

APRIL 6 - MAY 11, 2024

Aïcha Khorchid
Le Monde d'Aïcha

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CHANTAL

2021

organic pigments, latex, rabbit glue, oil chalk and
pencils on wood panel

200 x 200 cm

78,7 x 78,7 in





Installation shot of Aïcha Khorchid's exhibition Le Monde d'Aïcha at GNYP Gallery Antwerp in 2024

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ADMINISTRAME



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Odette la Femme de Ménage
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Aïcha's world – but is it even possible to speak of a “world” if its experience is only fed by the night terrors haunting us in our dreams? And by hopes for a different life – a better, more beautiful one?

Is the big, wide world not replete with wanderlust, with real journeys and imagined ones, with foreign cities and unfamiliar continents?

Which world does “Aïcha's world” refer to? That confined, walled-in world built for convicts, or rather the world of childhood, one that, like no other, is filled with fantasy and imagination? Playful and then again furnished with monsters?

It is indeed the world of childhood: it comes closest to “Aïcha's world”. When all the objects and figures are enormous and dominate the entire appearance of the imaginative power: the iron bed frame and the blood-filled bathtub, all the ingredients of the horrific images that are etched into the retina of memory, from the suicide of the mother to being incarcerated. Projected onto the weight of the wooden picture support, the objects of this world now stand before us: witnesses to a harshness and cruelty that know no mercy. Not even for the child. Especially not for the child. The child is the actual victim in each painting.

Decades later, this victim picks up a paintbrush and paints to get this world off her chest: not so much steeled by later life, but rather irrevocably raw from life.

This wound is the bleeding source for every single painting. The idyllic scenes in between – those about a successful life, love, peace and rampant beauty – are painted by the other source of memory: the one that is used to build a refuge in order to withstand reality. Those safe spaces you retreat to when you are at a loss and start dreaming up an ideal world.

If you were to view Aïcha's life unfold as a short film, you come across these two sources from which Aïcha's art draws its strength. Her life was more painful than that of most children – at least in our world. Here. In Europe. In civilized France.

Certainly, abysses did and still do exist here too. Luis Buñuel captured these phantoms of liberty on celluloid and showed us how horribly the orderly façade of the bourgeoisie can turn to rubble. Time and time again. And buried beneath this rubble lies Aïcha's world: cast away by the foster parents, there are the sedatives that are supposed to keep the child quiet, the bars that weave the Catholic cage of the cathedral like a spider's web.

Far too many children have suffered so much: abandoned by their parents and placed in the custody of the merciless.

This open wound explains a lot about this art. But not everything. It may explain the motifs, but not the unique power of the images. Is this naïve art? The art of an amateur, a dilettante? Of course, what else could it be? Aïcha didn't study at the academy. She received no instruction in perspective and anatomy, in modeling with light and shade, in composition and color theory.

The greats of naïve art were the customs officer Henri Rousseau in France and Niko Pirosmani in Georgia: both admired by Picasso. He organized a party for the Douanier in 1909 and later paid for his funeral. He actually never met the Georgian. Pirosmani died homeless under a backyard staircase, with no one around to mourn him, and was then laid to rest someplace. In his later years, Picasso dedicated an etching to him – in reverence to what twentieth century art owes to these naïve artists in terms of undisguised emotion. The great masters of modernism learned the art of unlearning from the 'naïves', the Sunday painters. Likewise from children's drawings, the art of the mentally ill, and Oceanic and African sculpture. All these self-taught artists were crutches that made it possible to forget the superficial virtuosity of academic training. The latter had long since been corrupted by the persistent abuse of art by salon painters. Emotions were merely acted out in these great historical paintings, they were not truly felt.

Aïcha comes from this tribe of the 'naïve'. But I hesitate to call her a Sunday painter. There is nothing solemn, dominical in this world of Aïcha. An insurmountable gulf separates her from the successful Sunday painters, who during the 1920s were referred to as the "Sacred Heart painters". Shortly before the National Socialists added these naïve artists to the list of "degenerate artists", France, which had not yet been occupied, officially awarded them the title "Maîtres populaires de la réalités" and the fledgling Museum of Modern Art in New York celebrated them as "Masters of Popular Painting".

