

At the Marrakech Biennale, a Conversation Between Postcolonial Identities

by [Bansie Vasvani](#) on April 4, 2016



The Palais El Badii, with works installed for the Marrakech Biennale 6 (photo courtesy Marrakech Biennale 6, © Jens Martin) (click to enlarge)

MARRAKESH — Set outside the institutional white cube, in restored ancient sites and the ruins of a 16th-century palace, the sixth edition of the [Marrakech Biennale](#), *Not New Now*, arrives like a breath of fresh air. Curated by Guggenheim Abu Dhabi Associate Curator Reem Fadda, the current edition of the Moroccan biennale creates a marvelous symphony between artists from the African Diaspora and the Middle East, many of whom give voice to the disenfranchised. Filled with works that reverberate as much for their aesthetic sensibilities as for their historical significance, Fadda's exhibition takes on identity politics in the region that she refers to as the "Global South" with a quiet certitude.

In the repaired Palais El Bahia, which is replete with ornate carvings, mosaic floors, and intricately patterned wooden ceilings, Fadda displays a multitude of works that explore and reclaim ideas of selfhood and nationalism. Malian scholar [Manthia Diawara](#)'s video "NEGRTITUDE: A Dialogue Between Senghor and Soyinka" (2015) probes the notion of negritude through an imagined dialogue — based on archival material — between Leopold Senghor, the first president of decolonized Senegal, and Wole Soyinka, the first African novelist to win the Nobel Prize. Diawara intersperses the dialogue with scenes of African streets, music, paintings, and dance in order to bring to life a vision of

African culture. By introducing the significance of African identity in a postcolonial era, Diawara sets the tone for other works in the biennale that come from countries in the region that gained independence in the 1950s and '60s — a time when they established distinctive artistic movements and voices too.



One of Melvin Edwards's 'Lynch Fragments' (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

Diawara's concept of negritude becomes much more charged in works by [Sam Gilliam](#), [Al Loving](#), and [Melvin Edwards](#), who engage with craftsmanship, textile, and found metal objects to shape a unique African American artistic identity. Gilliam's colorful, suspended canvases cascade from above and swirl on the ground, taking on sculptural shapes while also recalling the Belgian artist [Berlinde De Bruyckere](#)'s hanging animal skins. Loving's highly tactile collage paintings from the '70s — made from tattered found fabric and a clear precedent for contemporary artists like Shinique Smith — reference destitution and years of servitude, as much as Edwards's captivating and rough metal sculptures from the *Lynch Fragments* series — devised from shackles, chains, padlocks, and armature — reference subjugation and slavery. The African American artists' works are placed in rooms adjoining colorful abstract paintings of strident geometric shapes and curves by the Moroccan trio [Farid Belkahia](#), [Mohammed Chabaa](#), and [Mohammed Melehi](#), who founded the postcolonial Casablanca group in the late '60s and paved the way for Moroccan modernism by combining their Arab-African origins with Western forms. In this way, Fadda facilitates a dialogue between various forms of abstraction, histories of conflict, and trajectories of independence.



Dineo Seshee Bopape, “The name of which escapes me now” (2016) (photo courtesy Marrakech Biennale 6, © Jens Martin) (click to enlarge)

Materiality is integral to the South African artist [Dineo Seshee Bopape](#)’s representation of Pan-African identity in her installation “The name of which escapes me now” (2016). Composed of metal clamps, rods, large wooden ladles, drums, bricks, soil collected from different African countries, and stickers of different African flowers pasted on the surrounding walls, Bopape’s work is inspired by the lyrics of the song “Azania” — “From Cape to Cairo, Morocco to Madagascar ... Azania, our voice/land/being, we will get it via bazookas” — that was often sung during the South African struggle against apartheid. Reminiscent of a science lab filled with samples of soil, or a stage with drums poised on metal stands, Bopape’s installation presents an innovative repository of earth that stands in for a utopian idea of a united African continent.

In the vast ruins of the Palais El Badii, some pieces that allude to the precarious urgencies of life become highly potent. For instance, Moroccan artist [Fatiha Zemmouri](#)’s gigantic faux rock — made from polystyrene and plaster — that’s wedged between two solid stone walls is highly credible (and strongly reminiscent of Michael Heizer’s “Levitated Mass” [2012]); one can’t help but be in awe of its ostensible power and destructibility, especially when viewing it in the long, narrow corridor of its current setting. On the other hand, Omani artist [Radhika Khimji](#)’s parachute “Stay Safe” (2016), which appears caught on the rugged walls of the vestiges of the palace, effectively evokes memories of past wars, but loses its power when seen in the open, unspoiled grounds next to the Koutoubia Mosque.



Radhika Khumji, "Stay Safe" (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Fatiha Zemmouri's "A l'abri ...de rien" installed at Palais El Badii (photo courtesy Marrakech Biennale 6, © Jens Martin)

For many artists from the region, art is a way to express a sense of helplessness, and for others a voice for self-recognition. From the Palestinian artist [Khalil Rabah](#)'s funny but mournful video "Body and Sole" (1995), which is installed at the Dar Si Said Museum and shows the artist eating his own shoes, one gets a sense of desperation and urgency about not being able to find a safe haven. Relatedly, *The Book of Exile* (2016) by architects [Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti](#) documents the stories of refugees in occupied Palestine — an "act of decolonization" and an effort to keep a suppressed culture alive.

Fadda's well-chosen and thoughtfully installed exhibition invites the audience to partake in the ongoing discourse of postcolonial identity. Succinct and provocative without being overbearing, the biennale showcases artists from the decolonized regions of Africa and the Middle East, and in doing so evidences the commonality of their purposes and "the existence of transnational histories." Unlike the 2015 Sharjah Biennial, for which a few Western artists were invited to make works in response to the region and its history, Fadda's concern is to salute the practitioners of the Global South (and its diaspora). The Ghanaian artist [El Anatsui](#)'s massive 20-by-60-meter commissioned tapestry, made from discarded bottle caps and hanging like a flag in the Palais El Badii, is an appropriate symbol of one of the strongest current, international art exhibitions in the region.



El Anatsui's "Kindred Viewpoints" installed at the Palais El Badii (photo courtesy Marrakech Biennale 6, © Jens Martin)

*The **Marrakech Biennale 6**, Not New Now, continues at sites around Marrakesh through May 8.*

**Al LovingDineo Seshee BopapeEl AnatsuiFarid BelkahiaFatiha
ZemmouriKhalil RabahManthia DiawaraMarrakech BiennaleMarrakeshMelvin
EdwardsMohammed ChabaaMohammed MelehiMoroccoRadhika
KhimjiReem FaddaSam GilliamSandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti**