

Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative
But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise:
Zineb Sedira on Family, the Sea, and her Videos

My name is Zineb Sidera. I'm an artist based in London—I really work between London, Paris, and Algiers. So I do different forms—video, photography—but in my heart I'm really a filmmaker, so this is the medium I'm most at ease with. The earlier work in my practice was very much attached to my personal history, more like autobiographical work.

Growing up France—in '63 I was born, so I was growing up in the '60s—Algiers got its independence on the 5th of July, '62. To be in France around that time, after France had lost, it was quite a difficult thing for us, because obviously, anyone who was Algerian was facing quite a lot of racism. And I grew up actually seeing my parents pretty badly treated by people. But I did do a few pieces of work on this issue, like one called *Mother, Father and I*, where my parents talk about the immigration to France. They also talk about the Algerian War of Independence, because my parents were in Algeria when Algeria was French, and they were fighting against the French—they were freedom fighters.

And on the other hand, they decided also to come and live in France, when Algeria became independent. So I was really interested in making them talk about why you live under colonization, and under French rule, and you get rid of that rule, and then after you come back to France, to live again under that French rule, with the same type of racism. For the first time, I was hearing my parents really talking about this very painful moment that I had memories about. And a lot of things made sense, you know, in terms of all my trips back to Algeria, and the happiness I was facing there. And then with the [racism], as I said, growing up in France, and the schooling, things were quite difficult at times. So I did a few pieces around that, but also I became a mother in the early '90s. So I started to look at my relationship to my parents, especially to my mom, in a different manner.

And because I was already interested in her oral history, and telling stories, and recording stories, and perhaps archiving and collecting stories, I made my mom and my daughter speak to each other in that piece called *Mother Tongue*, where each of them speak in their own mother tongue—my mom in Arabic, my daughter who was born in the UK, in English, and me who was born in France, in French. That prompted a whole series of works looking at the relationship between my mother and I, and my daughter, and the transmission that comes with it—how do you talk about your identity when your identity is quite complex, perhaps painful at times, but also very rich.

During that time, in the early '90s, in Algeria, it wasn't really possible to travel, because there was what we call the Civil War, the Black Decade. So I stopped my contact with Algeria. It was quite difficult, because my parents had gone back to live in Algeria. Then in 2004, I was invited to do a project in Algiers—and things calmed down in Algeria, obviously—so I went back. And then suddenly it prompted a totally different set of work, because for the first time I was able to make work *there*, on the land of my parents, or my land, if you want, rather than about Algeria. So the work became much more infused with landscape and seascape.

It was an aesthetic that was less documentary, as the previous work was—like interviewing, always a lot of speech, a lot of people who were present, and the family was present. You know, some people have asked the question, “Why aren't you working with the family anymore?” But

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obviously, for me to be in Algeria is the family. And the sea, in French, *la mer*, is the same as the word for the mother, *la mère*. So the quality of the work became more filmic, perhaps, and more poetic. That went on for quite a while with pieces of work like *Middle Sea*, *Saphir*, *Floating Coffins*. And then at one point, I went back to the earlier style of filming, where I started to fuse a mixture of both.

And that's where it led me to make a piece of work like *Gardiennes d'images*, which is again an interview, a discussion, while I listen to somebody's story. But the way it was shot was more complex than in the earlier work, which was very straightforward, with a camera and myself filming. And here you have also a piece with a lighthouse keeper who's speaking about his role within that lighthouse, but again, infused with some kind of really beautiful, filmic shots.

Every work is very personal, and has some personal element to it, even in the piece, *The Lovers*—perhaps that's why I call them lovers, because I see the people in there, you know? Like when I think of the lighthouse keepers who have collected all these objects, placed them very carefully, in a certain order, with some handwriting there. I really feel those images. And the other one, for example, of the archive with all the handwriting—there is this kind of really human presence to it.