

# BUTT

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# STRAIGHT TO BED WITH SOUFIANE ABABRI

- Interview by Pierre-Alexandre Mateos
- Photography by Bruno Staub

Ivry sur Seine—I take the metro to the southern outskirts of Paris to meet the Moroccan-born artist Soufiane Ababri at his studio and witness his famous bed. The 37-year-old is wearing head-to-toe Adidas, and there’s a Genet portrait on the wall. He assures me that the kinky colored-pencil drawings surrounding us—his “bedwork”—are derived from his imagination, of course.

**Pierre-Alexandre: Hey! How was your weekend?**

Soufiane: I was completely busy working on a performance that I’m going to do in Aachen, Germany.

**What are you going to do there?**

A performance based on poems by Abu Nawas. He’s one of the first Arabs to write explicitly about homosexuality in the 8th century. The performance will take place in a park with two guys who have the kind of immigrant, Maghrebian dress code.

**Meaning sportswear?**

Sportswear, yes, but I’m not thinking of the guys who are super styled, with special edition Air Max. Instead, think casual, counterfeit stuff. Something a little less aesthetic, and a bit scruffier.

**Do you have a kink for that?**

Actually that look turns me on a lot. Yes, totally. I’m quite into synthetic, sporty materials. I’m quite down for that fantasy.

**It’s kind of “the” signature look in France. Isn’t it? Do you wear it too?**



Soufiane is lucky that Instagram's strict no-nudity-or-sex rules don't apply to his drawings.





**I think I may have seen a photo of you in head-to-toe Lacoste sportswear...**

I've worn it, and I wear it often. It also helps me get in a certain state of mind.

**It's quite seductive. If you go to a gay bar, in the evening, in sportswear, it's going to be a good way to get hit on.**

Certainly. And by wearing it you adopt a particular kind of psychology.

**It's like method actors getting into character.**

But I also wear artists clothes!

**Like overalls, with splashes of paint?**

(laughs) Yes. It's true, clothing plays an important social role in how people perceive you.

**Okay, but is it something you play with sexually? Like, have you role-played with sportswear, or using certain materials?**

Totally. There are two things—I like to receive and I like to give. I'm quite turned on by fabrics that are super soft, like cotton and nylon. And then I'm also into wearing things that are super sporty.

**"And then things happen that are like straight out of a Pasolini film."**

**Are there brands you fantasized about when you were younger? Brands linked to hip-hop and sports figures in the 90s, such as Bullrot or Com8.**

In my youth, I wasn't aware of any of this, or my interest in it. I didn't live here in France. I grew up in Tangier and Rabat.

**What's your relationship with those cities?**

There's a lot I could say. First of all, I grew up in Tangier—my family still lives there. It's still the only place where I have little difficulty getting work done in a weird way. When I'm there, I love snapping sneaky images of people on the street with my phone. Especially guys with a kind of exacerbated virility. I'll take a lot of pictures, store them, and then try to make drawings inspired by them when I get home. The drawings definitely move away from reality and touch upon my fantasies...

**What is your greatest erotic memory in Tangier?**

It's a cliché, but it always works for me—the hammams. I was talking about it with my friend, Abdellah Taïa, and he totally agrees. There are things that happen in the hammams where you ask yourself, 'But how is this a homophobic society?' It seems impossible given the promiscuity I've seen, with men intimately helping each other wash their bodies and all. I think it's always been the pattern. Hammams are charged with eroticism.

**Okay, do you have to go to a specific hammam for this?**

There are some that are laxer than others. One time I was with my ex-boyfriend. We went to Fez to do some work and passed by Marrakech. I had heard of a certain hammam there. Well, one of the guys who works there came over to wash us. And while he did, he started singing songs we normally do for a bride and groom. It's as if we got married!

You see, it's a completely schizophrenic society where on the outside you can be insulted, or worse, and then in some specific places, things happen that are like straight out of a Pasolini film.

