

Le Violon Bleu – A Tune of a Different Colour

DARRELYN GUNZBURG INTERVIEWS SALMA FERIANI

Le Violon Bleu contemporary art gallery opened its doors in Tunisia in 2004 at the initiative of Mrs Essia Hamdi and her two daughters, Khedija Hamdi and Salma Feriani. Situated in the celebrated blue and white village of Sidi-Bou-Said, with incomparable views of Carthage and the Mediterranean sea, it rapidly built a significant presence as a leader in the field of contemporary Middle Eastern and North African art. In December 2007 Le Violon Bleu opened a gallery in London under Salma Feriani's stewardship. Darrelyn Gunzburg spoke with Salma in April 2008 about the hazards and otherwise of establishing a new art gallery in Mayfair, in the heart of London.

Darrelyn Gunzburg: What was the impetus behind opening Le Violon Bleu London?

Salma Feriani: I was living in London working as an analyst for an investment management company. I loved it, actually, and I still love finance but my passion has always been visiting galleries and exhibitions, and meeting artists; we were always meeting artists through my mother's job. In fact most of them became part of the family because we would invite artists coming to Tunisia for lunch and dinner, so we interacted with them a lot. They definitely have something different and that was what excited me, dealing with those kinds of people, you feel that they are out of this world and you learn from them. So since I was living in London, we thought about opening a gallery here. I was looking for premises for over a year. When we found the space on Maddox Street we had so much building work to do to turn it into a gallery. Now we have it and we have a ten-year lease.

DG: You chose to feature as your inaugural exhibition a retrospective of works by Arman. He is not only one of the most important international object artists, and a co-founder and member of the artistic movement Nouveau Réalisme but Le Violon Bleu Gallery uses Arman's blue violin as its logo. What is your connection with Arman?

SF: We opened with the Arman Retrospective because Arman was a close friend of the family and the inspiration for the opening of the Tunisian Le Violon Bleu.

My mother first met him at FIAC, the International Contemporary Art Fair in Paris. His father was an antique dealer and my mother is an antique dealer back in Tunisia, so she invited him to visit us in Tunis. He came and he loved it and we took him to the famous blue-and-white village Sidi-Bou-Said, where my parents had bought this really old house overlooking the sea. They thought they were going to retire in that house but Arman encouraged them to convert it into a contemporary art gallery. At this time in

Tunisia nobody had contemporary art galleries, everybody was buying oriental paintings or furniture or antiques or Islamic art but there were no serious contemporary art galleries. As a result we changed the house into a two-floored gallery and Arman made the entrance door for us with a unique accumulation of his rusty violins on it and that's how we came to name it and to use his blue violin as our logo.

Farid Belkhaia (Moroccan), *The Hand* (1980)
© Le Violon Bleu.



Salma Feriani. Photo: Hampar Narguizian.

Arman brought something really new to the contemporary art scene. From works of Poubelle, which are collections of strewn rubbish presented in glass cases, to Coupé which are objects sliced and rearranged for presentation, to Colères, which are objects that are sliced, burned or smashed arranged on canvas, often with a strong 'identity' such as musical instruments or bronze statues, to Accumulations, which are large collections of the same everyday object either in cases or freestanding, they are all new to the eye of collectors and museums and universities. He did really important works in Colères when he was upset – which he was, a lot. [Laughs]

I learnt how to run a gallery by watching my mother. I used to work with her during my summer holidays when she had her antiques gallery, which she still has. Selling antiques or contemporary art, the concept is the same: handling clients, dealing with advertising, doing the marketing. Then I tried to be with her as much as possible when she opened the contemporary art gallery. I also did a few



Meriem Bouderbala (Tunisian) *Untitled* (2008)
Mixed Media on canvas © Le Violon Bleu.

internships in galleries and I read many books on art. But every day here is still a learning process.

Some clients are collectors, they love art and they want to buy it. Others buy art as an investment alternative, and that's where I can help them because that's my background. We have artists from all over the world. When I went to Canada I discovered two artists.

DG: How do you 'discover' an artist?

SF: If I like a painting in a friend's house they might introduce me to the artist and I would want to stay with them in their studio and start to learn more about their technique and how they work. You never know how you will discover an artist, sometimes through contacts or sometimes simply seeing the work in a

fair. There is no rule about where to find them.

We plan our exhibitions a year in advance. So when we find interesting artists we tell them it's in the long run, one year, two years. As soon as I see the work of the artist I like, I want to see all the steps and also the progress of that artist during the year, their exhibitions and their new techniques, and that takes time, it's not straightforward.

Le Violon Bleu has four solo exhibitions a year here in London and four in Tunis. Between each solo exhibition we have a group exhibition with artists of the gallery and each time we try to introduce a new artist with two paintings to see how people will react.

Some of the work we own; it's part of the Le Violon Bleu collection. Some collections are on consignment from the artist. We are developing clients not only here in London but also around the world:

Hong Kong, Greece, Bahrain. Selling the artwork is a varied and exciting task and many pieces sell themselves because of the fame of the artist or piece. But for emerging artists we put all our efforts in helping them become recognised. You need to see the work and then the eyes will remember: 'Oh that's a work by Meriem Bouderbala, or Sabhan Adam or Hamadi Ben Saad or Abderrazek Sahli or Dia Azzawi or Valeria Nascimento. I've seen that work'.

As far as what artists we choose to invest in, we go with our hearts and I think it's always been a success doing that because when you sell what you like, then you do it well. You can't think about the investment side of it or buy paintings to sell just because the artist is famous. Indeed, our impetus is to choose artists that haven't been exhibited in London before, from famous to emerging.

DG: For how long do you maintain an exhibition?

SF: An exhibition like the Arman exhibition took us along time to prepare. It is extremely difficult to get hold of a 1984 painting by Arman or one from 1992. It's a long research process. So we have to take the exhibition for as long as possible so people can see it. In London people travel a lot, they're not here all the time, so it was quite a long one, two months. A month is too quick.

We aim to do two exhibitions per year of an artist from the Middle East and North Africa and we will always have in our group exhibition an artist from that part of the world. The satisfaction is more about people knowing about those artists than making money because we won't be making money. These artists are emerging, they're works are not necessarily expensive, and showing them in London in a Mayfair gallery costs a lot for us. It's really so people can see art from that part of the world. Saying that, I always think there is not necessarily a region for art, there is no location. You think 'I like this painting' and it can be by an Iraqi artist, a British artist or an Italian artist. The origin is not at all important as long as it is a strong work.

DG: Salma, thank you for taking the time to talk with *The Art Book* and I wish you great success with *Le Violon Bleu* London.

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