

Pink Cheeks, Brown Shades: Soufiane Ababri's Queer Erotics

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I was invited to write this short piece on Soufiane Ababri's art practice when I have been passionately reading and studying Gayatri Gopinath's recently published monograph *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (2018), and thinking which queer art practices could be also be incorporated to the scholar's discussion. Extending her theoretical framework in *Impossible Desires* (2005), which focuses on the South Asian queer diasporic cultural practices and the "erotics of power" embedded within these practices' articulations of colonial memory (2005:2), Gopinath's *Unruly Visions* conceptualises a "queer regional imaginary" by focusing on a selection of contemporary art practices including those of Chitra Ganesh, Aurora Guerrero, Sheba Chhachhi, Akram Zaatari, Tracey Moffatt, Allan deSouza, Sher Shah, and David Dasharath Kalal. These "aesthetic practices of queer diaspora", Gopinath argues, "dwell precisely in the digressions offered by mining both personal and regional histories, identifications and affiliations: they constitute alternative byways that veer away from developmental and assimilationist narratives of both gay and national formation" (2018: 26).

What is formulated as *artistic subjectivity* here is defined through its refusal to be embraced or "included" by the heteronormative/homonormative discourses of liberation, empowerment, and citizenship. This register of queer aesthetics, whose investments are in neither a categorically intelligible desire nor a self-ameliorative empowerment, resonates with Soufiane Ababri's fierce art practice. This ambition to imagine a post-colonial queer practice seems to invest in, in Abrari's words, "a way of imagining how to perform a political and engaged practice without using the vocabulary of the dominant power ... [the social domination of which] infiltrates and contaminates systems of representation".

In his interview for the solo exhibition *Here is a Strange and Bitter Crop* displayed at SPACE in London (2018), Ababri makes clear how the queer accent in his art practice works through the intersectional operations of his identity: "the fact that I belong to several groups, namely immigrant, homosexual, brown-skinned, and being part of a postcolonial generation, gives me the opportunity to see things differently and interpret things in a specific way". However, this claim to difference in Ababri's practice does not merely translate into specific regional/geographic markers of identity but also work as an expansive, trans-local *queer-of-colour sensibility* that relates to different contexts of queer intimacy and desire.

Multiple layers of appropriation are at work in Ababri's work. Yet, the most significant gesture is located within its medium-specificity. He titles his drawings as

“bedworks” implying that the artist’s production takes place in his bed. The literal, metaphorical and ideological implications of uttering “bedworks” *as title* do not only offer a playful intervention into the marginalised status of drawing-as-medium within the hierarchical value system of the discipline of art history but also highlight the artist’s embodied labour in the process of producing (homo-)erotic art. Ababri swerves from a professionalised and disembodied space of art production to a personal, sexual, intimate and affective territory. The bed becomes the studio.

Ababri’s aesthetic choices in form, context and content helps us consider his works as a personal album, or an archive that presents everyday erotic encounters. This archive documents “queer affiliations across disparate locations [by] contesting the ongoing legacies of colonial modernity ... that consigns gendered, sexualised and racially marked bodies to hypervisibility and/or invisibility within a hegemonic visual field” (Gopinath 2018: 169-170). Rather than investing in a liberal humanitarian optics that urges us to see and save victims/objects rather than to witness agents/subjects, Ababri’s sketchy and banal imagery of everyday queer tensions between men prioritises an exploration of the intersections between the exotic, the erotic, and the ideological within dominant depictions of non-white masculinities, and their reception.

