

# La ronda

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Latifa Echakhch

#02

## RATIONAL MATERIALISM

“The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. (...) Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification.”<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière

Culture is comprised of abstract elements, symbols that are passed on from generation to generation, and standardised elements that serve as supports for those abstract elements. This perpetuates our social system and makes us *human*. Yet how does cultural transmission work in an increasingly global world, one that is practically devoid of borders? Can a specific culture remain intact? What role do migrations play in this phenomenon?

1. Jacques Rancière: *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2004, p. 63.

All of these questions share a common difficulty: how to define culture, a term that encompasses everything but defines nothing in particular. The analysis of culture is unquestionably a modern concern, and it is closely related to cultural studies, a term coined by Richard Hoggart in 1964 to refer to the political nature of contemporary culture. Cultural studies analyse the way in which an object or message relates to questions of ideology, social class, nationality and gender. During the 1970s, cultural history (*Kulturgeschichte*) was developed to interpret past events through social, cultural and political concerns related to the arts and to group behaviours.

From an etymological point of view, Anthony Giddens defines culture as one of the central elements of all human associations: it brings together the values shared by members of specific groups, the norms they agree on and the material goods they produce. Values are abstract ideals, while norms are the established principles or rules with which people must comply.<sup>2</sup>

According to Homi Bhabha, it is essential to understand cultural heritage in relation to one's place of origin, but also as part of the transformation, transition and movement that characterise contemporary societies. Thus, globalisation plays a key role when it comes to understanding our responsibility, not only in terms of who we are or what we do, but also how we relate to one another and how we understand the other and our common place in the global world. This leads to a fundamental question that also affects the work of Latifa Echakhch: how can we construct the cultural heritage of contemporary societies when migrations are one of their inherent components? How can the history, art, culture and science of those who have emigrated be incorporated into the narratives of the societies that have received them? According to Bhabha, the only possibility is to view migration as an opportunity to create a transformative culture, one that looks towards the future.<sup>3</sup>

This type of transformative, dynamic culture is quite important to diaspora communities, groups in constant movement with a great capacity for constructing identities. In most cases, these groups constitute the meeting point between a culture of origin and a culture that receives migrants, generating an interesting flow of communication between the country that receives and the country of reference. Such groups are also useful when it comes to understanding artistic and cultural expressions.

2. Anthony Giddens: *Sociology: a Brief but Critical Introduction*. London : Macmillan, 1982.

3. Homi Bhabha: *Austria could be a bridge*, Scope II: Press conference, July 2006.

## La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch

*La ronda* is the title that Latifa Echakhch, a French artist originally from Morocco, has given to the project conceived for the space of the Capella MACBA. This exhibition involves three installations: *Eivissa* (2010), *Gaya (E102) 5*, *Vitrail* (2010) and *Fantasia* (2010). Like the other works by Echakhch, these pieces start with a material, a texture, an object, elements that make reference to her experiences and trigger a reflection on her past as well as on the meanings of the materials, the traditions, the symbols and their social function.



Entrevista: Latifa Echakhch. *La ronda*

<http://www.macba.cat/video>

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6D\\_yLkJZ3ME](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6D_yLkJZ3ME)

<http://vimeo.com/13327145>

*La ronda*, also known as *pinche*, is a card game that probably originated in the Mediterranean, and more specifically, in Spain; from there, it was exported to Morocco, where it is very popular in cities like Fez, Tetouan and Tangiers. For Latifa Echakhch, the game is a journey into the past, to the summers she spent in Morocco during her adolescence, when she first began playing the game. *Pinche* is played with Spanish playing cards and thus for Echakhch, who was brought up in France, they are exotic, loaded with symbology.

