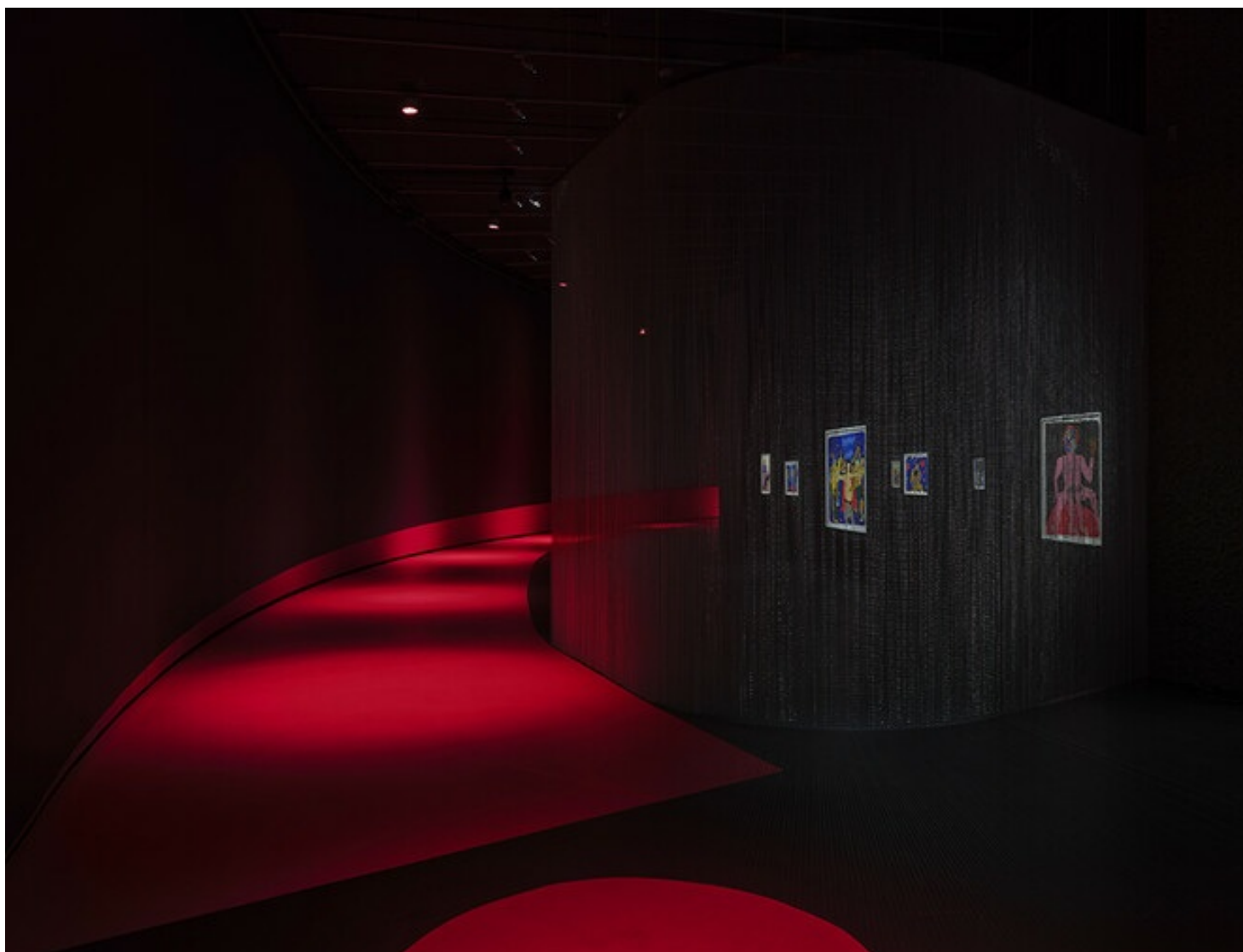

**Soufiane Ababri: Their mouths
were full of bumblebees but it was
me who was pollinated**
Emily Steer

Exhibition Review
01.05.2024



Title

Soufiane Ababri: Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated

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About the author(s)

is a London-based arts and culture journalist. She was previously the Editor of *Elephant* and has written for *AnOther*, BBC Culture, the *British Journal of Photography*, the *Financial Times*, *Frieze*, the *New York Times Style Magazine* and *Wallpaper*. She is currently training to be a psychodynamic psychotherapist and her writing explores the intersection of art and psychology.

