

For immediate release

barbican

Soufiane Ababri:

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

The Curve

13 March – 30 June 2024

Media View: Tuesday 12 March, 10am – 1pm

#SoufianeAbabri @barbicancentre

Supported by Fluxus Art Projects



Soufiane Ababri, *Bedwork*, 2023, *Between two paragraphs of Oscar Wilde's reading*

© Soufiane Ababri, photo Rebecca Fanuele

From March 2024, the poignant and exuberant works of Moroccan-born artist **Soufiane Ababri** transform the Barbican's Curve gallery for his first solo exhibition at a major UK institution. Living and working between Paris, France, and Tangier, Morocco, Ababri's interdisciplinary practice encompasses drawing, sculpture, installation, and performance. His work cites sources from sociology, philosophy, and the canon of western gay subculture, and is often inspired by real and fictitious encounters with other men.

Ababri's commission connects the crescent shape of The Curve gallery to the curling form of the Arabic letter Zayin (ز). This is the first letter of the word 'Zamel', a derogatory term for gay men deriving from 'Zamil', meaning close or intimate friend. In the Maghreb, the buzzing of this consonant is used insidiously, insinuating the slur without explicitly voicing it. Ababri takes the transformation of Zamil into Zamel as his starting point to investigate the ways in which language has been coded and weaponised. In doing so, he reveals how homophobia continues to threaten not only same-sex sexuality but undermines the possibility of intimate, non-heteronormative relationships based on radical forms of friendship.

Inspired by a thirteenth-century illustration by Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti that depicts a tender moment between two men holding hands and looking into each other's eyes, through this commission Ababri is engaging in art historical activism. Drawing from western and non-western queer experience, his work challenges traditional representations of intimacy and

sexuality. In their place, he forges an alternative canon, reversing the historic marginalisation of non-heterosexual relations.

A site-specific performance responding to the shape of The Curve will address the power architecture can hold over our bodies and its influence on our behaviour. Ababri references the history of clubs as sites of resistance for the queer community and explores the role of dance and music as tools for personal and collective emancipation.

Soufiane Ababri said: *“When I saw the architectural plans for The Curve, its emblematic crescent reminded me of the curling shape of the letter ‘zayin’. An artist is always in tension with the space offered to them, and I hope to use the structure of The Curve to reflect on social determinism – how my own experiences of harassment and the insult ‘zamel’ have shaped my response to this space. I asked myself: is suspicion a necessary element in a critical discourse? How could I use this commission to question relationships of power and domination, whilst making space for joy and a celebration of intimacy?”*

Shanay Jhaveri, Head of Visual Arts at the Barbican, said: *“We are delighted to present the first exhibition of Soufiane Ababri’s work in a UK institution. His show provocatively responds to the distinctive architecture of The Curve, reminding visitors of the continued vulnerability of queer communities, but also of their resilience, strength and the joy found on the dance floor.”*

Ababri’s previous works have demonstrated a shared fascination with probing gender roles, social dynamics, and eroticism through his characteristically kaleidoscopic lens. He considers the lingering legacy of colonial structures in homophobia, racism, and what passes as a socially acceptable expression of intimacy. Humour and irreverence are ever-present, subverting the notes of violence which darken the horizons of the work and resisting the strained reality of living and working in Morocco, a place where homosexuality remains illegal.

Soufiane Ababri (b. 1985 Rabat, Morocco) holds a Post-Diploma from the École Supérieure des Beaux Arts, Lyon, France, as well as an MA from the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, and a BA from the École Supérieure des Beaux Arts de Montpellier, France. He has exhibited in various institutions in Europe and worldwide with solo and group shows across Paris, Berlin, London, and Los Angeles. His work is included in the collections of the MAC/VAL and the FRAC Poitou-Charentes in France as well as the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden (MACAAL) in Marrakesh, Morocco, and X Museum in Beijing, China.

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Notes to Editors

Press Information

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Press image sheet available online

The image sheet and a pdf version of this release are available on the [Barbican Press Room](#). Please contact the press team for images.

Barbican Press Room

All Barbican Centre press releases, news announcements and the Communication team's contact details are listed on our [website](#).

Public Information

The Curve, Barbican

Silk Street, London, EC2Y 8DS

www.barbican.org.uk/artgallery

There will be no entry fee charged for this exhibition.

For more information on Barbican membership please visit:

<https://www.barbican.org.uk/membership>

Detailed visitor information will be available on the Barbican's [website](#).