The traditional Spanish deck consists of four suits or series of cards: gold (golden coins), cups, swords and clubs. Each of these suits is formed by several numerical cards (sevens or nines) and three figures (jacks, queens and kings) that are always numbered from 10 to 12. Thus, the Spanish deck can consist of 40 cards (from one to seven and the three figures of each suit) or 48 cards (from one to nine and the three figures of each suit). One of the innovations of the Spanish deck was the *pinta* (literally, “drawing”), solid or dotted lines that form a frame with a pattern that symbolises each individual card. Thus, the player does not need to look at the face of the cards in his/her hand to know which ones they are; by slightly separating one card from the others, a player can see what suit it belongs to and which figure or numerical number it represents. The golden coins do not have *pintas*; the cups have one; the swords have two, and the clubs have three. With the incorporation of the *pintas*, the suits of the Spanish deck are thus organised as follows: gold, cups, swords and clubs.

# La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch

In the most common reading of the symbology of the suits, the monarchy comes first and occupies the most privileged position, followed by the church, the nobles and finally, the people. In other interpretations, gold is associated with merchants and the bourgeoisie, rather than the monarchy. Some attribute the creation of the suits in the Spanish deck to a tavern owner who provided



*Eivissa, 2010. Vintage concrete, playing cards.*

Word produced in collaboration with Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA).

cards to keep guests entertained. In this case, the cups represent the tavern, the gold represents the money used by customers to pay, and the swords and clubs the tools by which their differences – game-related or otherwise – were settled. The four symbols of the deck would thus be the four objects closest to the players.

## La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch

Cards as a cultural reference – and as an everyday recreational activity that people engage in as they wait or go from place to place – are present in *Eivissa* (2010), comprised of eleven concrete blocks brought directly from Ibiza. In these concrete blocks, we can see – or occasionally imagine – randomly distributed cards from the deck. If we look closely, we discover different designs and models of cards, yet another sign that there is more than one way to interpret our culture and its elements.

The cards have been distributed randomly across the floor and the concrete blocks have been placed on top of them, without any composition or previous preparation. As is common in Echakhch's work, this performative act becomes gestural. The importance of the performance is eliminated, yielding an artistic gesture that the viewer suspects but never actually sees. Yet another component in the complex language that characterises Echakhch's work.

During the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), between 62,000 and 85,000 Moroccans died or were wounded under Franco's command. These soldiers were mainly from the north of Morocco – then a Spanish colony – and, at the frontline of the national army, they constituted a very important force. Many enlisted due to the poverty rampant in Rif after the Spanish campaign in Abdelkrim and several years of drought and poor harvests. Locals signed up in exchange “for two months advance pay, four kilos of sugar, a can of oil and a daily ration of bread that varied according to the number of children.”<sup>4</sup>

Once the fighting had ended, the majority of the soldiers returned to Morocco, though the country was incapable of reincorporating them. Some of them remained in the army, fighting against the so-called “bandits of deserters” while many others – professionals whose degrees were not recognised, some of whom were trying to avoid deportation – remained in Spain for a time, hoping their luck would change. Groups of Moroccan soldiers stayed on the island of Ibiza to demonstrate Spain's military power after the war. Provisional camps for these soldiers were constructed on concrete platforms. Echakhch has made use of the remains of these platforms for this exhibition at the Capella MACBA.

In Echakhch's work as a whole, the reference to existing objects and territories is very important; though constructed with an objective, they can be adopted to other users. This is the case, for example, of *Speakers' Corner* (2008), in which the artist uses a soapbox that can be turned into a pulpit for political

4. María Rosa de Madariaga: *Los moros que trajo Franco. La intervención de tropas coloniales en la guerra civil*. Barcelona: Martínez Roca, 2002 (first edition); RBA, 2006 (second edition).

