

A. GORGI

BLUE WIND PROJECT

Fatma Charfi

*Human being
Being human*

Curated by Beya Othmani

11.09 – 25.10.2026 Sidi Bou Saïd, Tunis



As part of a collaboration between the Aïcha Gorgi Gallery and the Blue Wind Project, we are pleased to announce a survey dedicated to the Tunisian artist Fatma Charfi (1960–2018).

Titled *Human being-Being human*, the exhibition is curated by Beya Othmani and unfolds exceptionally across the two partner spaces, creating a journey through the singular work of Fatma Charfi.

THE ARTIST

Fatma Charfi

B.1955, Tunisia D. 2018, Switzerland

Fatma Charfi was a Tunisian-Swiss artist whose multidisciplinary practice spanned installation, sculpture, performance, photography, video, drawing, and painting. Born in Sfax, Tunisia, she studied at the École des Beaux-Arts de Tunis before pursuing doctoral studies in aesthetics at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and further training at the Institut d'Art Visuel in Geneva.

Beginning in the late 1980s, Charfi developed the Abrouc (plural Aberics), a small hand-twisted anthropomorphic figure that became the defining element of her artistic vocabulary. Reappearing across multiple bodies of work, these surrogate figures allowed her to probe questions of power, representation, vulnerability, and the human condition, while reflecting on empathy and collective responsibility. Conceptually rigorous yet deeply invested in the materiality of making, her practice combined handcrafted and embodied processes, repetition, experimental uses of diverse media, and performative strategies.

Living between Tunisia and Switzerland, Charfi exhibited extensively throughout Europe, Africa, and the United States. She participated in five editions of the Dak'Art Biennale (1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2010), becoming the first woman and first Arab artist to receive its highest distinction, the Grand Prix Léopold Sédar Senghor, in 2000. In 1999, she was awarded the Jury Prize at the Alexandria Biennale. Her work has been presented at institutions including the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art St. Louis, the University of Colorado Art Museum, Kunsthalle Bern, the Zentrum Paul Klee, the Ford Foundation Gallery, and numerous museums and galleries in Tunisia and Switzerland.

Her work occupies a significant place in the history of contemporary Tunisian art, particularly for its contributions to the development of installation, performance, and conceptual art practices. Her works are held in public collections including the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Geneva Fonds cantonal d'art contemporain, the governments of Tunisia and Senegal, and the Lausanne University Hospital, as well as in numerous private collections across Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and the United States.

Biography of the artist written by Beya Othmani.

Photo: Fatma Charfi holding two Aberics, 2002. Photographer: Driss Manchoubé.

Courtesy Nabil Mseddi



SELECTED WORKS

Fatma Charfi
B.1955, Tunisia D. 2018, Switzerland

Cry of a Child
2002–2009
Installation with laminated photographic prints
900 × 240 cm

Cry of a Child
2002
Video, color
11 min. 55 sec

Enfant Mort et Médaille de Paix
2009. Acrylic paint and markers on canvas,
photographic print on paper, satin ribbon, plastic,
cotton wadding, silk paper, and glue
100 × 160 cm

Untitled
from the series ***Silhouette Humaine (Human
Silhouette)***
Ca. 2009–2010
Tulle and metal wires
53 × 78 cm

THE CURATOR

Beya Othmani

Beya Othmani is an Algerian-Tunisian curator based in the United States. She is the former C-MAP Africa Fellow (2024–2026) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), where she researched late twentieth-century art in Africa, developed public programs, and was editor of the museum's digital platform, post.moma.org. Her recent curatorial projects include M'barek Bouhchichi: Black Seeds at Selma Feriani Gallery, Tunis (2025); the three-part exhibition series Cantando Bajito at the Ford Foundation Gallery, New York (2024); Fella Tamzali: Arcanes at rhizome Gallery, Algiers (2024); and the 35th Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts (2023). Othmani was awarded the CAORC/Andrew W. Mellon Art History Fellowship (2020–2024) at the American Center for Maghrebi Studies (CEMAT), and in 2023 received the Hyperallergic Emily Hall Tremain Journalism Fellowship for Curators. Her writing has appeared in Hyperallergic, Artforum, moma.org, AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, ElaineAlain, the Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World, among others.



