



## Off the wall: Latifa Echakhch's poetic histories

Mitchell Anderson

With painting, installation, sculpture, and now sound, the Swiss representative at the Venice Biennale explores the many dimensions of human emotion

In the town of Martigny in southwest Switzerland, **Latifa Echakhch**'s studio sits not only at a mountain junction that joins the central Alps and the hillsides of the Rhône Valley, but at a geographical and historical crossroads too. For the Moroccan-French artist, it's also a creative and personal one. This summer, vaulting green mountains, dotted with chalets and barns, fill the windows of the industrial space she has worked in for the past decade. Echakhch's works tackle conflicting feelings and histories through teasing and unfurling beauty, process, and poetic histories, so the contrasted location should come as no surprise. She is, in her own words, 'the kind of artist who can create massive installations and small works, too.' 'I have different scales of ability,' she says. Over the two decades since her career began, Echakhch's large installations and her constantly shifting painting and sculpture practice have regularly been featured in prominent institutions, biennials, and galleries across the world.

Her studio is currently filled with blanket-size canvases in various stages of completion, all continuing the concept of the decaying fresco format that has been a red thread during the past years. *Cross Fade* (2016) took the form of a room-filling mural of a cloudy sky, with most of the image chipped off in heavy flakes and piled like rubble on the floor below. One could view it as an instance of the sky falling or as a memory of bygone, ephemeral beauty. The possibility of seeing the glass both half-empty and half-full is typical of Echakhch's practice. For the 15th Istanbul Biennial in 2017, this decaying image of hers on the wall and at the viewers' feet depicted a solid crowd of marching, masked figures, suggesting protests and the socially-minded murals of Diego Rivera.



Latifa Echakhch in her studio in Martigny, July 2021. Photo by Mitchell Anderson for Art Basel.

The artist is working on iterations of these fresco paintings in monochrome gold, built up on textured concrete, before she chips away at them to form compositions that relate to both painting and architecture, the wall as an icon held static at the moment it begins to come undone. Her studio floor has become like one of her installations, with piles of rubble from her paintings' former selves littering the ground. As she sifts through the pieces with her hands one notices, in addition to the gold, fragments of the skies, people, and jungles of previous versions of this work. That the shapes that remain on the canvases conjure the geographies of maps as much as they do the remaining visitable sites of the ancient world is lost on neither viewer nor artist. Echakhch observes as much as she comments on the way we all try to make sense of the world. 'My ability in society is to feel the world around me,' she says. 'My practice and work consist of translating this feeling to objects and installations in order to make these feelings readable to and shareable with people.'



The feelings she refers to can be both eternal and timely; they are part of Echakhch's curatorial and market success. During the past decade, she has tackled themes found in headline news as well as in the oldest tomes of poetry and philosophy: force, fragility, and the power of abstract symbols. For her renowned series 'Tambours' (2012-13), body-size canvas tondos, India ink is slowly dripped, splattering over the raw support as deep chasms or centrally formed irises of an eye. Taking their name from the resonating sound of their creation – in production they became tambourine-like drums – these works are both meditations on time and space and references to Renaissance figurative painting. Where that era's artists, working under church supervision and sponsorship, used the circular-painting style to portray an imagined heavenly world, Echakhch presents a dark black hole. That her central form may be closer to true spirituality than cherubs and clouds, as much as it is to a deep emptiness, is the kind of duplicity that is carried throughout her work.



Echakhch's 2014 work *La dépossession* was presented at Art Basel Hong Kong in 2019, as part of the show's Encounters sector.

These pieces also capture time, or timing, in a way that is consistent across her practice. With the frescoes it's a moment of immobile entropy, while the titles of each *Tambour* (whose accompanying numerals indicate the number of minutes the works took to create) give credence to the processed time held on the canvases' surface. Other series of large installations reference theater installations and backdrops, the moment before or after an event takes place. At kamel mennour's Paris gallery in 2014, a large backdrop painted, again, with a cloudy blue sky hung flaccid and rumpled as it hit the gallery's floor. At the Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen last year, a series of cloud-shaped cutouts, *Encrage (L'appareil photo Kodak)* (2014), hung close to the institution's floor, creating pathways as if the viewer were backstage at a production without performers or audience. In everything we see Echakhch creating a setting through emotion and moment. Where one believes that moment leads is personal, open and, ultimately, profound.



Next year, Echakhch will tackle the most prominent and high-pressure enterprise of her career, as she represents Switzerland in the country's pavilion at the Venice Biennale. For this, she has chosen to focus on the same themes that have guided her over the past 20 years: feeling and the moment in which we experience it. She ambitiously aims to execute a project that 'deals with all the joy and all the sadness of the world at the same time.' To do so she has decided to enter new territory: sound and music. While her objects and installations have repeatedly included instruments and ideas of performance, this is a first, as she seeks to influence 'viewers going out of the pavilion to feel like they [are] leaving a concert,' she says. 'That means to have their heartbeat transformed, more calm, more intense, and also to have a lot of different fragments of memory that people will do a new edit of through this new experience.' As with all Venice Biennale projects, the specifics are staying under wraps until next spring, but it promises to be a centerpiece of this international affair, as well as another grand representation of the paradoxical nature of Echakhch's practice.



Left: Latifa Echakhch, *Cannot remember what was the first image, and close eyes again to recover.*, 2014, presented at Art Basel Miami Beach 2017 by **kamel mennour**, Paris and London. Right: Latifa Echakhch, *Sans Titre (Le Jardin Exotique)*, 2019, presented at Art Basel in Basel by **Kaufmann Repetto**, Milan and New York City.

Even her foray into sound will leave viewers in awe of the unique contradictions to be found in her work as she transforms her formal language into, as she describes it, 'thinking about music and sound, the way of producing, the way of analyzing the question of time, the perception of the world in sound and musicality.' What may be most surprising to witness, as with everything she creates, is the generous dualism that alters how we see and feel. Her deep research into musical tone will be the work's focus, yet in the pavilion, visitors will not hear a thing.

Latifa Echakhch is represented by **Dvir Gallery**, Tel Aviv-Yafo and Brussels; **kamel mennour**, Paris and London; **Pace Gallery**, New York City, Geneva, Hong Kong, London, Palo Alto, and Seoul; and **kaufmann repetto**, Milan and New York City.

Mitchell Anderson is an artist exploring the narrative potential of images and objects. Recent exhibitions include at Kunsthalle Bern (2021), Kunsthalle Zurich (2020), Fondazione Converso and MAMCO, Geneva (2019). He is a frequent contributor to international arts publications and has operated the nonprofit artist-run space Plymouth Rock, in Zurich, since 2014.

Top image: The artist in her studio, July 2021. Photo by Mitchell Anderson for Art Basel.