Cover image: **Fig. 6** Installation view of *Soufiane Ababri: Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated* at the Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2024. (Courtesy Barbican Art Gallery, London; photograph Eva Herzog).

Soufiane Ababri: Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated

by Emily Steer • 01.05.2024

For the Moroccan artist Soufiane Ababri (b.1985), the bed is a site of passionate subversion. Many of his coloured-pencil drawings depict naked men caught in intimate entanglements [FIG.1](#), positioning the bedroom as a place of simultaneous private and public performance. Others portray rapturous scenes in nightclubs [FIG.2](#), with a cast of revellers who dance, writhe and lick. The unconventional, tight crop of Ababri's drawings creates a sense that the viewer is in the room with his muscular lovers and party-goers: not quite a participant, but not merely an onlooker either. The artist creates many of these works while lying down in bed, but despite this supine position, there is an immediacy to his energetic scenes, which are rendered in forceful, expressive strokes.

Ababri's solo exhibition in the Curve at the Barbican Art Gallery, London [FIG.3](#), showcases a new body of work. The eighteen drawings make intense use of colour, with vibrant red sheets, bright yellow and orange clothing and pink-flushed cheeks. His characters seem to swim, vortex-like, in deep blue backgrounds, some of which are peppered with floating circles of colour [FIG.4](#). In as much as these discs indicate simplified club spotlights, they also seem to visualise some of the freedom that queer spaces afford. Ababri's figures express themselves with wild abandon, enjoying the full pleasurable potential of their bodies; they leap and hold onto one another on the dance floor, freed from the specificity of locational and temporal markers. Protruding tongues and engorged penises are depicted with exaggerated flourishes [FIG.5](#); buttocks and muscles are proud and defined.

On the opening night of the exhibition, Ababri staged a performance in which six dancers crawled along the floor of the gallery. The artist's interest in horizontality and his decision to draw while in bed stem from the frequent portrayal of women, enslaved people and Arab figures in seated or reclining positions in nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings. Such poses – as epitomised by the work of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) – were intended to highlight the subject's subservience and passivity, as well as stereotypes of lassitude or 'laziness', catering to the white, Western male gaze. When Ababri's figures are shown in repose, however, they are active participants in their own play and

pleasure. As he remarked in a recent interview, he began drawing in a lying-down position – ‘in a register of laziness’, as he put it – ‘to get as far away as possible from the vocabulary of the white artist in a vertical position in his studio’.¹ This also reflects the artist’s belief in non-violent forms of resistance, recalling large-scale die-in type protests or the act of lying down on the ground in the face of police intervention. As a result of Ababri’s prone position, his drawings appear to have poured instinctively from mind to paper, as opposed to being composed using an organised tableau of models.



Fig. 1 *Bedwork, Men in the sun*, by Soufiane Ababri. 2023. Coloured pencil on paper, 110 by 130 cm. (© Soufiane Ababri; photograph Rebecca Fanuele; exh. the Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London).

Similarly, the artist’s use of coloured pencil can be understood as a rejection of a traditional, academic approach to creative production – although it must be noted that his use of the medium is, at times, almost indistinguishable from the vibrancy of paint on canvas. In practical terms, however, the works have a fundamental accessibility, requiring limited materials and only a bed for a studio space. As an artistic tool, coloured pencils might typically be considered naive – often associated with the drawings of children – but it is precisely these material preconceptions that allow Ababri to challenge interpretations of depictions of queer pleasure as ‘perverse’ or ‘deviant’. The use of pencil also takes the works far away from the proliferation of sexual imagery found online. Although many viewers will be desensitised to the presence of sheened bodies performing intimacy for film, television and pornography, there is something in the rough pencil lines and sharply angled genitals of Ababri’s drawings that is genuinely surprising, as they revel in the hairs, blemishes, curves and

crevices of the human body.



Fig. 2 *Bedwork, Chemical conviviality*, by Soufiane Ababri. 2023. Coloured pencil on paper, 57 by 83 cm. (© Soufiane Ababri; photograph Rebecca Fanuele; exh. the Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London).