## La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch

speeches. With the passage of time, these temporary constructions, which are generally designed to meet specific needs – waves of migrants as the result of political conflict, the entrance of people in a country, etc. – might be abandoned (as occurs with the blocks presented here) or might turn into permanent settlements. For Echakhch, one of the most interesting aspects of this type of construction is the element of time: the moment in which they become spaces of transition, waiting rooms, a sort of limbo between the past and future, between peace and battle, or between poverty and a new life, in the case of immigrants. These constructions exist in a zone between zones reminiscent of the “interzone” that William Burroughs speaks of in *Naked Lunch* (1959), in which many see a premonition or a critique of contemporary society.

For the exhibition at the Capella MACBA, the artist’s first idea was to reproduce these platforms and transform them into museum pieces. To do so, she made them into pedestals, bases that somehow represented the suits of the Spanish cards. She could thus almost literally recreate the experiences of the soldiers: camped out on the platforms, occupying their time playing cards, waiting for the situation to change. However, when Echakhch saw the images of these destroyed platforms, the concept of the work changed: the fragments of concrete became sculptural objects and the cards became their pedestals, inverting the initial – and in a certain sense, logical – order. With this installation, the artist creates a sort of archaeology of the temporary settlements.

*Eivissa* is a clear reference to the cultural exchange and the flow of people between Spain and Morocco. This is not only because of the fragments of the platforms upon which the camps of the old Moroccan soldiers rested, but also because of the reference to *ronda*, a Spanish game that, for years, the artist believed to be Moroccan. Paradoxically, Echakhch attempted to avoid the reference to Morocco when she began working on this project. Her idea was not to mention Morocco at all and to focus instead on concerns that went beyond the connections to her place of origin and the references to the – often tense – relations between the two countries.

Filtered through experience, culture is both the subject and the main tool of Echakhch’s work. As a member of a family of immigrants, cultural heritage – which she alludes to constantly in her work – is based on her own experiences but nourished by the ideas that her family conveyed about her country of origin. Despite appearances, the materials that she chooses to construct her works are not the prettiest or the most luxurious. Indeed, they are the cheapest, poorest versions of those materials, the ones found among families of immigrants; they

## La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch

represent what has been left behind. As the artist herself states, “Not everything fits into the emigrant’s suitcase.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the works entail a double play on meaning, a back-and-forth between reality and memories (from Echakhch’s point of view) or expectations (from the viewer’s point of view) that question the codes normally used to interpret other cultures and their components, an interpretation that is often based on preconceived notions.

In *Gaya (E102) 5, Vitrail* (2010), the three windows of the apse of the Capella MACBA have been painted with tartrazine, a flavourless food colouring that is used in Middle Eastern cooking as a substitute for saffron. The windows of the church (a very luxurious decorative element, one that very few artists have the privilege of working with) are desacralised by the use of such a lowly paint material: food colouring, a pigment mixed with water. This is a material that Echakhch has used on several occasions: on windows and canvases, and even the walls of the exhibition spaces where she has shown her work.

The fact that Echakhch uses the same component for different works is a sign of how this artist approaches the creative process: she works with the elements that obsess her, those that have accompanied her throughout her life. At the beginning, they are merely ideas, abstract thoughts; over time, they take shape and become projects.

The materials (whether a rug, sugar or food colouring) are turned into tools, instruments that the artist uses to represent ideas. In this regard, Echakhch’s work can be defined as “materialist”: the elements constitute the point of departure in her works and they are the first point of reference for the viewers. They are key to interpreting her work and its many levels. Through them, the artist seeks to convey the sensations and the feelings that the materials provoked in her the first time she noticed them. Also central to understanding the meaning of the materials in Echakhch’s work is their economic value, understood as their market value and not as their use value: the fact that she chooses a cheap saffron substitute instead of real saffron (an expensive cooking ingredient, one always associated with luxury in Middle Eastern cooking) means taking a stance. It is a reflection on social constraints and on the notion of culture.