It was only after World War II – in a time of longing for the childlike world of the 'Naïve' – that these untaught gods of Parnassus were rediscovered and celebrated, most notably the Croatian artist Ivan Generalić. His reverse glass painting, admittedly, has nothing in common whatsoever with Aïcha art born out of rape, abuse, violence and pain.

She shares but a few design principles with the "Sacred Heart painters". The frontal view, which in Aïcha's work however freezes into the hopelessness of the viewer. The lack of perspective and the enlargement of objects and figures, though in Aïcha's work they evolve into emblematic figures representing anguish. Not to mention the – in Naïve Art-terms unparalleled – monumental scale of the pictures. This monumental quality is not only due to their size, although the two-by-two-meter boards alone are quite unusual in the cosmos of Naïve Art. Aïcha's paintings are monumental even in the smallest motif, in the internal form of the brushstroke, in the power of reducing things to their very essence.

With somnambulistic certainty, the bed and the tractor stand firmly within the image, the gruesome medicine and the agonizing bathtub, the barren table and the deathly brown curtains.

I can't think of any artist who possesses such a fine sense for the distribution of weight in the quadrangle of the painting as Aïcha. It was hard to believe that she never had any teachers. Feigned naïvety in order to give the impression of authenticity has long been around in abundance.

The anti-academic design principles of a shadowless frontality in a shallow space, the naïve simplification of forms and a somewhat aggressive confrontation with the viewer have become the ubiquitous vocabulary of contemporary expressionism, when it seeks to demonstrate that it is possible to feel deeply when we forget everything we have learned.

Yet here, in Aïcha's world, we reencounter this immediacy in this unspoiled, naïve form that prompted Picasso to rave about Rousseau's paintings. Only, Aïcha does not depict the clean order of the petty bourgeois world of a Henri Rousseau. She is not describing the dreams of the gypsy woman, nor the magical jungle with the toy tiger. Aïcha's world is one of desolation that leads us to lose all trust in people. The gloomy tone of the paintings with their confined spaces underline this hopelessness.

Once again, there is this paradox: despair has never been painted more beautifully. Just as we stand before the beauty of the martyred body of Christ by Grünewald, just as we admire the beauty of the destruction of Guernica, because it has become a terrifying painting, so does the aesthetic pleasure thrust itself into the trepidation in the face of such utter desolation. Only art can achieve this. Only art can paint the petty bourgeois in such a way that we are frightened by them and at the same time relish their image. Only art can depict the sorrows of a personal life story with all its uprooting; it alone can transform the dark childhood rooms with their sparse furnishings of iron frames and small bottles of medication to combat insomnia and anxiety into something beautiful. The child Aïcha who, on her way home from school cannot rush into her mother's arms but finds her dead in a pool of her own blood in the bathtub, would decades later regret never having said "I love you" to her mother.

And we stand in front of this anguish and can't stop looking at it. Just as we can't take our eyes off the uncle of the foster family who abuses the child and stares at us unblinkingly: What do we want from him?

Aïcha Korchid had to live to be forty years old before she produced these paintings. Aïcha gets separated early on from her parents, who took her from Karachi via Lebanon to Paris before handing her over to state care, because there was not enough money to support the ten-strong family of refugees. Foster parents teach Aïcha how sexual abuse, psychological and physical violence can break a person. Dropping out of school and being passed from one foster family to another, from one torture chamber to another, eventually lead the young adolescent to search for, and find, her mother again, only to lose her in the next moment to a death that she chose for herself.

Her life as a street painter covering the pavements of Paris, as an exotic model and dancer in the Caribbean, as a decorator of domesticity – this life only ends when, literally from one day to the next, she discovers painting. Now she dedicates herself to painting as if to rid herself of her life of abuse. May we then be grateful that suffering gives birth to such great art?

Klaus Albrecht Schröder

Aïcha Khorchid

Aïcha Khorchid (French, born 1981 in Pakistan) currently lives and works in Mallorca. Her paintings, always on large wooden panels, address Khorchid's multilayered life story that forms a central point of reference in her work. Her oeuvre is about human relationships and their complexity. In this exhibition Khorchid artistically dissects her difficult childhood in the French foster family in Normandy, presenting to us its emotionally charged daily life and people that inhabited that world. Her powerful seemingly naive visual language stresses intricacy of pain and happiness, and makes her work a vehicle to think about human condition.

Khorchid's paintings were recently featured in the group exhibition "The Beauty of Diversity" at the Albertina Modern Museum in Vienna.

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