The raw, queer sexuality of Ababri's drawings also challenges the exoticisation and objectification of Arab bodies in Western art history. Taking ownership of his own narrative, the artist embraces the physicality of his characters, whose bodily proportions are often amplified to highlight their erotic impact. Although only a small number of the works are directly biographical, his experience as a gay Arab man growing up in Morocco and France informs the works' visceral nature. With overt pride and desire, he visually counters the stigma – and the resulting violence – that he has known in both countries.

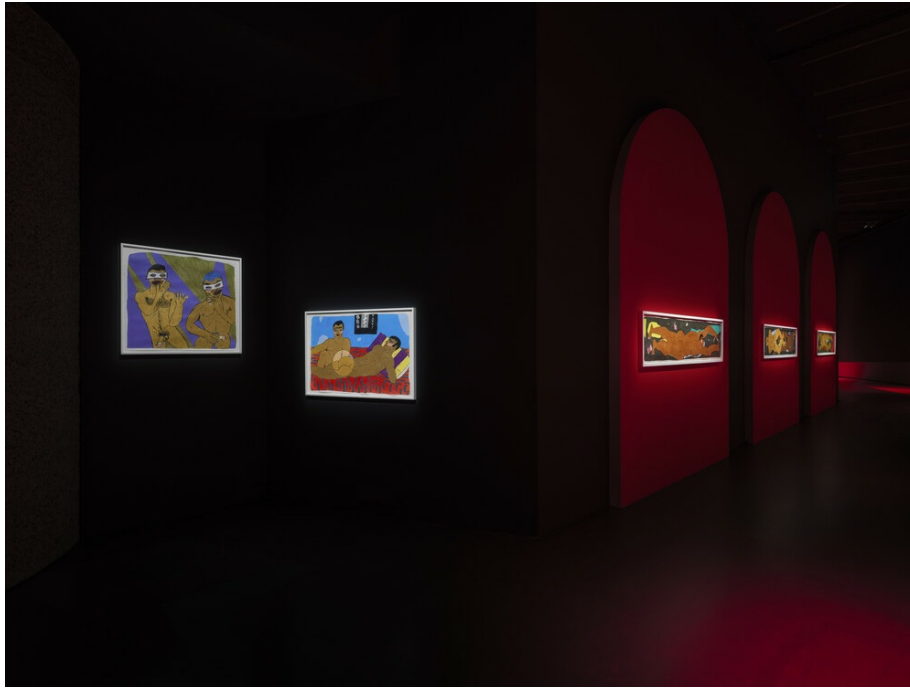


Fig. 3 Installation view of *Soufiane Ababri: Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated* at the Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2024. (Courtesy Barbican Art Gallery, London; photograph Eva Herzog).

In this body of work, the ostensibly private nature of the bedroom is juxtaposed with the public, communal space of the nightclub. This extends beyond the paper into the gallery, as the artist has transformed the Curve in order to evoke the feel of a club. Long chain curtains hang at either end **FIG.6**, the space has been darkened, a blood-red light floods the curved walkway, and an ambient soundtrack fills the space. The title of the exhibition stems from the distinctive shape of the gallery, which the artist compares to the curve of the Arabic letter *ز* (Zayin) **FIG.7**. This forms the first letter of the homophobic slur *zamel*, which the artist was subjected to while growing up in Morocco. The ‘buzzing’ sound of this first letter is often used in isolation to indicate the word without overtly expressing it, mimicking the noise of bumblebees when uttered repeatedly. *Zamel* derives from the Arabic word *zamil*, which means colleague or close friend. Its cultural warping is co-opted by Ababri to explore the damaging and restrictive nature of homophobia, which impacts not only queer connections but also the intimacy that exists between friends of the same gender. The drawings, which are brightly illuminated in the surrounding darkness, punctuate the space in highly visible acts of riotous protest **FIG.8**.



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Soufiane Ababri: Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated* at the Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2024. (Courtesy Barbican Art Gallery, London; photograph Eva Herzog).

It is difficult not to acknowledge a dislocation between this fearless exhibition and the wider context of the Barbican Centre, which has recently seen multiple artists, including Yto Barrada (b.1971), Mounira Al Solh (b.1978) and Cian Dayrit (b.1989), withdraw their work from the group exhibition *Unravel*, as well as the staging of a guerrilla show of Palestinian art in its foyer.² These acts of protest followed the institution's cancellation of the London Review of Books Winter Lectures. The series included a talk by Pankaj Mishra titled 'The Shoah after Gaza', in which the author proposed to examine the 'fate of universal values' when Israel, 'a country founded as a haven for the victims of genocidal racism, is itself charged with genocide'.³



Fig. 5 *Bedwork, Queen boat affair*, by Soufiane Ababri. 2023. Coloured pencil on paper, 86 by 78 cm. (© Soufiane Ababri; photograph Rebecca Fanuele; exh. the Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London).

