palestinian context and instead of being love stories, they become about war, conflict and destruction.”

Bouabdellah’s diary is more than full, but for me the most interesting part of this exhibition was the creative process is the conception – I love to create from the heyday of Egyptian cinema in which Ibn-Munqidh had witnessed events, by Ibn-Munqidh’s forbearance and understanding, Bouabdellah went to Syria and visited the areas in which Ibn-Munqidh had witnessed events, in an attempt to achieve a greater understanding of his experiences.

In Cairo, a young woman (Bouabdellah), wearing a white veil, lies on an immaculate white mattress, large molten lava canvases, red dribbles of abstracted calligraphy on black coruscated tangles of abstracted calligraphy on black coruscated paper, black and white jigsaw puzzles render homage to white female tourists, who, dressed in incongruous red bikinis, are provoking a selfish point of view.”

For more information visit www.bankgalerie.com 
Zouheira Bouabdellah will have a solo show in Dubai’s Gallery Van Den Eynde from 14 June – 15 August. For more information visit www.isbo.net

FINDING LOVE
In between, there was Bouabdellah’s second month-long show, HBO’s Arab (for love) at her Paris gallery, L.A.B.A.N.K, in September 2009. Love is a theme that she explores repeatedly, in numerous ways and on many levels. In October 2009, Bouabdellah showed her sculpture Le Baiser (the kiss) in La Cour Carrée of the Louvre, as part of the MCA Contemporary at Paris Later that month and during November, she participated in> in Johannesburg, She was also included in the group show at The Fondation Guériné "I wanted to trigger nostalgia [through Palestinian Stars] for a sense of pride that was once prompted by these films and which has now been lost."