

PRESS RELEASE



Anna Boghiguan, *An Incident in the Life of a Philosopher*, 2017 (detail)
Courtesy the artist

ANNA BOGHIGUIAN

Curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Marianna Vecellio

September 18 - December 10, 2017

The Castello di Rivoli presents in the Manica Lunga the first retrospective dedicated to the Egyptian-Canadian artist of Armenian origins, Anna Boghiguan (Cairo, 1946).

The exhibition will then travel to the Sharjah Art Foundation in Sharjah (UAE), from March 16 to June 16, 2018.

Anna Boghiguan, whose studio and home are found in Cairo, lives and works in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. After studying political science at the American University in Cairo, in 1970 she moved to Canada where she studied art and music at Concordia University in Montreal. Her interests range from literature to philosophy and politics and are reflected in her drawings and paintings often made in encaustic which stand out for their instinctiveness and saturated colors. Her works combine figures and written text, thus turning the painting into a unified body able to effect all the senses and lead the viewer into an empathic dimension with the world. Besides painting, the artist uses numerous languages of expression such as sculpture, photography, writing, and sound.

Her collages incorporate objects and cut-outs of printed images. “Her installations and environmental works offer a unique interpretation of the experience of journeys and contemporary human beings, poised between past and present, poetry and politics, impassioned gaze and critical observation,” states Marianna Vecellio, the exhibition’s curator.

Born into an Armenian family with first-hand experience of the diaspora and that tremendous exodus, Anna Boghiguiian developed the urgency of cultural cosmopolitanism well before the advent of globalization. Almost as if protecting her studio from the violence and disturbances in the Middle East, in spring 2017 the artist moved the furniture and objects from her atelier in Cairo to the Castello di Rivoli, recreating on the Museum’s third floor the surroundings she holds dear: rooms overflowing with works and drawings, jars of pigment, rugs, Oriental objects, and early works never shown to the public before.

A nomad at heart, Anna Boghiguiian has always been a citizen of the world: during her numerous trips, from one city to the next, one continent to another, she immerses herself in the places and sounds of cities as well as in the literature, poetry, and political-social dimension. Though keeping the distance of an outside observer, she grasps, like an entomologist, the contradictions and unease of today’s man.

The artist stood out on the international scene by taking part in the project curated by Catherine David, *Contemporary Arab Representations*, presented in 2003 at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona; BildMuseum, Umeå, and Centro José Guerrero de la Diputación, Granada, for which she created a series of works that evolve according to an actual narrative. Her works have been exhibited at the Thessaloniki Biennale (2007), 11th International Istanbul Biennial (2009), 10th Sharjah Biennial (2011), dOCUMENTA (13) (2012), Kassel, Bienal de São Paulo, 1st International Biennial of Contemporary Art Cartagena (2014), 14th International Istanbul Biennial (2015), and 12th Sharjah Biennial (2015). Her most recent solo shows include *Promenade dans l’inconscient (A Walk in the Unconscious)* at Carré d’Art, Nîmes, 2016. At dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Anna Boghiguiian made a name for herself in the art world for the vigor and effectiveness of her works, which for their uniqueness stand apart from customary and traditional official art. With her presence, three years later, in the 56. Venice Biennale (2015), Anna Boghiguiian was one of the artists who exhibited in the Armenian Pavilion and was awarded the Golden Lion for the best national participation.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev writes: “Anna Boghiguiian’s exhibition reconfirms our Museum’s vocation to analyze the cultural dialogue in today’s world characterized by migrations, wars, and crises, and to anticipate contemporary artistic developments. Starting from her hand-made artist book in the 1980s up to her latest large installations, Anna Boghiguiian unravels and opens a time-space folded over upon itself, as she creates an experimental language of abundance and inclusion able to convey empathy and engage the public.”

For the exhibition, a catalogue in English and Italian has been published by Skira, with a section of previously unseen works dedicated to Nietzsche in Turin and made expressly for this publication; the catalogue also offers essays by the curators and a comprehensive timeline with a critical anthology, biography, and bibliography.