**Well, Tangier is definitely a charged city in the Western gay imaginary. Paul Bowles and William Burroughs.**

Of course, I love those writers, but at the same time, you have to be very wary of them. Especially Burroughs, who was clearly racist. He used the bodies of young Arabs for his own personal pleasure. There was no relationship. The mythology of gay writers in Tangier should be taken with distance and caution. The Tangier they experienced has nothing to do with what a local might experience. The young generation of Tangier artists are annoyed with this Western-centric heritage, which is disconnected from reality.





**Where the magic happens.**

**Where did you first study art?**

In Montpellier, but it was a really weird time. I came to France to do other studies, and then I completely dropped everything for a love story.

**How old were you?**

At that time, I was 21.

**How did you meet this lover?**

I met him in Bordeaux, in a bar. We were bumming around a lot, living in several cities in France, and even went to Fez for a while. When we landed in Montpellier, I didn't have any career prospects or anything. All I had was this long-time desire to go to art school. So, I applied just to this one school, and for some reason they accepted me.

**So, it was your boyfriend who got you to Montpellier?**

It was a mutual decision. He had things to do. I was in love and would find odd jobs. He was my main occupation.

**What kind of odd jobs?**

I once worked in a sauna.

**Wow. How did that happen?**

I was a regular there and—

**—Where was it?**

In Bordeaux, on Quai des Chartrons. It no longer exists. It was me behind the bar, serving. I'd say that the context of a sauna was also a kind of schooling for me. I learned all the codes and jokes of provincial gays. I really had a sense of their repartee. It was highly developed! (laughs)

**Are there certain jokes you remember specifically?**

Well, it was stuck in the 80s. Nothing had changed. Everyone calling each other "elles". I swear, if you ever go en provence, there are places where it feels like you are

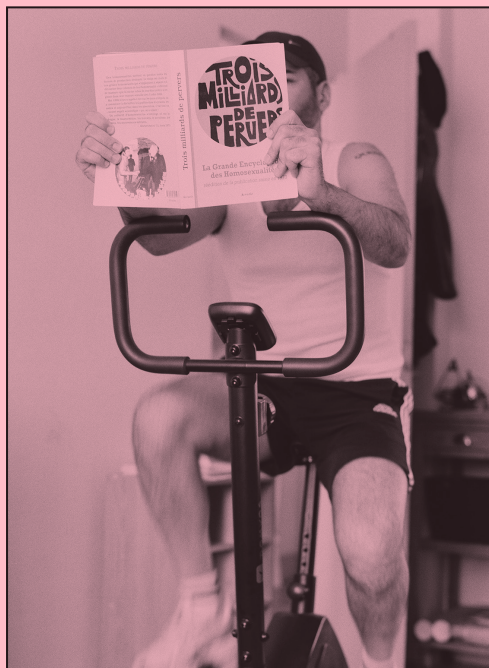


time traveling. It can be charming. It depends on what you're looking for. It was a very male-only environment. There was none of the fluidity I was able to discover in Paris, especially among younger generations — places that are inclusive of everyone. I was living in a milieu that was 100% men.

**Do you ever go to the saunas in Paris?**

Occasionally. I liked it a lot when I was younger. You always have to respect the fiction in places like saunas. I like how Mathieu Lindon talked about it in his book 'Hervelino', which was dedicated to writer and photographer Hervé Guibert. He tells an anecdote from his friendship with Guibert and Michel Foucault. Foucault got angry because Mathieu Lindon boasted about having entered an S&M leather bar in New York in the 70s without respecting the dress code. For Foucault, this was a betrayal of the fiction of the place. To brag about not respecting this code is like breaking a code of honor. You were supposed to walk into the bar in leather gear, with boots on. It's all about placing yourself in a particular psychological state, ready to perform a scenario.

**Just like you in sportswear. (laughs)**



Yes, but to be honest, I have more great memories of outdoor sex in the south of France than at the bars in Paris.

