

## GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ARTIST ANALYSIS

### ARCHIVE PROJECT

# Samta Benyahia

ERICA EL GAFY, ART EDUCATION, 2022



Samta Benyahia / Installation view, 'In the Light of Morning...Albert Camus', Gallery Martine et Thibault de la Châtre, Paris, 2008 / Courtesy of the Artist

This short art analysis paper accompanies an original video presentation produced by UTC undergraduate students, dedicated to the work of a contemporary artist and developed as part of ART 4190r: Global Contemporary Art course in Spring 2021.

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### Samta Benyahia

Samta Benyahia was born in Constantine, Algeria, in 1950 and is known as an Algerian French artist. Benyahia is best known for her Arab Berber Andalusian geometrical patterns and rosace, called fatima<sup>1</sup>. She attended the National Superior of Decorative Arts School in Paris from 1974 to 1980 then preceded to teach at the Graduate School of Fine Arts in Algeria from 1980 to 1988. She received her Master of Advanced Studies in plastic arts from the University of Paris where she currently works and lives. Benyahia's applies Mediterranean Islamic architectural motifs along with photographs and oral poetry to explore issues of gender, space, and power<sup>2</sup>. She is a member of "diaspora"<sup>3</sup> and her exhibitions introduce a generation born in France after 1962: many of the members of this group create art that the many artists represented in that group, work questions the pressing issues of feminine portrayal in Arab-Moslem and Western cultures<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Behiery, "'Silent Synchrony'," Islamic Arts Magazine, January 28, 2014, [http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/silent\\_synchrony/](http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/silent_synchrony/).

<sup>2</sup> "Samta Benyahia," Samta Benyahia (The Artists, December 4, 2018), <https://www.the-artists.org/samta-benyahia/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ramón Tio Bellido, "The Twentieth Century in Algerian Art," Universes in Universe - Worlds of Art, August 2003, <https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2003/algerian-art>.

<sup>4</sup> Ramón Tio Bellido, "The Twentieth Century in Algerian Art,".

In the Western culture, the identity that a person has is not just limited to race or gender. There is no common measure in the act of social survival<sup>5</sup>. “Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational”<sup>6</sup>. One culture should not be limited but rather thrive into a combination of various other influencing cultures.

One of Benyahia’s more well-known installations, *Architectures of the Veil*<sup>7</sup>, displayed at the Fowler’s Museum, would cover the glass entrance doors and arched interior courtyard windows with digitally printed films of a blue moucharabieh pattern<sup>8</sup>. Encircling the courtyard, it consisted of sequin-embroidered motifs on netting, and eight large-scale black-and-white photographs of early 20th-century Algerian women, including the artist’s mother and aunt. There would be poems in Arabic and French spoken throughout the installation.

The openwork screens used in her installation are of a Mediterranean Islamic architecture used to cover the windows and balconies. The screens allow those inside—typically women—to view the outside world without being seen<sup>9</sup>. This doubles as a mismatch of the private /public, female/male, concealed/unconcealed issue. She installed it for the museum public as an area that she classifies as feminine and private by hanging the series of her female family members who would traditionally have been shielded from the public scrutiny<sup>10</sup> by the moucharabieh architecture. This offers a “dynamic exploration of gender relations as well as of the tension

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<sup>5</sup> Homi K Bhabha, “The Location of Culture,” Perusall, accessed April 28, 2021, <https://app.perusall.com/courses/sp21-art-4190-23209/bhabha-excerpts?assignmentId=AERS9nMFCMhQvEE83&part=1>, 172.

<sup>6</sup> Homi K Bhabha, “The Location of Culture,” Perusall, 172.

<sup>7</sup> Image: Samta Benyahia, *Architecture of the Veil*, 2007, Fowler Museum, Los Angeles

<sup>8</sup> “Architecture of the Veil,” *architecture of the veil*, accessed April 27, 2021, [http://users.telenet.be/african-shop/architecture\\_of\\_the\\_veil.htm](http://users.telenet.be/african-shop/architecture_of_the_veil.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Fundación de Cultura Islámica, “An Installation by Samta Benyahia - FUNCI - Fundación De Cultura Islámica,” FUNCI (Islamic Culture Foundation, October 2, 2018), <https://funci.org/an-installation-by-samta-benyahia/?lang=en>.

<sup>10</sup> Tiffany Sutton, “Taking Up Space: Museum Exploration in the Twenty-First Century,” *www.jstor.org*, 2007, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25160254>, 8.

between interior and exterior, concealment and revelation, and private versus public space”<sup>11</sup>. The screen is interchanged to emphasize the porosity of the boundaries between cultures on either side of the Mediterranean<sup>12</sup>.

