

Lunn, Felicity. "Latifa Echakhch," *Frieze* (January-February 2011): 127.

## Frieze

### Latifa Echakhch

Latifa Echakhch  
'Still life, Frame Still'  
Installation view  
2010



#### *Fri Art, Fribourg, Switzerland*

Latifa Echakhch's solo exhibition at Fri Art was her first in Switzerland, the country she has been living in for the past two years. At the heart of this presentation of both new and existing work was the artist's transformation of the symbols of her cultural heritage into still lifes, freeze-framed so as to seem either obsolete or already dead. Unlike some contemporary artists with an immigrant background, Echakhch distances herself in much of her work from these symbols; she left Morocco at the age of three, does not speak Arabic, has no memories of the country of her birth and is informed more by her upbringing in France. She is more interested in deconstructing cultural stereotypes that have repeatedly confronted her and reinvesting them with new meaning.

Echakhch has a talent for distilling the political and the personal via clearly recognizable objects and materials. This is taken up in installations such as *Untitled (Gunpowder)* (2008), a grainy black border that was made by hurling gunpowder tea (a form of Chinese green tea in which each leaf is rolled into a small round pellet) at a wall. A reference to both the popularity of tea in Morocco and to a battlefield, as well as a nod to Minimalism, the work establishes the artist's ability to create multilayered gestures that are both subtle and precise. This was enhanced by the rhythm of the exhibition, whereby works from the same series were repeated over two floors, suggesting that they are part of a much larger whole. 'Untitled I - V' (2010), for example, comprises a group of large canvases applied with uneven rows of either white or black carbon paper. Minimal, monochromatic and process-based, the works pay homage to the humble and nearly obsolete material that enabled revolutionary texts in France and other countries to be mass distributed in the 1960s and '70s.

Just as the carbon paper is empty of any text, so the drums that feature in the four versions of *Untitled (Drummer) [a, b, c, d]* (2010) are silenced and the clothes scattered around them on each plinth apparently abandoned. Echakhch represents marching-band drummers not with statues of figures or even with the uniforms of traditional bands, but rather by piling civilian clothes on plinths, thereby replacing possible associations with military or political activity with individual portraits.

This quietly restrained analysis of objects and processes avoids nostalgia but is imbued with the melancholy of absence. A white linen cloth conceals the objects on an occasional table while, in *Vanités* (Vanities, 2007), the traditional Moroccan poufs placed on the upper floor are on closer inspection no more than empty black plastic bags. The plastic is echoed in a series of five small photographs, each entitled *Still Life (Vanités)* (2010), taken in an abandoned graveyard near the place of her birth in Casablanca and close to her father's grave. Even in the context of this highly personal work, Echakhch's observation is discreet. Reflecting the title of the related 2010 video, *Raouda, the little garden* ('raouda' meaning both graveyard and garden in Arabic), she focuses primarily on the rubbish caught on the scrub and tiny snails clustered on leaves. Both the photographs and the video avoid any direct reference to the cemetery, tracing a path across the dried grass, thistles and mossy stones of the apparent wasteland. Only one of the images shows what gradually appears to be a non-descript tombstone on which is inscribed a name in Arabic and, adhering to Moroccan tradition, just one date, that of the person's death.

Felicity Lunn

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