The exhibition will be presented at the Sharjah Art Foundation of Sharjah (UAE) from March 16 to June 16, 2018, curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Hoor Al Qasimi.

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Works

The Studio, 2017, a room filled with objects by the artist and others found onsite, represents a place of work and creation that reveals a desire to create a bond between Cairo and Turin while making an intimate space of great emotion accessible to the public. Comparison with local cultural history led the artist to create the works on paper *An Incident in the Life of a Philosopher*, 2017, inspired by the time the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) had spent in Turin between 1888 and 1889; it was here where he conceived his autobiographical work *Ecce homo*, his final masterpiece before his breakdown.

Boghiguian takes her cue from the episode where, on January 3, 1889, the famous German philosopher embraced a horse leaving the Teatro Carignano in Turin to defend it from brutal whipping; he then began sobbing on the ground and rolling over in pain, a prelude to a philosophical and clinical madness brewing under the surface. Boghiguian takes this story and creates her own interpretation of this solitary, meditative figure who abandoned himself to a Dionysian ideal according to which the dynamics of birth and destruction give rise to the creative act.

ZYX-XYZ, 1981–1986, was born as an artist's book in 1981 during her stay in Canada. Boghiguian's reflections on man's existential journey and the never-ending repetition of life and death can be found in this book as works in gouache, watercolor, pastel, and collage, freely combining painting and writing. This work alludes to the imaginary journey of an alchemist, symbolically represented by a brain, which the artist prints with a seal she found in the late 1970s in a shop in Amsterdam. *ZYX-XYZ* explores the trajectory of things, of cultural concepts and transformation, the expression of material and bodily fluidity that contradicts the idea of an economy and a liquid world associated with the flow of data in the digital age.

In the series *Indian Train*, 1984, the artist records her own experience on Indian trains, which symbolize a society in motion and a privileged place of observation and reflection on humans and the world at large. The Indian railway was the biggest project ever built by the British during the colonial era. Used to unify and connect the country, trains, which represent nomadism, laid the foundation for the first migrations and the gradual decolonization. But India and colonialism recur in another series of works devoted to the Indian poet and Nobel winner Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). Titled *A Play to Play*, 2013, Boghiguian's site-specific installation is inspired by the comedy *The Post Office* written by Tagore in 1912 that describes the life of Amal, a sick child who observes the outside world from his window and who becomes a symbol of colonial India under the British Empire. The characters and settings of Tagore's work are portrayed in a series of drawings, papier-mâché sculptures and paper puppets that have been cut out and hung. To make *A Play to Play*, Boghiguian visited Santiniketan, where Tagore opened a school—which later became the Visva-Bharati university—whose mission was a freer kind of education outdoors as opposed to more traditional models brought to India by the British.

A Poet on the Edge of History (Constantine Cavafy), 1995–2017, is Boghiguian's title for her body of work—over 300 works on paper—dedicated to the Greek poet and intellectual Konstantinos Kavafis (1863–1933). By analyzing the political intuitions of Kavafis—who had lived in Alexandria in Egypt from the late 1800s to the early 1900s and whom she calls the poet “of history”—Boghiguian focuses on a few themes of his poetics, such as metamorphosis, sensuality, and the description of the decline that distinguishes the end of the Ptolemaic and Greek-Roman period in Egypt. Her constant interest in the poet can be seen in her recent works, such as the installation on the Battle of Actium, in which Boghiguian outlines a parallel between the decline of the Ptolemaic reign in Egypt and of the Eastern Roman Empire with the decadence of today which favors the rise of authoritarian political figures.

The Simple Affair that Moved the World, 2010–2011, is the first installation made by Boghiguian. This work—which joins wooden structures, canvas, drawings on paper, writings, and mural painting—investigates the influence of the global market upon the phenomenon of migration, focused on exporting and importing people and goods as events that have historically characterized relations between Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, India, and the Americas. World history, which

intermingles with the personal and inner history of the artist, creates a storyline where reality and fiction blend together to explain the profound roots of cultural imperialism.

