

Traditionally, portraiture has aimed to capture the likeness and essence of its subject. Throughout art history, the portrait has been treated as the gateway to one's unique human spirit. While much of Hicham Benohoud's work is classified as portraiture, it challenges the core principles of the medium itself. Benohoud does not illuminate nor idealise the individuality of his subjects. Alternatively, the artist maintains a confrontational dialogue with the tradition of the portrait, and his work illustrates a progressive, artistic investigation into problems of identity. Using both himself and others as subjects, Benohoud's practise considers the global and local forces impeding the development of individuality, and the factors threatening the preservation of cultural identity in today's climate.

In an early series, *Version Soft*, (2003) the artist raises questions of identity and representation using himself. The series comprises twenty-five monochrome portraits, composed and staged in the same neutral space. Each image captures the artist using arbitrary materials such as stones, tape, and string, to increasingly (and sometimes totally) censor and abstract his appearance. Several of these 'masking' techniques appear burdensome and subtly violent. The result is a visual commentary on the power of disguise and censorship to manufacture identity. Fifteen years later, this concept is still of particular relevance in a technological era that is witnessing the extinction of authenticity - an era where 'self' is but a carefully curated projection, performed in a digital landscape. These themes of the oppressive and violent forces that threaten identity recur throughout the artist's work.

By 2007, Benohoud's practise had evolved to consider the formative influence of social and cultural privilege on the construction of identity. His project *Azemmour*, (2007) is a series of portraits of youths local to a small Moroccan heritage town of the same name.

In contrast to *Version Soft*

, Benohoud departs from the neutral space and incorporates the natural environment of his subjects into their portraits, thus considering how physical, social, and cultural surroundings impact how we understand and express our individual and collective selves. While the images reveal a quality of artistic sophistication (suggestive of the artist's hand), each portrait is also refreshingly spontaneous. Encouraged to improvise, the children interact with idle objects and detritus from their surroundings, incorporating them intuitively and expressively into their portraits. As they interact with branches, twine, and other miscellaneous materials, Benohoud captures them in precise moments of tension within their environment, creating a sense of absence in each subject's relationship to their physical world. Shot in black and white and

staged in a barren landscape, the series comments on how social and cultural neglect are directly oppressive to the creative formation of identity.

A recent portraiture series, *Kairouan* (2016), is titled after the Tunisian city of the same name. The project is stimulating and rich. It adds dimension to the artist's philosophical dialogue with the topic of

identity, by introducing new factors threatening its progression and preservation. Compared with earlier series, where environment was minimized, here Benohoud donates particular significance to the role of site. Now a UNESCO world heritage location, the city of Kairouan was once a centre for Islamic scholarship and Quranic learning, recognized for its contribution to cultural heritage. In selecting this particular location, Benohoud's series reflects on the erosion of identity as a symptom of the disintegration of cultural heritage.

Digressing from his monochromatic trend, Benohoud captures *Kairouan* in colour, tactfully using its power to evoke the metaphorical qualities of place. The pale and overexposed colour scheme mirrors the natural characteristics of the desert: parched, arid, withered and scorched. In each image the subjects pose before backgrounds sharing a mutual quality of neglect, such as the crumbling ruins of a house, a desolate concrete embankment, or an isolated desert bush. The figures are akin to mannequins - anonymous, awkward, and staged - each strangely alienated from the conditions that shaped their being.

Maintaining thematic continuity, *Kairouan* is another of Benohoud's experiments in anti-portrait portraiture, as the identity of each subject is intentionally deleted. In one final gesture, Benohoud sets fire to the faces, quite literally de-materializing them to dust. The figures stand before the relics of a city whose heritage is evaporating in the arid climate of technology, capitalism, and globalization. Examining them, one wonders how long before all uniqueness and individuality is lost.

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Pull Quote : Benohoud's work reflects on the erosion of identity as a symptom of the disintegration of cultural heritage