The Barbican is not alone in being criticised for its handling of such issues. In the last few months, for example, more than one thousand artists, including Tai Shani (b.1976), Adham Faramawy (b.1981) and Oreet Ashery (b.1966), signed an open letter accusing the Arnolfini, Bristol, of censorship of Palestinian culture, following the cancellation of two events in the city's Palestine Film Festival.⁴ HOME, Manchester, also recently cancelled a literature event titled 'Voices of Resilience', organised by Comma Press, after the Jewish Representative Council of Greater Manchester accused one of the speakers of antisemitism.⁵ Their decision was met with protests outside the arts venue, and many artists also withdrew their work from the *Manchester Open* group exhibition. HOME subsequently apologised for their decision and have reinstated the event.⁶

These same institutions seem to comfortably platform progressive views when they are rooted in personal experience or speak to more general, historical dynamics of domination and subjugation. The Barbican rightly gives Ababri a platform as a powerful anticolonial voice. It seemingly embraces and promotes his call to look at the world and question it unflinchingly. However, the institution's decision not to engage with the mass violence in Palestine reveals the conflicted and contradictory limits of open political discourse when it comes to the urgent, dehumanising

devastation happening now. These boundaries are becoming increasingly visible – and ever harder to reconcile – across many of our public institutions.



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Soufiane Ababri: Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated* at the Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2024. (Courtesy Barbican Art Gallery, London; photograph Eva Herzog).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Soufiane Ababri: Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated* at the Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2024. (Courtesy Barbican Art Gallery, London; photograph Eva Herzog).



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Soufiane Ababri: Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated* at the Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2024. (Courtesy Barbican Art Gallery, London; photograph Eva Herzog).

Exhibition details

Soufiane Ababri: Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated

The Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London
13th March–30th June 2024

Footnotes

- 1** Soufiane Ababri, quoted from A. Chrisafis: “‘It’s effortless’: the Moroccan art star who shuns paint and works from his bed”, *The Guardian* (5th March 2024), available at www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2024/mar/05/soufiane-ababri-moroccan-art-star-bed, accessed 23rd April 2024.
- 2** See, for example, K. Jhala: ‘More works pulled from Barbican show over Gaza “censorship” row’, *The Art Newspaper* (8th March 2024), available at www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/03/08/more-works-pulled-from-barbican-show-over-gaza-censorship-row, accessed 24th April 2024; and J. Lawson-Tancred: ‘Protestors take over the Barbican with “guerilla” Palestinian art festival’, *Artnet* (19th March 2024), available at news.artnet.com/art-world/palestine-protest-censorship-barbican-2454819, accessed 24th April 2024.
- 3** Mishra’s lecture instead took place on 28th February 2024 at St James’s Church, Clerkenwell, see the event description at www.lrb.co.uk/pages/standalone/the-2024-lrb-winter-lectures-at-st-james-s-church-clerkenwell, accessed 24th April 2024.
- 4** See ‘Leading artists disengage from British venue that censored Palestine’, Artists for Palestine UK (12th December 2023), available at www.artistsforpalestine.org.uk/2023/12/12/leading-artists-disengage-from-british-venue-that-censored-palestine, accessed 26th April 2024.
- 5** See ‘Comma Press statement in relation to the cancellation of Home’s “Voices of resilience” event and baseless allegations’, Comma Press (28th March 2024), available at www.commapress.co.uk/blog/comma-press-statement-in-relation-to-cancellation-of-home-event-and-baseless-allegations, accessed 26th April 2024.
- 6** See R. Vinter: ‘Manchester theatre restores cancelled Palestinian event after artists protest’, *The Guardian* (4th April 2024), available at www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/apr/04/manchester-theatre-restores-cancelled-palestinian-event-after-artists-protest, accessed 26th April 2024; and ‘A statement on “Voices of resilience”’, HOME (4th April 2024), available at www.homemcr.org/article/a-statement-on-voices-of-resilience, accessed 26th April 2024.

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