Unfinished Symphony, 2012, made for DOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, is an immersive installation made up of over 100 works on paper, a large sculpture in wax portraying an ear, a dry tree, dead bees, a stuffed bird, an egg-shaped object, and a military canvas. The work alludes to the meanders of history and the roots of Nazism in Germany that can be found in the unresolved contradictions of World War I and in the colonialism of previous centuries. Renewed conflicts and resulting migrations, the pain of people under dictators forced to become refugees make art reflect on current emergencies.

The Salt Traders, 2015, shown at the 14th International Istanbul Biennial and recently a part of the Castello di Rivoli's permanent collection thanks to the financial support of the Fondazione per l'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea CRT, offers an account and comprehensive interpretation of the "salt traders" around the world. Salt, which was once used in trading but also to keep food from spoiling, contributed to the birth of economic dealings and slavery as well as the creation of new ports and commercial routes that kicked off migration across the Mediterranean. By comparing the journeys of Alexander the Great and Christopher Columbus with the peaceful marches of Gandhi and the recent economic collapse of Greece, this installation underlines how crises derive from a lack of primary goods.

Through a dream-like journey in time and geography, but also through collective and personal memory, the installation *Promenade dans l'incoscient*, 2016, relates the history of Nîmes with Alexandria in Egypt. Faced by the never-ending flow of history, Boghiguian, who references the sense of hearing—which she differentiates between a metaphysical ear for inner hearing and a physical ear that can establish bonds with the surrounding world—invites the audience to practice hearing that allows us to reflect on the existence and misery of politics in both ancient and modern times.

Biography

Anna Boghiguian was born in Cairo in 1946 to Armenian parents. She grew up in a family of clock makers in Heliopolis, around ten kilometers from Cairo, a city in the middle of the desert built in the early twentieth century by a Belgian businessman, engineer, and general, the Baron Edouard Empain. Known for its bizarre palace inspired by the Angkor Wat in Cambodia and the Hindu temples of Orissa, Heliopolis was inhabited by the elite and minorities, mostly foreigners.

At the age of six she witnessed the Egyptian revolution of 1952, which forced King Fārūq I into exile, and the fall of the monarchy the following year. The artist grew up in a context of radical political and social change that, under the leadership of President Ġamāl Nasser, would create modern-day Egypt.

She attended the Nubarian Armenian school and drawing classes by Onnig Avedissian; from 1958 to 1964 she went to the American College for Girls, and between 1964 and 1969 she studied political science and economics at the American University in Cairo, established in 1920 to educate the country's future leaders. She became interested in the philosophical writings of Hegel, Marx, Macchiavelli, Plato, and other utopian thinkers. At twenty, when allowed by the government, she would take trips abroad. Passionate about literature and poetry, she read Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Nikos Kazantzakis, Anna Achmatova, Nagib Mahfuz, Albert Camus, Taha Hussein, Jean-Paul Sartre, Truman Capote, and the poems of Rabindranath Tagore.

In the early 1970s she moved to Montreal in Canada and attended the Concordia University where she studied art and music.

Made starting from the late 1970s, her first works are collages with images, ads, and words, selected from newspapers and magazines, including *Interview* by Andy Warhol, and presented on supports like recycled cardboard, wrapping paper, and butcher paper. Her use of newspapers led her to reflect on combinations of writing and drawing, which she later elaborated.

In 1978, Boghiguian made her first mural (now lost) at the Youth Clinic in Montreal. Her first exhibitions were informal events and, organized in her studio and home, were not attended by the public who never received invites. She exhibited her works in Greece in 1979. She also began drawing, painting, and writing in her diaries and creating hand-painted artist books, a practice she has continued on and off even today.

In 1983, she visited the home of Konstantinos Kavafis in Alexandria, Egypt, at the time the Amar hotel, which inspired many of her subsequent works.