Echakhch’s work cannot be understood without defining – or, rather, redefining – the meaning of the materials she uses, a displacement of meanings that she sees as the fruit of the social filter that affects all of our experiences. In

5. Interview with Latifa Echakhch during the installation of the exhibition, July 2010.

## La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch

the case of the artist, her experiences are marked by the duality between her country of origin, Morocco, and her adopted country, France (although she currently resides in Switzerland). Many of the elements that make up her identity (her last name, place of birth, etc.) have been “filtered”, that is, adapted to the new situation for administrative or social reasons. On occasion, this process of adaptation has provoked what the artist calls a “margin of error”: anomalous situations that occur throughout the adaptation process (a non-existent last name, a fictitious place of birth, etc.) that both make us unique and exclude us. This “margin of error” determines Echakhch’s critical interest in social processes. It defines her work’s highly critical stance which is reinforced by the distance from her two countries of reference and by a feeling of not belonging. In the artist’s view, she has no homeland and no heritage, since both France and Morocco are foreign to her.



*Gaya (E102) 5, Vitrail, 2010. Coloured food pigment.*

Works produced in collaboration with Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA).

Culture does not belong to the community to which it refers: instead, it is part of an open context that serves as a basis for formulating universal questions and reflecting on who we are, without aspiring to universality or globalism. Echakhch’s work speaks of her personal experiences and allows each viewer to apply his or her own “filters”, thus producing interpretative freedom. In general, they are easy-to-recognise objects in which the viewer must search for meaning.



## La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch

Despite its ideological weight, *Gaya (E102) 5, Vitrail* can be read on a formal level. Indeed, the formal is another essential component in understanding Echakhch's work. She works with materials until they are transformed to the point of reflecting, in their materiality, conceptual contents. In this case, through the layers of food colouring that cover the windows of the apse, we sense the gesture of the artist, now rendered a painter, and this gives the work a singular materiality. The poor quality of the food colouring as pigment highlights the ephemeral quality of the piece – it will disappear with time – thus emphasising its ideological component.

*Fantasia* (2010) is formed by a set of flagpoles leaning at different angles and distributed across the main hall of the Capella MACBA. As on earlier occasions, this piece, different versions of which have already been shown, arises from the artist's interest in flagpoles, an everyday, common object in Spanish cities, either alone or in groups, with or without flags. In this case, the most representative image for Echakhch – the image she took as a point of reference – is that of the squares of Strasburg, where the groups of flags symbolise the countries that belong to the institutions of the European Union.

In this installation, the flagpoles are stripped of their fabric and rope, thus eliminating the direct reference to countries or institutions in order to focus on the object itself. This is a very common process in Echakhch's work, one that she defines as part of a "minimalist culture": any accessory element that could distort the meaning or the material references is removed. The materials are subjected to a process of deconstruction (they are broken up, split into pieces, and parts are taken away), and thus reduced to their most minimal expression. At that moment, the materials reveal what interests the artist: their intrinsic meaning and the limits thereof.

*Fantasia* is a name of Latin origin that was used at the beginning of the nineteenth century to refer to *Al-tbourida*, a popular celebration in rural Morocco. The rite is a symbolic representation of the virtuous warriors embodied by the *Baroud* (gunpowder horseback riders). It marks the continuity of the military equestrian tradition in Morocco and it is loaded with symbols: the horse, which represents freedom; the shotgun used to defend the land, and woman, considered partners and mothers. In the rite, the horsemen ride over the sand and coordinate their actions to shoot at the same time, creating a single gunshot. The beauty of the tradition, and what most interests the artist, is the coordination of the riders.

Another reference that Echakhch alludes to when speaking of this piece is the *Battaglia di San Romano* (ca. 1438-1440) by Paolo Uccello. This painting

## La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch

depicts an episode in the history of Florence: the 1432 battle that the painting is named for, which ended in a victory for Florence. Initially, this work seems no different from others from the period, except – and herein lies its great contribution – it made way for new possibilities in painting: its characters are framed in the space of the painting as if they were sculpted, not painted. The entire work speaks of Uccello's interest in perspective; even the broken lances scattered on the ground converge at the same vanishing point. This almost mathematical distribution is responsible for the artificial, nearly theatrical appearance of the scene.<sup>6</sup>



*Fantasia*, 2010. Fiberglass flagpoles, metal supports.