Photo © Iman Salem



Untitled
from the series **Silhouette Humaine (Human Silhouette)**
Ca. 2009-2010
Tulle and metal wires
53 × 78 cm

COURTESY OF NABIL MSEDDI



Cry of a Child
2002
Video, color
11 min. 55 sec

Introduction

When Fatma Charfi died in 2018, she left behind in her Tunis studio a body of work spanning nearly three decades of artistic production. Ranging from her pioneering installations of the early 1990s to works made shortly before her death, this ensemble forms the point of departure for this exhibition *Human being-Being human*. Having been based in Switzerland since the mid-1980s, however, the majority of Charfi's works remain there, making those preserved in Tunisia a necessarily partial, yet representative, selection. Seen anew, they reaffirm the coherence of an oeuvre that continually returned to installation as both a medium and a way of making art. Charfi's installation-based approach extended across many techniques, including painting, photography, collage, video, and performance. Even when working outside installation, she consistently conceived artworks in relation to one another and to the space they occupied. While highlighting her installation works, the exhibition also brings into focus the complexity of an oeuvre that continues to resonate with striking urgency today.

It takes its title from one of Charfi's works *ÊTRE HUMAIN...MAA-UND* (2010), playing on the double meaning of the French expression *être humain*: the human being as an individual and being human as a practice. This dual meaning echoes the two preoccupations that run throughout Charfi's work. On the one hand, there is her sustained observation of human beings and the conditions that shape their lives; on the other, there is her desire to provoke participation, care, and collective action.

The exhibition unfolds across two venues, each emphasizing one of these complementary dimensions. The first movement, presented at Aïcha Gorgi Gallery, brings together works that emerged from Charfi's observation of the world. The second movement, presented at Blue Wind Project, focuses on the performative dimension of Charfi's practice through works such as *Cry of a Child* (2002–2009), which paved the way for her long-running performance project *Laboratoire de paix* (2002–2014).



Golfe (Gulf). 1991. Silk paper, ink, and marbled powder, 15 × 400 × 300 cm.
CITAM Archives, Fondation Toms Pauli Lausanne / Lausanne City Archives

When Fatma Charfi died in 2018, she left behind in her Tunis studio a body of work spanning nearly three decades of artistic production. Arguably one of the first artists in Tunisia to make installation her main medium, Charfi developed a conceptual language in which the human being and the practice of humanity continually come together. Her first breakthrough came at the 15th International Biennial of Contemporary Textile in Lausanne in 1992, where she presented *Golfe (Gulf)*, a poignant installation consisting of a four-by-three-metre Plexiglas container filled with white marble powder upon which she laid hundreds of small black figurines—which she named *Abrouc* (plural: *Abérics*)—crafted from stained and twisted silk paper.¹ *Golfe* was her response to the Persian Gulf War (1990–91) that she watched unfold on television in Switzerland. Television, she felt, was not showing the full weight of the dead. As she later explained, "What wasn't visible on television, I could feel and see in my own hands."² The *Abérics* thus became her way of reckoning with the politics of visibility that determine what is seen and what is systematically withheld.

Charfi chose black for the *Abérics* because it rendered them anonymous; they were, as she put it, "charred figures, after all."³ By rendering the figures anonymous and the scene faintly surreal, *Golfe* called for compassion while simultaneously unsettling that very impulse towards it, questioning how empathy is mediated, produced, and consumed through images. The grief it evokes is real, but it belongs to no one in particular, dissolving into the same endless, faceless stream of alarming images that the installation itself exposes.

The reason I return to *Golfe* in this text is that it marks the turning point at which the core concerns of Charfi converged. It is here that one already finds the *Abérics*, the cumulative and embodied process of making, the productive tension between empathy and critique, and the conviction that art could serve a larger ethical purpose. As she herself stated, "I love humanity, I am concerned with the human being; what is reflected in my work is not a message, but a social preoccupation."⁴ Although *Golfe* is not physically present in the exhibition, it remains a recurring point of reference. It resurfaces directly with photographic fragments incorporated into works such as *Enfant Mort et Médaille de Paix* (2009) and *Titanic* (2010), and more subtly implied in *Cry of a Child* (2002). In many ways, the exhibition traces the afterlife of *Golfe*, following how the questions it first articulated continued to reverberate throughout Charfi's later works.

