

CULTURE ——— OCTOBER 21, 2020

## How This Casablanca-Based Gallery is Enriching the Dialogue on African Art

by REBECCA ANNE PROCTOR

*Casablanca-based Loft Art Gallery's recent show 'Inner Garden' explores the shared heritage of North and Sub-Saharan Africa through contemporary artworks that incorporate references to traditional African textiles.*



The Inner Garden. Courtesy of Loft Art Gallery.

As soon as visitors step inside Loft Art Gallery in Casablanca, they will be struck by Moroccan artist Amina Agueznay's sculptural installation made of green linen evoking a verdant garden. Made in a variety of sizes that shoot up prominently from the ground in various shades of green, this abstract rendition of a garden is almost akin to the panorama of a sleek city skyline, where edifices similarly jet into the sky with vibrancy and a spirit wills to live. The untitled work, executed in 2020, is part of Inner Garden, an exhibition that explores the development of contemporary cloth and fiber in Morocco and Sub-Saharan Africa through the work of three contemporary female artists: Amina Agueznay and Ghizlane Sahli, from Morocco, and Joana Choumali, from Ivory Coast. The show, like the Loft Art Gallery's broader vision, is multifaceted: It demonstrates the common history that surrounds textile making throughout Africa as well as how a piece of fabric today, in the age of coronavirus, acts like a protective and also imaginary barrier. Textile, created in a variety of forms and for various uses, like the title of Loft Art Gallery's latest show suggests, acts as a metaphorical inner garden.



Amina Agueznay, "A Garden Inside." 2020, Variable dimensions

“Since last year we wanted to stage an exhibition dedicated to textile in contemporary African art and the various ways of using traditional textile in contemporary art,” said Loft Art Gallery co-founder Yasmine Berrada. “This was the first exhibition we staged since the coronavirus lockdown in Morocco. We didn’t want an exhibition that was specifically about Covid-19 but one that reflected the world’s present state and also transcended current challenges through artwork.”

The works on view converse with each other through the subtle and common language of textile. There are Joana Choumali’s dreamy works from her *Alba’hian 3* series, inspired by her daily walks in Abidjan over the last few months. The results are meditative depictions combining her photography with embroidery. Choumali became the first African photographer to win the prestigious photography prize Prix de Pictet in November 2019.



The Inner Garden. Courtesy of Loft Art Gallery.

The rich texture of Choumali's works immediately speaks to Aguezay's garden made of fabric as well as the artist's other works on show, each upholding the local Moroccan tradition of textiles through her contemporary creations. "My approach consists in approaching the creative process through the meaning I give to the gesture and the approach of the material," said Aguezay. "Both are placed at the service of art." The artist, who trained as an architect and has also worked as a jewelry designer, has long sought to uphold the traditional craft of local Moroccan artisans through her art.

A similar mix of curvilinear abstract forms, which might appear to be gigantic budding flowers, can be found in the work of Moroccan artist Ghizlane Sahli. Endowed with the same poetic vision as works by Aguezay and Choumali, through her abstract installations Sahli incorporates techniques borrowed from traditional embroidery and weaving. The result are vibrant, living organisms that give a sense of hope and optimism, just like the flowers in a lush garden.



The Inner Garden. Courtesy of Loft Art Gallery.



“Through the exhibition Inner Garden our desire was that Casablanca becomes a window through which the world can view both African and Moroccan contemporary art,” continued Berrada.

Located in Le Triangle d’Or, the city’s chic neighborhood replete with luxury boutiques and upscale restaurants, Loft Art Gallery is the brainchild of Berrada and her sister Myriem who jointly founded the gallery in 2009. Berrada and her sister were inspired by the galleries they viewed in Manhattan’s Chelsea district and thus sought to open Morocco’s first white cube art gallery.

The mission of the gallery has long been to promote modern and contemporary Moroccan and African art at home and abroad. “I believe Morocco is a historic meeting point for many cultures and this is what we seek to uphold through the gallery and in an exhibition like Inner Garden,” said Berrada.



The Inner Garden. Courtesy of Loft Art Gallery.

Berrada and her sister continue to operate the gallery with a mission of enhancing intercultural dialogue through art, whether it be through exhibitions such as Inner Garden, participation at international art fairs, through the gallery's improved online platform or Loft Edition, the gallery's publishing arm.

"Inner Garden is a bearer of hope," adds Berrada. "It arrives as an act of resistance and offers the public an immersive world in which to take refuge in these special times."

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Source : <https://en.vogue.me/culture/loft-art-gallery-first-contemporary-african-textile-exhibition/>