

Introducing Rita Alaoui

““Meet Rita,” she said, “she’s a Moroccan artist, student in the art schools of Paris and New York. Her great grandmother was kidnapped to be a slave, oh, and yes, she’s descended from the Prophet.”

That’s what she said. Literally. She’d invited me for a drink in her hotel, in some palace in Marrakesh, and that’s how she introduced me.

“I’ll get you a show in Zurich,” she said, but I never heard from her again’



What am I doing here?

I show Rita Bourdieu's famous plan of the Berber House: 'I'm going to draw your studio,' I say, 'and interview you, and perhaps, there'll be a sort of anthropology in there.'

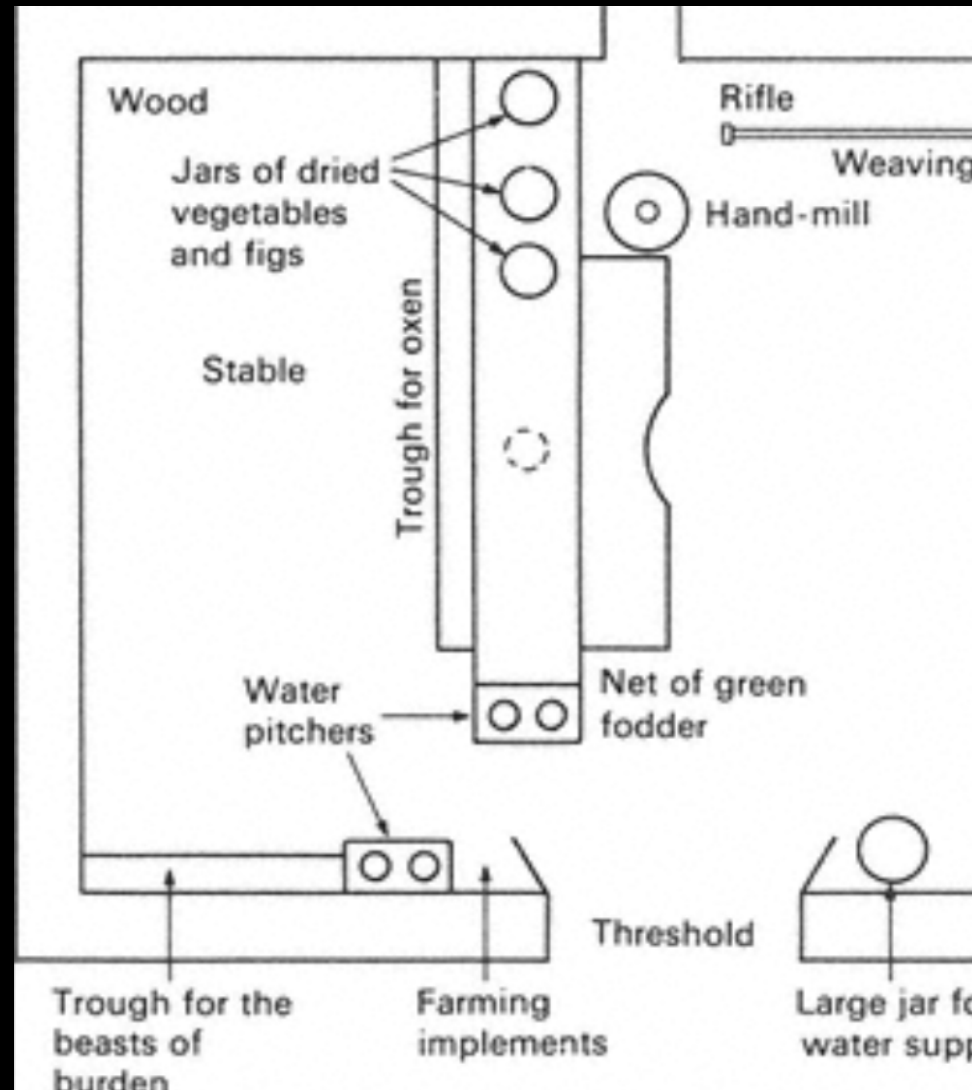
'We have to start somewhere, I suppose.'

She takes a box from the arched alcove opposite her desk, and opens it. Inside, are two photographs of a real Berber House she went to visit a couple of years ago.