The afterlife of *Golfe* is perhaps most visible in the *Abérics*, established there as the enduring protagonists of Charfi's work. Reappearing across her installations in ever-changing situations, Charfi freezes them in carefully choreographed movements and expressive bodily gestures. Although faceless and anonymous, they manage to convey emotion and a sense of individuality. At times trapped within laminated plastic or transparent containers, the *Abérics* respond to their confinement with outstretched arms and legs, suggesting an unexpected sense of agency, as though refusing to surrender to their captivity. They embody the tensions that run throughout Charfi's work: between victimhood and agency, freedom and constraint, violence and care, visibility and erasure. When assembled together, the *Abérics* acquire a collective force, imbuing even Charfi's darkest installations with a sense of hope and possibility. Constantly shifting from one situation to another, they resist any fixed identity, becoming the medium through which Charfi explored what it means to endure, to resist, to oppress, and ultimately, to be human.

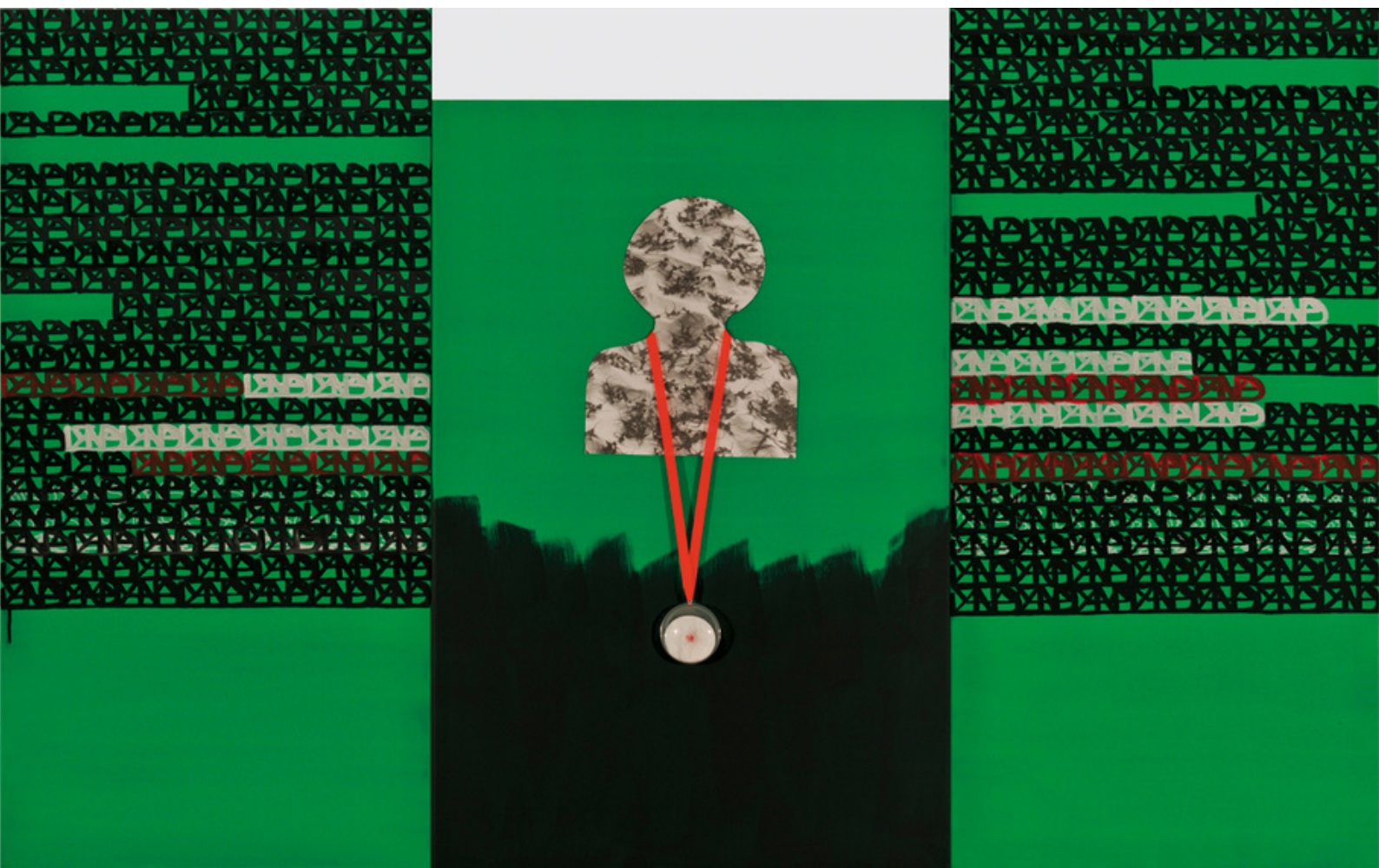
To make her *Abérics*, Charfi spent countless hours twisting, twirling, folding, and rolling silk paper. Her fingers had to discover the precise gesture that would avoid tearing the delicate material while finding the exact rhythm—usually swift—needed to shape the details of each tiny figure. She used the sweat of her hands, the humidity of her breath, and even her saliva to soften the paper, consciously inscribing every *Abrouc* with traces of her own DNA.⁵ Charfi understood her sustained engagement with the making-by-hand as part of a feminine lineage. She did not position herself as an explicitly feminist artist, but she regarded her art as inherently feminine—a conviction she expressed with characteristic directness: "I love to touch, to handle materials, probably because women have done so for centuries; and I see no contradiction between this and the most advanced technologies. After all, one rolls dough the way one rolls plastic: the gesture is the same. I assert my womanhood through my art."⁶