When mother gave her the black passport photograph of herself in 1990, she says that the “use of the design relates to her alarm and dismay at the attacks on women in the 1990s and its adoption signals ‘taking a position to say no to violence against women’”<sup>13</sup>. The rosette pattern she used became a visual metaphor, wanting a universal story for women everywhere, to be seen. Her use of the traditional North African designs also explored the idea of infinity<sup>14</sup>. Through the use of repetition, Benyahia uses complex yet familiar patterns to give an impression of endlessness, which is often associated with the Islamic conception of God<sup>15</sup>.

In Benyahia’s photograph, *Femme des Aurès, Cultes intimes*<sup>16</sup>, her process offers the quality of revelation and concealment by alternating cut-outs of hollows with solid patterns<sup>17</sup>.

The women in her photographs display a look of declaration. They are asserting themselves as subjects and “challenge the objectifications imposed by the image and metonymically challenge

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<sup>11</sup> “Architecture of the Veil,” architecture of the veil, accessed April 27, 2021, [http://users.telenet.be/african-shop/architecture\\_of\\_the\\_veil.htm](http://users.telenet.be/african-shop/architecture_of_the_veil.htm).

<sup>12</sup> Siobhán Shilton, “Alterity in Art: Towards a Theory and Practice of Infra-Thin Critique,” *Alterity in Art: Towards a Theory and Practice of Infra-Thin Critique* 37, no. 3 (2014): pp. 356-371, <https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2014.0134>, 367.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Elms, “Identity and Positioning in Algerian and Franco-Algerian Contemporary Art,” *Academia.edu*, December 13, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/44164584/Identity\\_and\\_Positioning\\_in\\_Algerian\\_and\\_Franco\\_Algerian\\_Contemporary\\_Art](https://www.academia.edu/44164584/Identity_and_Positioning_in_Algerian_and_Franco_Algerian_Contemporary_Art): 198-213, 198.

<sup>14</sup> Sheha Girap, “Samta Benyahia,” *Alchetron.com*, February 16, 2018, <https://alchetron.com/Samta-Benyahia>.

<sup>15</sup> Sheha Girap, “Samta Benyahia,” *Alchetron.com*

<sup>16</sup> Image: Photograph-- Samta Benyahia, *Femme des Aurès, Cultes intimes*, Un Nouveau Paysage Humain, 1998

<sup>17</sup> Martin Elms, “Identity and Positioning in Algerian and Franco-Algerian Contemporary Art,” *Academia.edu*, December 13, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/44164584/Identity\\_and\\_Positioning\\_in\\_Algerian\\_and\\_Franco\\_Algerian\\_Contemporary\\_Art](https://www.academia.edu/44164584/Identity_and_Positioning_in_Algerian_and_Franco_Algerian_Contemporary_Art): 198-213, 198.

the double oppression of Algerian women”<sup>18</sup> in the terms of the violation of their bodies and the restrictions of traditional the culture. Samta Benyahia was inspired to “engage with the condition of women and the female body by events in Algerian history, specifically her dismay and horror at the treatment of women by Islamists and others during the 1990s.”<sup>19</sup>

A 2014 Amnesty International Report documents that simply because women went out without a veil, or dressed in western clothes or because they had jobs, thousands of women were violently assaulted, raped or subjected to unspeakable sexual violence, others were mutilated or killed, or abducted and forced to service in a variety of ways the members of the armed groups<sup>20</sup>.

“The cultures themselves, sometimes the most opposed, can also meet in the new space of a reflection.”<sup>21</sup> During this time, she has created a space to bring others together. Samta Benyahia wants a universal story for all women everywhere, to be seen, and to end the violence.

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Elms, “Identity and Positioning in Algerian and Franco-Algerian Contemporary Art,” Academia.edu, December 13, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/44164584/Identity\\_and\\_Positioning\\_in\\_Algerian\\_and\\_Franco\\_Algerian\\_Contemporary\\_Art](https://www.academia.edu/44164584/Identity_and_Positioning_in_Algerian_and_Franco_Algerian_Contemporary_Art): 198-213, 198.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Elms, “Identity and Positioning in Algerian and Franco-Algerian Contemporary Art,” Academia.edu, December 13, 2019, 198

<sup>20</sup> Martin Elms, “Identity and Positioning in Algerian and Franco-Algerian Contemporary Art,” Academia.edu, December 13, 2019, 200

<sup>21</sup> Caroline Hancock, “Samta Benyahia,” Samta Benyahia, accessed April 28, 2021, <https://samtabenyahia.com/>.

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Images:



Samta Benyahia, Femme des Aurès, Cultes intimes, Un Nouveau Paysage Humain, 1998



Samta Benyahia, Architecture of the Veil, 2007, Fowler Museum, Los Angeles



Samta Benyahia / Installation view, 'In the Light of Morning,...Albert Camus', Gallery Martine et Thibault de la Châtre, Paris, 2008 / Courtesy of the Artist