Works produced in collaboration with Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA).

At Capella MACBA, the lances of the warriors are turned into flagpoles. This layout of lines with their respective vanishing points accentuates the play on perspectives in the space and accentuates the verticality of the building. On a formal level, one important aspect of this work is seeing how a material that is intended for exteriors works in interiors, and the effect of this change of location. Through this spatial redefinition, the flagpoles, which generally convey a sense of openness, create the sense of tight intersection when installed in an enclosed space: they close onto themselves, establishing a play of perspectives that is yet another reference to Uccello's work. The concrete blocks

6. Ernst H. Gombrich: *The Story of Art*. London: Phaidon, 1959.

## La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch

of *Eivissa* have also been subject to this process; they become “wild” insofar as they participate in an archaeological reflection on the movements of people.

While retaining their individual characters, the works on exhibit operate together as a sort of still life or landscape with different levels of materiality: on the one hand, the Spanish cards are at the base of the exhibition, distributed across the floor like small tracks, markers on a map upon which the blocks are placed. From there, we look up to the bases of the flagpoles, which in turn lead our eyes towards the upper part of the chapel, in which the windows, painted with food colouring, allow the orange light to flood the space.

In this regard, it is important to emphasise the idea of the still life and the paradox that it presents in Echakhch’s installations: objects that are unmoving (still) or dead (if we use the French term for such works, *nature morte*, or the Spanish term, *naturaleza muerta*). The creation of still lifes is often connected with the performative quality that we mentioned in relation to *Eivissa* and that characterises so many of the artist’s works, as well as with the violence inherent to this performance: “There are times when one has to kill the object to make different readings possible.”<sup>7</sup>

Echakhch’s installations are based on superimposing elements and meanings to construct narratives where the limit with the fictitious, with the almost theatrical, functions as yet another layer; stories with an air of strangeness that put the artist in touch with the viewers: how they will react and behave, what they will understand. Striking such a balance is a critical part in the installation process, rendered a mathematical operation characterised by the search for disorder within order.<sup>8</sup>

Like the sensitivity of which Rancière speaks, the narrative of Latifa Echakhch’s installations seeks to convey a set of sensations and feelings that take us into the past and make us aware of the fact that the world changes. Perhaps the secret of her work lies in finding a *mise-en-scène* where the interpretation of each constituent element depends on the others, thus establishing

7. Milovan Farronato: “Nature Morte”, an interview with Latifa Echakhch. *Mousse Magazine*, no. 19, 2009.

8. In this regard, it is interesting to consider the different ways that chaos is addressed by contemporary sculpture, and specifically in which artists try to impose order on the world around them. Such artists might be influenced by Samuel Beckett’s idea that the artist’s mission is to find a form that can accommodate the mess. This idea is diametrical to the thinking of Theodor Adorno, who considered the aim of art to turn chaos into order. Anne Ellegood: “Motley Efforts. Sculpture’s Ever-Expanding Field”, *Vitamine 3-D. New Perspectives in Sculpture and Installation*. London: Phaidon, 2009.

## La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch

connections that go well beyond the evident. We could say that Echakhch works with *assemblages* of objects and sculptures that are half-poetic, half-political, using them as a film director would.<sup>9</sup>

Unquestionably, Latifa Echakhch's work and the multiple readings it proposes make her one of the most complex artists working today. If viewers initially find the beauty of her work dazzling, as they delve into it, they will see its profoundly critical and political dimension. Echakhch's work is committed to its time and to history; from a very personal perspective, it reflects on political questions that affect us all.