The early 2000s marked a new phase in Charfi's practice, as she began incorporating performance and inviting viewers to activate her installations. It was during this period that the red seed (*la graine rouge*) first appeared, laying the foundation for her long-term project *Laboratoire de paix* (2002–2014), discussed in greater detail later in this exhibition booklet. During her meticulously orchestrated performances, Charfi invited audiences to handle, unfold, and care for red seeds. Whereas the *Abérics*, in their twisted configurations, gave form to the artist's anxieties about the world, the red seeds proposed a counter-gesture. Designed to be opened, held, and cared for by spectators, they offered, however symbolically, the possibility of healing through a shared gesture of care.

From the artist's own body in the acts of making and performing, to the bodies of viewers invited to handle the red seeds and the represented bodies of the *Abérics*, Charfi's work gradually became an interwoven system of relationships. In the last years of her life, Charfi increasingly described her practice as a *Human Lace*, explaining that it "suggests many things: interdependence, fragility, connection, beauty, weaving, networks, etc."⁷ More than a metaphor, *Human Lace* offers a conceptual logic through which to understand her oeuvre. Like an intricate lacework, it is patiently woven from recurring gestures, forms, and ideas, extending its threads to all those who encounter it.

Beya Othmani, August 2026

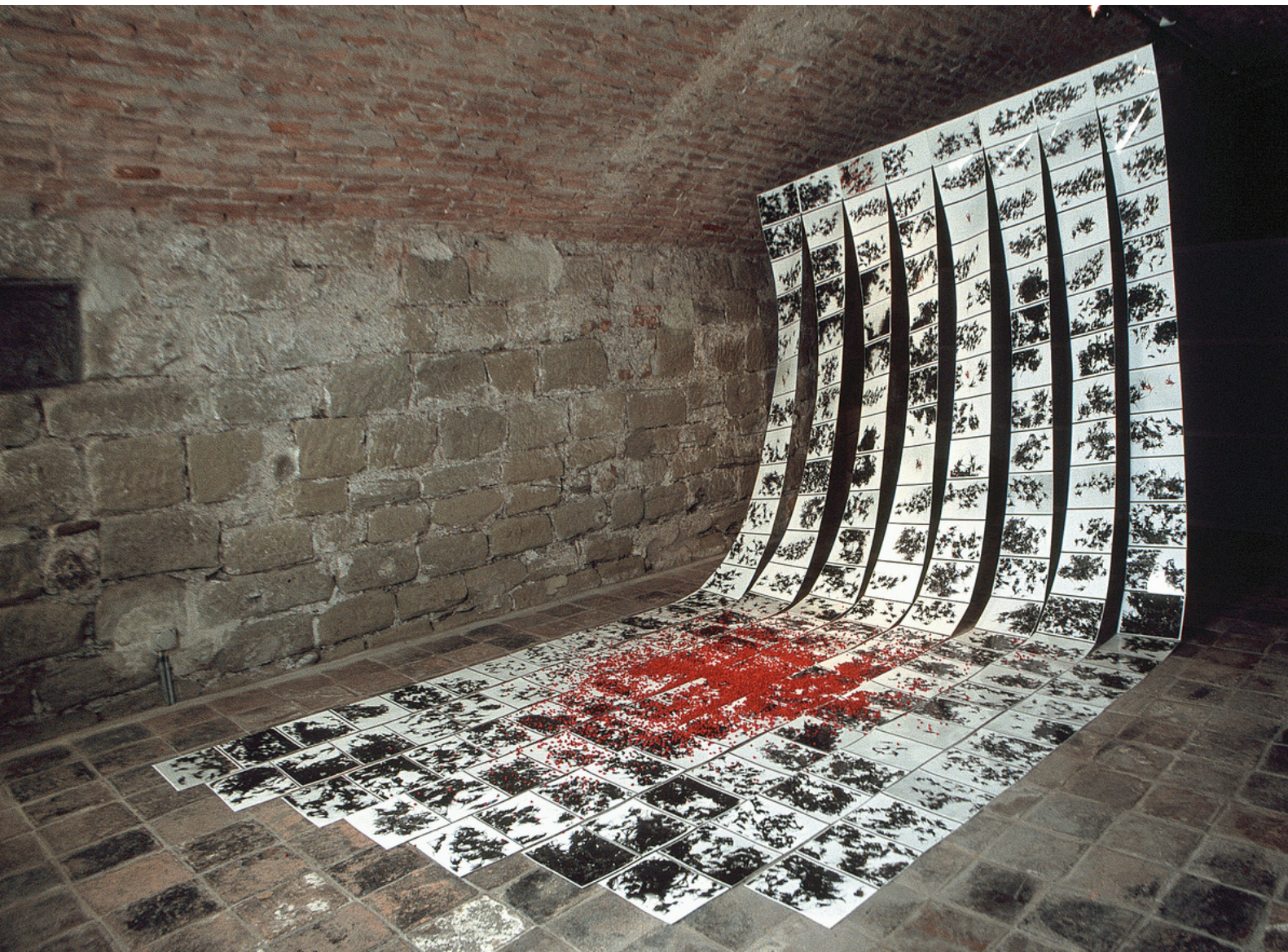
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1. The term Abrouc was used within Charfi's family and belongs to a localized form of the Sfax dialect rather than to common Tunisian usage. It referred to a resourceful, cunning, or street-smart person, most often a man. Charfi appropriated the term to name her paper figures and coined the plural form Abérics, a neologism of her own invention. Fatma Charfi, email to Karen Milbourne, March 21, 2007.
