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Latifa Echakhch *Speakers' Corner*

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In one room a wooden box lies on the gallery floor surrounded by an army of bare flagpoles; in another, a few burnt tyres are scattered around and the walls are lined with carbon paper that's been splashed with methylated spirits, the ink running down. This description of Latifa Echakhch's *Speakers' Corner* exhibition at Tate Modern Level 2 Gallery probably doesn't sound like much, but the strength of her practice is precisely in the austere simplicity of her visual language. That's not to say that her work is unimpressive or unspectacular – the show is both these things – but the violence is always somehow contained, seeping through the artist's minimal gestures.

The carbon-paper piece, entitled – apparently after a Yasser Arafat quote – *For Each Stencil a Revolution* (2007), is meant to evoke a time in the 1960s when this now-obsolete method was extensively used to reproduce revolutionary pamphlets. But in a gesture of fierce, and individual, rebellion – perhaps in opposition to the once-borderline-military organisations of young protesters – Echakhch has sprayed the whole installation with alcohol, as if to burn the place to the ground. The blue ink dribbles and draws on the floor an uneven frieze motif; the slogans that could have been written, believed in, distributed and shared are turned into insignificant muck at the bottom of a gallery wall.

The tension between the individual and the collective underlies the whole exhibition. The burnt tyres, bringing to any French mind the Paris riots concomitant with Nicolas Sarkozy's accession to power, echo the aggressiveness of the splashed spirit on the walls. They seem to embody the destructive will of one against the decisions of many. Next door, in the installation *Fantasia* (2008), the touchingly small soapbox is perhaps one of the most pathetic symbols of political engagement. It is the possibility of free speech reduced to its simplest form, and a poignant symbol of the need to convince in order to change. The clusters of flagless white flagpoles pointing up in a fascist-like salute that surround the box seem to threaten it like a militia; the vision of one is menaced by the blindness of the horde.

Echakhch was born in Morocco in 1974 but grew up in France, and it seems that for her, as for most people born in that country around that time, the 1960s, with its home-stencilled utopias, are taken as a sort of acme of protest. Yet as the artist is quick to point out in the exhibition leaflet, beside its political resonance, her carbon paper also bears a whole different set of associations; she mentions the smelly exercise sheets once distributed in every school, but it could just as well evoke the paranoiac institutional requirement to have everything in triplicate. *For Each Stencil a Revolution* also belongs to the purely formal realm, as a breathtaking oversize colour-field painting (especially timely presented alongside Tate's Rothko exhibition blockbuster, coincidentally or not). Echakhch's works exist in this zone of confluence of the political, the poetical and, at times, the viscerally sensorial. *Coline Milliard*



For Each Stencil a Revolution
(detail), 2007. © the artist