'There's only one room,' she says, 'In the day they pack everything away, and only two things remain in there:

Above the window, carved into the plaster, the name of God

Below the window, placed on the carpet, the television.'



A screen

I'm disappointed. Rita tells me she's tidied up.

'It's not to do with you. I just decided I needed more space – and the residency had to go.'

It's been running for four years; and lots off people have come and gone: Anna Sabina, who distilled essences in bottles of municipal parks and newsprint; Pierre, who manipulated books into mysterious illegibility, the Indian who cooked odoriferous curries; the young writer too terrified to leave the flat; the Frenchman who turned her into an anthropology project.

'Not always; but generally, it worked.' she says
'Working here on my own, I'm isolated, and the residencies gave me people to talk to and work with. That's why I did it.'

She shows me the screen she built to divide her studio from the rest of the flat: 'this kept them out' she adds, 'so I could get on with some work.'



Miniature

On top of the metal shelves by the window there are two miniature forests, and by the door, there is a block of polystyrene that is going to become a miniature landscape. On the screen that stands behind it, trees are sketched onto the rolling, desert landscape the polystyrene will become.

In a box, wrapped in tissue paper, there is a photograph of her son at the barbers', and of his hair, scattered on the floor.

'He spent the whole time picking up the bits of hair, and making monsters on his arm with them' she says, 'he couldn't stop himself.'

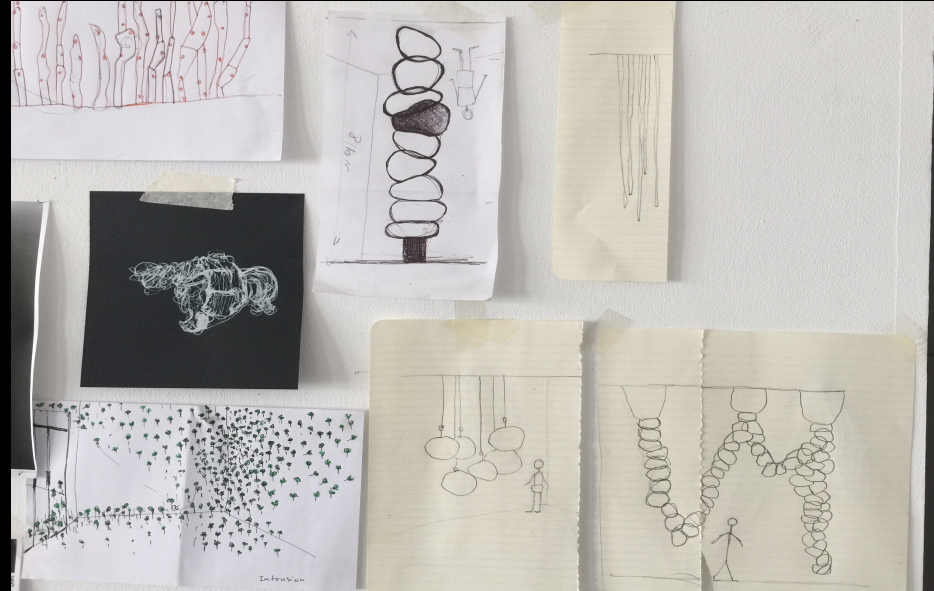


Concrete

'I met this guy recently, an engineer, who builds really big stuff: bridges, and railway stations, and airports – that sort of thing. He fell in love with my work.

"I can build you anything." he told me, "Ask me for a nine metre long beam in the middle of the desert, and I can do it."

"You should always be careful of offering an artist anything they want" I replied.'



A Residency

'You're the architect' she tells me; and she asks me what to do about the bathroom: 'It's too big for a studio,' she says, 'and it's blocking the light; but I don't want to get rid of it entirely.'

Rita lives next door, on the same street, in an inner suburb of tall white, concrete apartment blocks. She's so close she has often thought about stringing up a pulley over the few yards of yard that separate her kitchen from the studio.

'Could I work at home? I did for a while. My kids got sick to death of having to keep every stone and pip for my art. They've got endless collections of their own, and they haven't got room for mine

This place is rented' she adds, 'and I'd like to be able to live here, one day, once they've gone.'