The Curve opening times

Monday – Sunday: 11am – 7pm

Bank Holidays 12pm – 7pm

Exhibition

Soufiane Ababri: *Their mouths were full of bumblebees but it was me who was pollinated* is curated by Raúl Muñoz de la Vega, with support from Curatorial Assistant Colm Guo-Lin Peare. This exhibition is supported by Fluxus Art Projects

The Curve

The Curve is the Barbican's free exhibition space that wraps around the back of the Concert Hall. Launched in May 2006, Curve Art is a series of new commissions in which contemporary artists respond to the distinctive architecture of the space. Artists who have previously made new commissions for The Curve include Tomás Saraceno (Argentina); Richard Wilson (Britain); Jeppe Hein (Denmark); Marjetica Potrč (Slovenia); Shirana Shahbazi (Switzerland/Iran); Hans Schabus (Austria); Huang Yong Ping (France/China); Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (Canada/Mexico); Peter Coffin (US); Clemens von Wedemeyer (Germany); Robert Kusmirowski (Poland); Céleste Boursier-Mougenot (France); John Bock (Germany); Damián Ortega (Mexico); Cory Arcangel (US); Junya Ishigami (Japan); Song Dong (China); rAndom International (Britain); Geoffrey Farmer (Canada); Ayşe Erkmen (Germany/Turkey); United Visual Artists (Britain); Walead Beshty (US/Britain); Roman Signer (Switzerland); Eddie Peake (Britain); Imran Qureshi (Pakistan); Bedwyr Williams (Wales); Richard Mosse (Ireland); John Akomfrah (Britain); Yto Barrada (Morocco), Francis Upritchard (New Zealand) Daria Martin (US), Trevor Paglen (US), Toyin Ojih Odutola (Nigeria/US), Shilpa Gupta (India), Soheila Sokhanvari (Iran) and most recently Julianknxx (Sierra Leone)

Barbican Art Gallery and The Curve

Our visual arts programme embraces art, architecture, design, fashion, and film. Many of our exhibitions explore the interconnections between disciplines, periods, and cultures, and aim to imagine the world in new ways. Designers, artists, and architects are our collaborators in this process.

We invest in the artists of today and tomorrow; The Curve is one of the few galleries in London devoted to the commissioning of new work. Through our activities we aim to inspire more people to discover and love the arts. Entrance to The Curve is free. Through Young Barbican we offer £5 tickets to 14 – 25 year olds for our paid exhibitions, children under 14 attend for free.

Our exhibitions are complemented by comprehensively researched catalogues and a full range of public events. We develop engaging online content for audiences and offer special tours for schools. In partnership with renowned museums and art galleries, many of our exhibitions travel to reach both national and international audiences.

The Barbican believes in creating space for people and ideas to connect through its international arts programme, community events and learning activity. To keep its programme accessible to everyone, and to keep investing in the artists it works with, the Barbican needs to raise more than 60% of its income through ticket sales, commercial activities and fundraising every year. Donations can be made here: www.barbican.org.uk/join-support/support-us/forindividuals/make-a-donation

About the Barbican

The Barbican is a catalyst for creativity, sparking possibilities for artists, audiences, and communities. We showcase the most exciting art from around the world, pushing traditional artistic boundaries to entertain and inspire millions of people, create connections, provoke debate, and reflect the world we live in.

We are an international arts and events centre rooted firmly in our own neighbourhood, collaborating with local communities and putting the City of London on the map as a destination for everybody. Central to our purpose is supporting emerging talent and shaping opportunities that will accelerate the next generation of creatives.

As a not-for-profit, we rely on the generosity of individuals and organisations, including our principal funder the City of London Corporation. Every ticket purchased, donation made, and pound earned supports our arts and learning programme and enables the widest possible range of people to experience the joy of the arts.

Opened in 1982, the Barbican is a unique and audacious building, recognised globally as an architectural icon. As well as our theatres, galleries, concert halls and cinemas, we have a large conservatory with over 1,500 species of plants and trees, a library, conference facilities, public and community spaces, restaurants, bars, and a picturesque lakeside oasis.

We're proud to be the home of the [London Symphony Orchestra](#), and a London base of the [Royal Shakespeare Company](#). We regularly co-commission, produce and showcase the work of our other associates and partners including the [Academy of Ancient Music](#), [the BBC Symphony Orchestra](#), [Boy Blue](#), [Britten Sinfonia](#), [Cheek by Jowl](#), [Darbar Festival](#), [Doc'n Roll Film Festival](#), [Drum Works](#), [EFG London Jazz Festival](#), [Human Rights Watch Film Festival](#), [London Palestine Film Festival](#), [Serious](#), and [Trafalgar Entertainment](#).

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