Ababri collects images from various sources including films, pornography, art works, and photographs he takes with his phone. The series of bedworks displayed under the title of *Memories of a Solitary Cruise* contains various artistic references including David Hockney’s paintings/drawings, Wolfgang Tillmans’ photography, Keith Haring’s *activist* drawings, Caravaggio’s paintings, Warhol’s screen tests, and Ang Lee’s film *Brokeback Mountain*. Ababri’s urge to “draw men with extreme masculinity” resonates particularly with Hockney’s early paintings and drawings in the 1980s, especially those inspired by the American beefcake magazine *Physique Pictorial* and 1980s’ gay soft-core. This connection with Hockney operates through not only the homoerotic content but also the formal/stylistic gestures these drawings perform. While Ababri strategically uses drawing as medium to present mainly non-white masculinities by means of a miniature-like aesthetic that lacks Western perspective, Hockney’s early paintings (especially those with references to swimming pools and *physique* magazines) also attempt to contest the articulations of photographic realism in Western canons of visual arts. Similarly, Ababri’s incorporation of non-white men into drawings that cite Tillmans’s photographic fetishism and Caravaggio’s *tableau vivants* clearly demonstrates the artist’s investments in hybrid, cross-cultural frameworks of queer aesthetics. Rather than attempting to authenticate specific cultural locales of homosociality, Ababri re-appropriates formal registers of queer representation by reflecting on his own experience of diasporic double consciousness. Perhaps, the emphasis on the “solitary cruise” demonstrates the situatedness, and the libidinal/erotic nature, of the artist’s own reflections on erotic embodiment and same-sex desire. In parallel to

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the practices of Hockney, Tillmans and even Caravaggio, Ababri's art practice explores the political potentials of erotic expression rather than those of fixed, stable identities and their affirmations/celebrations.

While the early examples of Ababri's bedworks seem to be more eclectic in the ways in which they are grouped and exhibited as compilations of images, the artist has recently been working on a set of site-specific projects that enabled him to further contextualise his queer aesthetics by responding to specific locations of sexual politics. *Here is a Strange and Bitter Crop*, the solo show at SPACE in London (2018), is a creative response to the suicide of Justin Fashanu, the first professional football player who came out as a gay man. Here, Ababri's work expands from Fashanu to a broader meditation on racialized black body in popular culture and on the ways in which the colonial memory works as an imprint in representing and locating black male body. Ababri's bedworks provide a queer response that celebrates black body through presenting black men having sex in the cotton fields. While the *mise-en-scène* in these works presents a symbolic landscape of colonialism and slavery, the sexual exchange of black male figures Ababri locates within this landscape juxtaposes sexual pleasure with colonial violence. However, by making the colonial memory the very playground for sexual pleasure enjoyed by men of colour, Ababri's practice politicises the erotic while eroticising the political memory. There is no sexual desire without that memory.

Ababri's show at the PILL in Istanbul, titled *Memories of a Solitary Cruise*, seems to offer another site-specific queer response to the Western exoticisation of "Oriental" masculinities. The artist's starting point for this project is a 2015 Public Policy Polling survey made in the USA, which found that 30% of Republicans and 19% of Democrats said they would support 'bombing Agrabah' – the fictional country of Disney's *Aladdin*. In response to this post-truth American perception of the Middle East, Ababri takes the genie in Aladdin's lamp as a point of departure in this project. Anthropomorphised as an ambiguous, asexual and submissive figure, the blue genie in *Aladdin* becomes an object of Orientalism in Ababri's imagery. In his depiction of the traditional Turkish wrestling, the artist abstracts the genie by painting the wrestlers' bodies in blue, and transfers its Orientalist meaning to an all-encompassing colour that flows throughout the exhibition space on- and off-canvas. Blue becomes the male flesh in Ababri's depiction of the wrestling scene, or perhaps it is the lubricant oil that facilitates male wrestling and its homoerotic theatre of masculinity. By using another Orientalist image of homoeroticism, where the erotic is located outside the intelligible sexual identity categories, Ababri's bedworks gaze back at the West by appropriating its tools of representation.

Majority of the male bodies depicted in Ababri's bedworks, including his Turkish wrestlers and his black lovers of the cotton fields, have pink cheeks, which can be considered as the artist's "signature". Ababri notes that these pink cheeks are used

to add a feminising effect to the masculine men he usually depicts in his works: “Putting on these pink cheeks eroticises the male body and it’s also a way to access to a system of representation of fragility... the pink cheeks imply a body that loses control of its own representation”.

Abrari’s practice is a quest for queer commons in the field of the (homo-)erotic. The artist discovers new answers to the question who counts entitled to desire or eroticise whom or what, and who is entitled to make that desire visible if not legitimate.

References:

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