

Interview

Hicham Benohoud's best photograph: the boy with the cardboard feet

Dale Berning Sawa

**'I was bored teaching art in Marrakech, so I started taking
photographs of my students instead'**



▲ 'What's he going to get us to do now?' ... a student in a Marrakech school, from the series *The Classroom*.
Photograph: Hicham Benohoud

For 13 years, I was an art teacher in Marrakech, teaching 11- to 15-year-olds, and I was very bored. An art class lasts an hour. The teacher spends 10 minutes explaining what the students have to do, then they spend the next 45 minutes doing it. And while they're cutting out, drawing and colouring, the teacher just sits there at his desk. That repeats hourly, from 8am until 6pm, every single day.

So about four years in, I started making work in the classroom. I first became obsessed with hyperrealistic drawing. My students were what I had in front of me, so I started taking passport-style photographs of them, which I would copy. Within a few months, people thought my drawings were photographs. I then moved on to colour photographs and oil painting, before realising that the photographs were what was most interesting.

In the darkroom, I would notice things I hadn't seen in the viewfinder. The student sitting behind the model, or the one holding the paper background and looking away. So I started integrating more students into the images. And since it was an art room, the materials I had to hand - paper, cloth, tape, plaster - made their way into the images, too.

I'd plan out exactly what I wanted to do, and then do a few versions of each, with different pupils. Sometimes I'd need to bring objects in from the outside - a very large jumper, a woollen hat I had asked a seamstress friend to make, or a pair of trousers of which she had lengthened one leg.

// Running through the images in this series is the idea of Moroccan society being in limbo; a society out of kilter

With this image, I started with the cardboard feet and gradually added cardboard arms. The boy couldn't get the feet on without taking off his shoes, and I left his shoes exactly where he put them. They reminded me of my father, a very lazy man. When he comes home after work, he takes off his suit to put on his joggers, and leaves it right there on the floor.

Running through these images, and my work in general, is this idea of Moroccan society being stuck, in limbo. A society that doesn't move, yet isn't stable; one out of kilter. Sometimes the model would appear to be hanging from the ceiling, or he'd be seated at a desk tipping over to one side. Sometimes they'd be seated at desks on top of desks.

Fifteen years on, Morocco has changed but not necessarily developed. You see people driving in the wrong direction on the motorway, or not stopping at red lights; others throwing stuff out of windows; donkeys weaving through traffic. There are laws, but everyone just does as they please. It is the world upside-down, a surreal place.

If I was bored, the students were, too. I had to follow the curriculum in



class, and it was so repetitive, so pointless, that anything out of the ordinary was exciting for them. As soon as I took my camera out, their faces would light up. “What’s he going to get us to do now?” I could feel their gaze on me: we had a real understanding.

I didn’t direct them in terms of making facial expressions. I’d just set up the camera and tell them how to position themselves. It was only when I developed the film that I’d notice they were smiling, or looking serious.

It didn’t make them any more interested in art. They really didn’t care. These sessions never led to any conversations. I would try to engage them further - talking about Matisse’s cutouts, say, his technique, his childlike sensibility - and they’d listen respectfully, but without curiosity.

One day I gave copies of one photo to the two students who were in it, and they immediately put them in their notebooks and asked if they could leave. I scratched my head, wondering if they’d not realised it was them in the picture. I asked them what they thought. They said they didn’t think it was beautiful - because a good picture, for them, was a portrait with big smiles.

I don't remember any of their names - I saw about 460 students a week - but I've since met a couple who remember me. Once in Paris, I was waiting to cross the road and noticed a north African girl on the other side, staring at me. When we passed each other, she stopped to ask if I was Monsieur Benohoud. To which I replied: "Let's get out of the road first." We spoke for a while, and she said: "You were my teacher; you took photos of me in that series." She was an adult now, no longer a teenager.

● Hicham Benohoud's series The Classroom will be exhibited in the Carte Blanche show at PHotoESPANA 2018, in Madrid, until 26 August.

Hicham Benohoud's CV

Born: Marrakech, Morocco, 1968

Training: Art baccalauréat; art teacher training at the Centre Pédagogique Régional, Marrakech, and the Centre de Formation de Plasticiens Intervenants; Ecole des Arts Décoratifs, Strasbourg.

Influences: "None."

High point: "Exhibiting at Tate Modern in London." [One of the photos from this Classroom series was donated to the Tate in 2015.]

Low point: "None."

Tip: "None."