 2. Interview with Fatma Charfi, October 1993, audio recording from unidentified radio broadcast produced on the occasion of the artist's exhibition at Galerie Yahia, Tunis, Fatma Charfi Estate, unprocessed personal archive hereafter FCE. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Fatma Charfi have been translated by the author.
 3. Interview with Charfi.
 4. Fatma Charfi, typescript of interview by J. Posse-Murgui, "Questions à l'artiste," n.d., in "Archive Fatma.pdf," p. 4, FCE.
 5. Fatma Charfi, email to Karen Milbourne, March 24, 2007, FCE.
 6. "J'aime toucher, palper la matière, probablement parce que les femmes l'ont fait depuis des siècles; je crois cela compatible avec les technologies de pointe. Après tout, on roule la pâte comme le plastique, le geste est le même. Je revendique ma condition de femme à travers mon engagement artistique." Charfi, typescript of interview by Posse-Murgui, "Questions à l'artiste," p. 2.
 7. Fatma Charfi, email to Karen Milbourne, March 15, 2007, FCE.



Enfant Mort et Médaille de Paix

2009

Acrylic paint and markers on canvas, photographic print on paper, satin ribbon, plastic, cotton wadding, silk paper, and glue
100 × 160 cm



Cry of a Child

2002-2009

Installation with laminated photographic prints

900 × 240 cm

Laboratoire de Paix

Ca. 2004–2006

Photography

44.5 x 59.5 cm

CONTACT

INFO@BLUEWINDPROJECT.COM

WHATSAPP **KHADIJA HAMDI : +34 623565723**

INSTAGRAM : **@BLUE_WIND_PROJECT**

WWW.BLUEWINDPROJECT.COM

12 PLACE SIDI HASSINE 2026
SIDI BOU SAÏD, TUNISIA

CONTACT@AGORGI.COM

WHATSAPP **AÏCHA GORGI : +216 55 66 55 00**

INSTAGRAM : **@AGORGI_GALLERY**

WWW.AGORGI.COM

3 RUE SIDI EL GHEMRINI
2026 SIDI BOU SAÏD, TUNISIA