

Over the past ten years, Safâa Erruas has been gently making her presence felt in the Moroccan art world, creating works of poetic fragility that nonetheless impose themselves with tranquil force. For a decade she has been developing a specific language, apparently minimalist, in which white monochromes and common materials express a subtle dichotomy: the apparent softness and an underlying violence. A simplistic categorization would be to describe hers as a feminine art, since the materials she employs refer to a world that remains decidedly female in the Maghreb: textiles, sewing, weaving and all the banal and blunt objects which women manipulate daily. Ought we not question this bait thrust at our emotions? Indeed, the forcefulness that exudes from Erruas' paintings and installations challenges this notion and we find that it balances on the fragile frontier that outlines us all, men and women and the time we are allotted in the days of our lives.

Safâa Erruas has a predilection for white materials, tissue paper, raw canvas, sheets and bedding on which she intervenes when she is not working directly on the white surface of the walls which surround her installation works whose fragility and lightness is but pretext for games of shadowplay. This delicate work evokes sewing and embroidery with its stitches and hems, as well as its particular tools, sewing scissors and seam rippers for slashing the fabric or piercing buttonholes. To understand this work is to retrieve, as the artist does, a retinal memory of matte limewash on the medinas of northern Morocco, walls of thick and crackled whiteness which the eye slips over happily while the hand is caught by the roughness. Here is a women's world, a world of silence at the vital center of the house. During the sewing hours the domestic enclosure is a soft cocoon of clean sheets which are stitched, patched, remodeled; all a strange oxymoron for the gentle ambience in which scissor tips, crochets hooks, sewing needles and razor blades do their piercing work.

During the 1990s, Safâa Erruas made works from bedsheets—the well-ironed creases testifying to their domestic origin. On them she stitched razor blades, whole or broken, needles, pins, dozens of sharp instruments spread over the surface of the sheet and tracing a personal calligraphy, a kind of silent writing. Sometimes we feel a strange silence that might lead us back to buried emotions, rediscovering the lost paradise we hold in ourselves. Yet how can one rest tucked into these sheets hemmed with blades; no caresses are possible where no hand can pass unscathed. Later, lace, gauze, tissue paper, the same fine fabrics would be deployed in installation pieces and covered with white pictorial materials stuck over with needles and thorns, wooden splinters appearing under the skin of the papers. Nowadays, silver threads embroider the edges of slashed fabric, slits that allude to the body's privacy expressed as gashing vertical smiles. Indeed, Safâa Erruas sews her work and mends the world. The white monochrome is there, omnipresent and speaking always of absence and silence, being a discreet form of mourning, a light gauze which aims to appease the pain and cruelty of the world. By eschewing color, her work avoids any direct evocation of violence or blood, yet in a sense evokes it everywhere. The paradox is striking: wounds are clean, sutured, never oozing, and yet the white carries memories of all shades of red. Yes, she mends and tries piece together the feminine and masculine, attempts a reconciliation between gentleness and violence, taking into account the lacerating force of desire as well as the consoling properties of fabrics that staunch or veil.

Mohamed El Baz recently exhibited a work including a taped voice saying: « I have always been interested in enclosure ». There is something of this for Safâa Erruas, in what she says about women's conditions, their imprisonment, their damped protestations. One imagines the knife blades hidden amongst a pile of sheets neatly put away in the cupboards, one hears the silence at the end of the day, the whiteness of melancholy, perhaps despair. Time as expressed in these works is the daily immobility of women's situation. Artists such as Pierrette Bloch have evoked such time by daily stretching a steel thread between two nails and winding horsehair round it in an esthetic of the rudimentary, a language made of the repetition of a single similar, though never identical gesture, creating forms that distinguish themselves by their loops, their clasps and the shadows projected on the wall. Works by Jamila Lamrani also come to mind. She uses glass beads from Dounia Oualit, creating silent medleys of fragility and tension. Watching Safâa Erruas realize some of her installations, as I did in May 2004 at the Marrakech Museum, where she disposed minuscule bits of tissue held together by paper clips, one understands how each of her gestures and the time she takes to create link her work to the ancestral work of women, that creation which engenders material from a simply spun thread, that punctuates time with rhythm and finally is able to utter, as Penelope did in the *Odyssey*, desire, waiting and enclosure. Perhaps this work is instinctive, picking up an enterprise transmitted from generation to generation, and yet it finds its full expression and reason for being in the modernity that Safâa Erruas displays to us and which we accept. She states: «My work is born of necessity. I choose my materials and display strategies according to needs which are as much formal and esthetic as they are purely emotional and instinctive.»

Safâa Erruas questions reality through this feminine instinct and across the emotions linked to the materials themselves, their symbolic charge and their capacity to appeal to our senses, quilted softness of cotton wool and cushions, sharpness of blades and points, fears and ancient pains before the syringe needles, tiny bandages and transparent dressings. A reality which questions memory and our buried emotions, and that she sometimes pushes to extremes of the surreal as in her line-up of knives upon which she paints lidless eyes, or when she binds a pair of white shoes with silver thread, sewing absence and desperately enclosing a void. She paints and whitewashes, attempts to erase the real that would seem to be an attempt to reduce reality in order to attain the essential, the very essence of things. Here is the origin of this emotion offered up to the viewer, which stimulates in him the endless dialogue between the soul and the body.

Indeed, in the omnipresent nearly blinding whiteness there is the body; and that is mostly what we perceive. This body is the very gesture of the work's creation, and its visible trace. It appears metaphorically in the image evoked by the huge slits contoured by tiny prickles of silver thread in certain recent works. Besides the unsubtle sexual reference we see through the slits, in this advocated femininity, we can also perceive the representation of a body liberated of all identity, of all culture, like a primal body, Magdalanian, one from before the time of forbidding, one without inhibitions. What Safâa Erruas demonstrates here is a new formal concern, showing the passage from the traditional flat medium of painting to a new dimension beyond the canvas, an attempt at spacialism that asserts the primacy of gesture over matter. Obviously, the formal analogy brings Lucio Fontana's work immediately to mind. Like the Italian master, Erruas manages not to deny the erotic connotations of her slashed canvases, just as she affirms the conceptual importance of these breaches in the pictorial space. This ambiguity, whether

conscious or unconscious, is always at the base of a successful work of art. In this case, we experience a successful orchestration of the void, where Erruas re-appropriates the surface on the skin of the painting, whether it be canvas, or board or paper. She makes slits, knots metallic threads, and creates reliefs born of the tensions in the materials. Tensile strength is explored with the different piercings and sutures. These gashes are as wounds denoting her fascination for the origin, time and essential enigmas of our lives.

Though visual art is silent, much is said by this work that maintains a permanent tension between the outside world and the intimate sphere. Safâa Erruas continually shows the complexity of our society. Such contrast between violence and tenderness or force and fragility, is the mark of existing tensions in our present society, where ideals of paradise and perfection turn out to be hellish traps, and earthly paradise seems more like a domestic prison. Erruas deploys feminine imagery in all its contradictions, speaking to a whole generation of women and men as well. We must contemplate her work over time, perhaps until the white monochrome confounds with the white blindness one feels in harsh sunlight, as the artist might have experienced as a child in Tétouan, after observing the white walls too closely and seeing the minuscule slits tracing their intimate geography made of accidents, bumps and reparations. We must look long enough to hear the women nearby at their sewing work. There is no cloth so torn that it cannot be mended, no blade that it does not become dull from cutting gauze strips, no sharpened pin that cannot be caught finally in fragile layers of paper, no wound that does not close. Indeed you must smile as Safâa Erruas, and gaze at length at her work until the violence of its poetry permeates your soul.

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