



BECOMING INDEPENDENT



AMINA MENIA AND ZINEB SEDIRA

Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin
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IMAGE REVERSE: Mohamed Kouaci, *Algiers*, Independence Day, 5 July 1962. Photography courtesy of the Kouaci Family Estate

Frantz Fanon, psychiatrist and writer from Martinique who lived and worked in Algeria between 1953 and 1961, wrote: “This huge task which consists of reintroducing mankind into the world, the whole of mankind, will be carried out with the indispensable help, of the European peoples, who themselves must realise that in the past they have often joined the ranks of our common masters where colonial questions were concerned. To achieve this, the European peoples must first decide to wake up and shake themselves, use their brains, and stop playing the stupid game of the Sleeping Beauty.” (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961)

2013 commemorates 100 years since the Dublin Lock-out and the build up towards the Easter Rising and Irish independence. As a homage to Joseph Marie Plunkett, one of the leaders of the Rebellion, who spent several months in Algiers in 1911/12, this exhibition takes a step aside to explore the process of becoming and being independent in Algeria.

Algeria commemorated 50 years of independence in 2012. The largest country in Africa had come under French rule in 1830. The Algerian War lasted from 1954 to 1962. The inhabitants of this country were torn between newly established insiders and outsiders and those in between, those who stayed, those who had to leave like the *Pieds-Noirs* and the *Harkis* for instance, creating lasting traumas in various communities and complex relations with language (Algerian, Arabic, French, and Berber languages like Tamazight, Kabyle) and religion (Muslim, Jewish, Christian). The Algerian revolutionary thrust and engagement in the Non-Aligned Movement was an example worldwide throughout the 1960s. The success of Gillo Pontecorvo’s film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) is testament to this. But the initial ideals were not necessarily carried out and a dose of disillusionment and powerlessness settled in and remains largely true to date, despite an immense wealth of resources. Nationalism meets “nostalgeria”, escapism, resilience, passionate militancy or aphasia in what has been and is still a hotbed of creativity across art forms, crying out today for attention and wider recognition. Certain clichés have survived too long without debate or criticism. Creating new axes of exchange will continue to expand the dialogue into the English-speaking world and further, and might contribute to releasing some anchored knots.

IMAGE REVERSE: *The Monument To The Dead of the First World War*, Algiers (sculpture by Paul Landowski, reliefs by Charles Bigonet), 1922-1928. Found postcard (collection idéale P.S.), dated 27/10/1930, Collection of Amina Menia © Paul Landowski/ADAGP. Licensed by IVARO, Dublin

At a time when other North African and Middle-Eastern countries are protesting for or figuring out new situations of self-determination, it is important to be reminded that the Algerians have already lived through various post-independence civil affirmation springs (“Berber Spring” in 1980, “Algerian Spring” in October 1988, and the “Black Spring” in 2001) claiming social liberties. But this troubled period is also known as the “Black Decade” of terrorism. Perhaps a look at their past and present can help to better apprehend today’s world affairs. The quest for freedom of thought and expression goes on not just there, around the Mediterranean Basin, but here and everywhere. Beyond notions of nationhood, the process of “becoming independent”, in its present continuous tense, starts on an individual level, affects everyone, and probably never ends.

Having given international visibility to her own Algerian family story in the earlier part of her career, Zineb Sedira (born in 1963 in Genevilliers, France; lives and works in London) continues intermittently to revisit and highlight Algerian history. *Saphir*, shown at Temple Bar Gallery in Dublin in 2006, was filmed in the old European part of Algiers.

Mohamed Kouaci started photographing in the 1950s in Paris where he and his wife Safia were involved with the FLN (the Algerian National Liberation Front). From the late 50s until Independence, they moved to Tunis and worked in exile for the Ministry of Information of the Temporary Government for the Republic of Algeria (GPRA). He then continued as the main (if not only) official photographer for the newly independent Algerian government. In *Gardiennes d’images* (Image Keepers), Sedira interviewed Safia Kouaci in her home in Algiers where she has been keeping an archive of her husband’s activity since he passed away in 1996. Discussing the photographs allows her to recall key historical events both visually and verbally, alongside the tale of their private life.

Kouaci photographed significant events during the war of independence and the three first decades of the young country. This includes portraits of Algerian political personalities such as Ahmed Ben Bella, Houari Boumediène, Mohamed Boudiaf, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Redha Malek, of official visits by Fidel Castro, Patrice Lumumba, King Hassan II, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and of mythical figureheads of the freedom fight like Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon. To this day, his photographs have lacked exposure

IMAGE REVERSE: Zineb Sedira, *Gardiennes d’images* (Image Keepers), 2010. Three screens video projections with sound. Production SAM Art Projects, Paris Courtesy of galerie kamel mennour, Paris

and study; they have often been appropriated or reproduced with no due crediting and copyrighting. Sedira envisaged this video installation as an invitation to experts who might join forces to document, preserve and diffuse Kouaci’s work in the future.

Amina Menia (born in 1976 in Algiers, where she lives and works) has an incisive fascination for art and life in the public sphere and her work involves underlining spatial possibilities/ impossibilities or incongruities in the urban environment.

Between 1953 and 1957, the architect from Marseille Fernand Pouillon was employed by the mayor of Algiers, Jacques Chevallier, to build housing estates for destitute Algerians in record time and budgets. This was coined an architectural and social “miracle”. It occurred at the same time as the beginnings of the Algerian War of Independence. *A Peculiar Family Album* (2012) is an auto-fictive narration with a wealth of architectural, historical, social and political references, superimposed on archival film footage of building sites and inaugurations. She mentions that “through the centuries, the city of Algiers has gone through ceaseless metamorphosis: it has been Berber, Phoenician, Roman, Arab, Andalusian, Ottoman, French.”

The Monument To The Dead of the First World War was commissioned by the French authorities for the centre of Algiers and inaugurated in 1928. Paul Landowski, sculptor of the main figures, also famously realised the *Christo Redentor* (1931) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The low reliefs were by Charles Bigonet. Over 10 years after the Independence, the mayor of Algiers enabled a renowned Modern Algerian artist M’hamed Issiakhem to transform this highly visible public sculpture. Menia is researching how and why Issiakhem decided to cover it under a concrete monolithic proposal in 1978. Likened to a sarcophagus or a shell, this encapsulating is both obliterating and protective. This gesture is unusual since “offending” colonial statues in any newly constructed nation across the globe have historically tended to be exploded, dismantled, displaced, or destroyed. In 2012, this structure is cracking and undergoing a restoration campaign. Menia’s documentary installation *Enclosed* investigates this layering of history, art history and heritage.

CAROLINE HANCOCK | Curator

IMAGE REVERSE: Amina Menia, *1978 Monument by M’hamed Issiakhem, Algiers, 2010*. Photograph courtesy of the artist

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