

Hafid Bouazza, *The Ideal Muslim Woman*, GEM

Aline Thomassen's work is full of brutal tenderness

Thomassen has penetrated the world of Moroccan women and the almost bestial physicality of her drawings reveals how intimate her stay in that world is—a world that she loves, no doubt about that, but also one whose dark sides she exposes. Or perhaps I should say: invisible sides. "In this world and the hereafter" (or "the next"): this expression from the Koran, written in Arabic script, appears frequently in her work, alluding to the number of children the women have, because still-born children are also counted.

The drawings are lyrical and ferocious, literally organic, because the women in her work are torn open, heart and womb ripped open, their body parts named, their gestures captured, and in spite of the fact that their nakedness expresses a power, Thomassen cannot hide that the women are sometimes reduced to a single basic function: to bear and suckle the living and even, as already said, to bear the dead.

Her fascination with the bodily undoubtedly refers to the physical way in which Moroccan women interact with each other, their unforced intimacy amongst one another. And yet... and yet...the violence in her drawings, both in terms of form and content, must signify something more. Look for example at the dominance of red in her work.

What is, after all, the association of red, the color of blood, with Morocco? There is the red city Marrakesh, the tannery in Fez, the color of the flag, the henna that in and out of season is smeared on hands and feet and elsewhere, the blood-stained sheets after the marriage night, the circumcision, the ritual slaughter. In Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* Moroccan rituals, in which much blood flows, were depicted as a background for pagan rituals.

Part of the explanation lies in the physicality that Thomassen emphasizes in her drawings: wherever there is a body, decay lies in wait. Blood is sacred, but unclean when it is periodically secreted by a woman. Henna is the blood of the martyrs. A sacrificial offering for God must be bled to death, recalling pagan rituals. Another explanation, I think, lies in the continual consciousness of death: "this world and the hereafter." The hereafter is not so much a kingdom that comes hereafter, but a parallel world. Thomassen does not solve the riddle of Morocco (insofar as there is a riddle) — there are only the musings that her work evokes.

Aline Thomassen is no tourist guide for Morocco, however. Thomassen's work does not need this background. She places her work in a topographical context and then goes beyond it – her drawings scream, whisper, cry, and sing sufficiently on their own. Forget that country, forget Ramadan, forget the street urchins, and see her work in terms of its own autonomy. Her work shows an intimate world, a sensual, sexual, and cruel world – Thomassen's world – in which her great admiration for the women around her in Morocco is also visible. It fascinates and sometimes repels. It is of a brutal tenderness.