

ECLECTIC CONSTELLATIONS

Asad Faulwell's recent show at Lawrie Shabibi features new works in the artist's celebrated *Les Femmes d'Alger* series, writes **Patrick Martin Lichty**



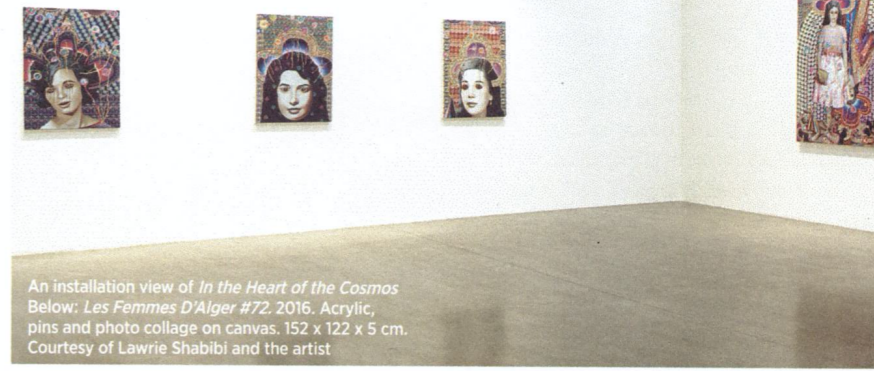
Les Femmes D'Alger 2016. Acrylic, pins and photo collage on canvas, 183 x 183 x 5. Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi and the artist

Asad Faulwell's *In the Heart of the Cosmos* is his second solo show at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, continuing his ongoing *Les Femmes d'Alger* series. This body of work has a deep expression of the Iranian-American's eclectic background, influences and styles. It reflects on the 1954-1966 Algerian War of Independence from French occupation, and the obscured legacy of the women of the Algerian FLN who fought as equals with the men in that conflict. *In the Heart of the Cosmos* is inspired by Gille Portecovo's 1966 film, *The Battle of Algiers*, which is considered a classic example of Italian Neo-Realist cinema, and serves as a rich source of visual inspiration. Questions of who these women were, their bravery, and their visibility became questions that would infuse this body of work.

Faulwell previously worked mainly on larger abstract compositions, whose influence can be seen in his later work through fissures of colour running across the surface of the paintings. He had been working in abstraction and looping forms until he was inspired by the Portecovo film. After this Faulwell considered the role of the Algerian woman in art just as they were a frequent subject for artists during the 18th and 19th century.

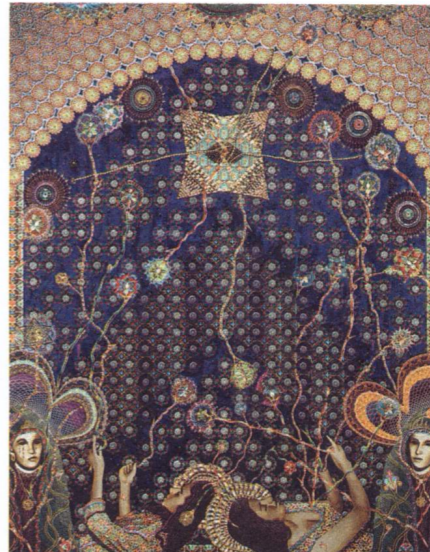
Delacroix's *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1837) is a classic example of this type of Romantic-era Orientalist subject matter that would inspire Picasso to revisit the subject matter just as it would also influence Matisse's *The Algerian Woman* (1909). This art historical conversation forms one basis of Faulwell's *Femmes d'Alger* series as well as the relationship between the mythology of the female body and the political history of the Algerian woman.

The earlier versions of the *Femmes d'Alger* series were larger figurative works, and some of the pieces shown at Lawrie Shabibi contain singular figures, evolving to great assemblages and pyramids of personages. The series was originally done as fantasies in the vein of Delacroix and Picasso as well—a theme that would change over time. As the artist mentioned in a conversation, *The Battle of Algiers* inspired him to do work that was about specific, real women who were important figures in the battle. This led him to increasingly take actual images from history, leading to this structural quality of the figurative aspect of the works. This would range from the trial and acquittal images of the women



An installation view of *In the Heart of the Cosmos*. Below: *Les Femmes D'Alger #72*, 2016. Acrylic, pins and photo collage on canvas, 152 x 122 x 5 cm. Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi and the artist

of the battle to the "trophy photographs" of interrogated Algerian women taken by French soldiers. This insertion of reality into the work caused Faulwell to have other concerns, such as whether his narratives were indeed accurate. The question of authenticity, in subject and in form, evolves as the paintings delve closer to the reality of the women of the Battle of Algiers. Similarly, the monumentality of the figure in the paintings reflects the balance between myth and record. The figures of his women, made through many collages from images drawn from their trials or of the moments just after their acquittal, are painted in grisaille to suggest the idea of monumentality. In addition, the figures exhibit lobed halos in the vein of Catholic devotional icons, or resemblances to Latino altars of the Holy Virgin, but with the halos displaying a fluorescent palette of *Los Angelino* influences such as Scharf or Kelley or the Mexican Day of the Dead. Such references elevate the women in the Battle of Algiers to legend status and thereby add to them a deeply psychological quality. They stare forth, reflecting the pathos and struggle against colonialism. Additionally, these figures suffered a double oppression, on account



of their French colonisers, but also because of their gender. This use of imagery referring to sculpture, memorials, martyrdom (in that many of the Christian saints were canonised as such) in context with the events of the Algerian war, brings about a deep social awareness as well as rich iconography.

Formally, the paintings are exquisitely crafted. Much of the patterning comprising dots, stipples, and web-like designs is based on Persian motifs and geometric patterning using acrylic, oil, and pins. Faulwell's artistic process is informed by mathematical construction, miniature painting, and collage; he layers patterns from quick chaos to obsessive slowness, working towards abstraction, and editing over time like writing. Pins are placed in this matrix of form and painted so that they become constellations throughout his obsessive patterning.

Faulwell initially works on his paintings flat, but when he turns them vertically upright, his perception of them changes—much like the account of Kandinsky's story of the invention of abstraction by seeing a painting set at a right angle. Upon seeing this new orientation, he reworks them until they are done, but he wonders if any of the paintings are ever "finished." Perhaps they are in the eye of the viewer.

Faulwell's eclectic confrontation of so many issues, visually and conceptually, has given him mixed reactions. While his paintings were gaining critical acclaim in the US, he was often assumed to be female due to his feminist subject matter. "The artworld likes to categorise things, and along very prescribed lines, and this is something I wanted to question," says the artist.

Clearly, Faulwell challenges this categorisation, and in his doing so, powerfully challenges our perceptions about history, gender, and culture through his work. ■

In the Heart of the Cosmos ran until 4 February at Lawrie Shabibi. Lawrieshabibi.com