

VOGUE

A Moroccan Artist's Love Letter to Tangier Explores Recollections Personal and Political in a New Exhibition

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Photo: Courtesy of Pace Gallery

Installed over three floors of Pace Gallery, “How to do Nothing With Nobody All Alone By Yourself,” artist Yto Barrada’s thoughtful new show of works spanning her career paints a moving portrait of her family history and of her beloved, fast-changing hometown of Tangier. Through the mediums of photography, sculpture, and film, Barrada finds the hidden histories in the discarded ephemera of her family and city.

One of her earlier photographic series, *The Telephone Books (or The Recipe Books)* (2010), for instance, amplifies in scale the pages of a tiny notebook that belonged to her grandmother Zhor. The mother of 12 children (10 of whom survived to adulthood), Zhor was illiterate. In order to communicate with her grown children, she created a code of symbols and illustrations in the notebook—one indicating a child who wore glasses, another who had four children of her own—with markings to indicate how to use the dial on her telephone to reach each of them.

Family Tree (2005) is a document of a moment when Barrada and her mother’s housekeeper took down a wall of family photographs, carefully arranging them in the order in which they were removed—the housekeeper to clean, Barrada to record. Her mother was enraged, feeling that they could never be put back in the correct formation, but in fact, the pictures had preserved the base color of the bark-textured wall covering while the uncovered areas had faded in the Moroccan sunlight, leaving clear outlines to match the various picture frames—and a cryptic portrait of an absent family. The palimpsest of time is an enduring fascination for Barrada in a city that is constantly morphing, sometimes in ways that erode the quality of life. *Three red buildings* (2008) and *Pink and red building* (2009) are photographic

documents of the sort of poorly conceived apartment buildings that are shooting up all over the city's former grazing land to house an influx of new arrivals looking for work in the newly built port and light industrial factories. The surreally blank facades that Barrada has recorded have no windows of any description.

The compelling “sediments of history,” as Barrada describes them, also include discarded cornets of paper that she found littered in a public park, which were used by nut and seed vendors. They turned out to have been repurposed from the line sheets of the city's clothing manufacturers—one of the industries drawing the welter of new inhabitants to the city. Some of them even reveal the financial punishments for substandard work.

More heartbreaking still are Barrada's documents of the struggles of the migrants and desperate young locals whose longing to carve better lives for themselves in Europe causes them to take extraordinary risks to get there—the southern coast of Spain is clearly visible, a tantalizing nine kilometers away, across the dangerously roiling waters of the Straits of Gibraltar where the Mediterranean and the Atlantic meet. A seemingly benign collection of photographs of the logos of various bus companies is juxtaposed in the catalog with a narrative from a young person detailing the destination of each bus based on those designs, including information about how well-guarded they are—and the amount of space in the undercarriages for child-size people to hide.

I have been spending time in Tangier since 1989—it's where I met Barrada, who has since contributed substantially to the city's cultural well-being by

restoring the atmospheric 1940s Cinema Rif (now the Cinémathèque de Tanger) and transforming it into the country's pre-eminent film archive as well as a hip meeting place and cultural center. Barrada's naive wooden model of the cinema in the exhibition is part of a series that she made of all the old movie houses in the city. Many of the pieces in the show are made from fabrics that the indefatigable Barrada has dyed herself, stitching the panels together to create Frank Stella-esque pictures. She is currently planning to create a botanical garden in Tangier to showcase the 500 or so plants that can be used to create various tints. I'm heading to her studio in Brooklyn to try to match that perfect mauve—wish me well.

In all the years I have been visiting the city, though, I've never understood the strange rolling Dada contraptions of pipes and faucets that one occasionally sees on its sidewalks. In fact, they serve as tradesmen's calling cards for itinerant plumbers, advertising both their wares and their availability to work. Barrada has gathered together a collection of them—she even brought some to the States for her installation.

Barrada's politically engaged mother, Mounira Bouzid el Alami, founded Darna to provide a safe place for learning for women and children in the city. Her activism goes back decades. In 1966, she was invited by the State Department along with a group of fellow “young African leaders” for a “cultural appreciation” tour of the United States. From the State Department's point of view, the visit can only have been a partial success, for while the participants were impressed by aspects of the United States's infrastructure and technology, they were underwhelmed by its level of cultural sophistication. Piecing together her mother's own words through her

records and journals of this trip, along with the perspectives of the trip's organizers, Barrada has created *Tree Identification for Beginners* (2017), a stop-motion animated film that uses Montessori toys to animate the narrative. When she found a local science museum closed, Barrada characteristically fished out a poster from a trash can outside the building that illustrated the rock strata beneath her country in vibrant color coding. She has created a playful "Geological Salon" inspired by the colors and the symbols—screen printing them on to velvet to create pillows, cushions, and sheets that emerge from a custom trunk, along with all the elements that can be pegged together to create shelves and seating units. As the opening drew to a close, Barrada decided that it was time to liven things up—before the caravansary moved on to the festivities at the East Pole, that is—and started throwing the cushions (filled with different materials to delight children with various tactileities) to her friends until an irate guard came to tell her off.