Soledad Gutiérrez

Exhibition Curator of the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA)

9. Mats Stjernstedt: *Latifa Echakhch. Pendant que les champs brûlent – part I*. Galerie Kammel Mennour, June 2009.

# La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch



Latifa Echakhch. *La ronda*

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/macba/sets/72157624923028252/>

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# La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch



Latifa Echakhch. *La ronda*

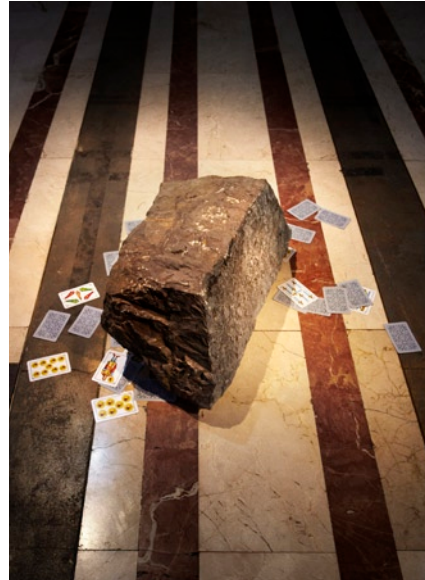
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# La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch



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# La ronda

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Latifa Echakhch



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# La ronda

#02

Latifa Echakhch



## Video

Interview: Latifa Echakhch. *La ronda*

<http://www.macba.cat/video>

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6D\\_yLkJZ3ME](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6D_yLkJZ3ME)

<http://vimeo.com/13327145>



## Audio

Conversation between Latifa Echakhch and Soledad Gutiérrez

[http://www.macba.cat/controller.php?p\\_action=show\\_page&pagina\\_id=28&inst\\_id=28593](http://www.macba.cat/controller.php?p_action=show_page&pagina_id=28&inst_id=28593)

Radio programme: SON[IA] #109: Latifa Echakhch speaks about the exhibition #02 Latifa Echakhch. *La ronda*

[http://rwm.macba.cat/ca/sonia?id\\_capsula=744](http://rwm.macba.cat/ca/sonia?id_capsula=744)



## Photographs

Photographs by Rafael Vargas of the installation by Latifa Echakhch, *La ronda*, at the Capella MACBA, 2010

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/macba/sets/72157624923028252/>



## Other links

Interview: *Mousse Magazine*, no. 19. Milan, 2009

<http://www.moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=101>

*Latifa Echakhch. Speakers' Corner*. Exhibition at the Tate Modern, London, 2008

<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/latifaechakhch/default.shtm>

Paolo Uccello *Battaglia di San Romano*, ca. 1438-1440. The National Gallery, London

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/paolo-uccello-the-battle-of-san-romano>

(Accessed September 2010)

**Latifa Echackch** (El Khnansa, Morocco, 1974) lives and works in Paris, France and Martigny, Switzerland. She studied at the École supérieure d'art in Grenoble and at the École nationale supérieure d'art in Cergy-Pontoise; she did graduate studies at the École des beaux-arts in Bordeaux. She has done artist residencies at the IASPIS, Stockholm; la Cité internationale des arts, Paris and in La Box, Bourges (France).

*La ronda* is her first solo show in Spain after exhibitions in Reims (FRAC Champagne Ardenne), Germany (Kunsthalle Fridericianum and Bielefelder Kunstverein), New York (the Swiss Institute) and London (Tate Modern).

In her work, she uses everyday objects with a strong cultural and symbolic component that acquire new meanings when removed from their usual context, inciting us to question their socio-political implications and allowing for a new reading of the social codes they imply.

*Eivissa*, 2010.

Vintage concrete, playing cards.

*Gaya (E102) 5, Vitrail*, 2010.

Coloured food pigment.

*Fantasia*, 2010.

Fiberglass flagpoles, metal supports.

Works produced in collaboration with the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA).

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Latifa Echackch. *La ronda*,  
7 July, 2010 – 6 February, 2011

#### Exhibition

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