**Where exactly?**

Parc de Mériadeck in Bordeaux. It was downtown, not far from city hall and the court. It was a park with a parking lot below, and surrounded by these ugly concrete apartment blocks from the 80s. There weren't any guards, despite it being this secluded green space right in the middle of the city.

**You'd go there during the evening or the day?**

In the evening, everyone goes. During the days I'd also sometimes pass by while out running errands. I didn't live far...

**Okay, so anytime is good for you to try to cruise. (laughs) You have a photo of Genet on the wall. A famous cruising ancestor.**

Genet, yes, he's everywhere. What I appreciate the most about him are the less official stories, like his relationships with women, or about how he got involved in the Palestinian cause after traveling to the US in support of the Black Panthers.

**Have you read the biography of Genet by Edmund White?**

Yes, it's the most vivid biography of Genet. I like the fact that Edmund White insists on his point of view. It's a very individual and admiring portrayal.

**Do you also try to get close to your subjects?**

My relationship to everything I depict is very personal. One could even say "sentimental". I first collect images, often imagined ones that come to me from reading, and then I draw them.

**You depict a lot of sex scenes. I mean, there's a scene of a threesome hanging on the wall here. Does that scene come from your personal imagination or experience? (laughs)**

Actually, I often take very standard scenes that aren't necessarily very erotic, and deliberately eroticize them. And then, I'll introduce elements of race and colonialism into it. It's as if I'm trying to say 'Voilà! This is my homo perspective of the world.' The gaze of an immigrant who can transform something banal into art.



**What do you think about Arab representation in French gay porn, like from Citebeur studio?**

I find it so outdated. This old-school fantasy where the Arab is only active, and fucks a white guy. In their films, it seems like all Arab guys are active and therefore not gay because they have women elsewhere. There's also this class element, where the immigrant is a worker who is only passing through, who's lonely, or in a position of frustration and sexual misery. It's based on a lot of prejudices. We should move beyond these pornographic clichés.

**But your work plays with these stereotypes, while adding your imagination?**

Exactly. For example, I'm working on one drawing inspired by a photo from a frankly horrible book about how African colonial soldiers were treated. In the photo you see a white doctor using a stethoscope on a conscript's back. He's shirtless and in front of him there's a person passing by. And with one gesture, I respond to this photo, which is already loaded with ideas of imperialism and medical experimentation, and somehow transform it into an erotic relationship, playing out the domination narrative.

**Domination in relation to both race and sex drive?**

The connection is there. We don't really understand it fully. Why would I like to be dominated by someone who represents power? Take the cops, who are a danger to me as an Arab living outside of Paris. While passing them, I can check them out, desire them, imagine things. Which is to say that I hate them as a social phenomenon, yet I secretly desire them.

**Have you ever slept with a cop?**

Yes. (laughs)

**You have to tell a little bit about it.**

See, it wasn't really the full fantasy because we don't care if a guy is a cop when he's naked. (laughs) There's something else at play that makes it intriguing.

**Have guys ever recognized you on apps? Like, they know you're an artist.**

Yes. That's when I said to myself, 'I need to delete Grindr.' (laughs)

**Do people ever tell you that your work turns them on?**

Especially on Instagram. There are people who write to me all the time. They get obsessive. And frankly, that's something I like. I acknowledge that there's an erotic, exciting quality to my work. But it's not just that, you see. I present a fairly brutal relationship towards sex since, as we discussed, I problematize a history of domination. I figure if someone follows my work, at least he'll acquire some new perspectives at some point, even if he's not fully aware of it.

**Why do you call your drawings "bedwork"?**

Because I draw on a bed, and the location affects my position, and also my perspective. I use cheap colored-pencils from the supermarket in order to get away from the figure of the artist and his traditional means of expression – painting.

**Are they all made in your bed?**

Mine or someone else's. I think being in bed is a starting point for lots of scenarios.



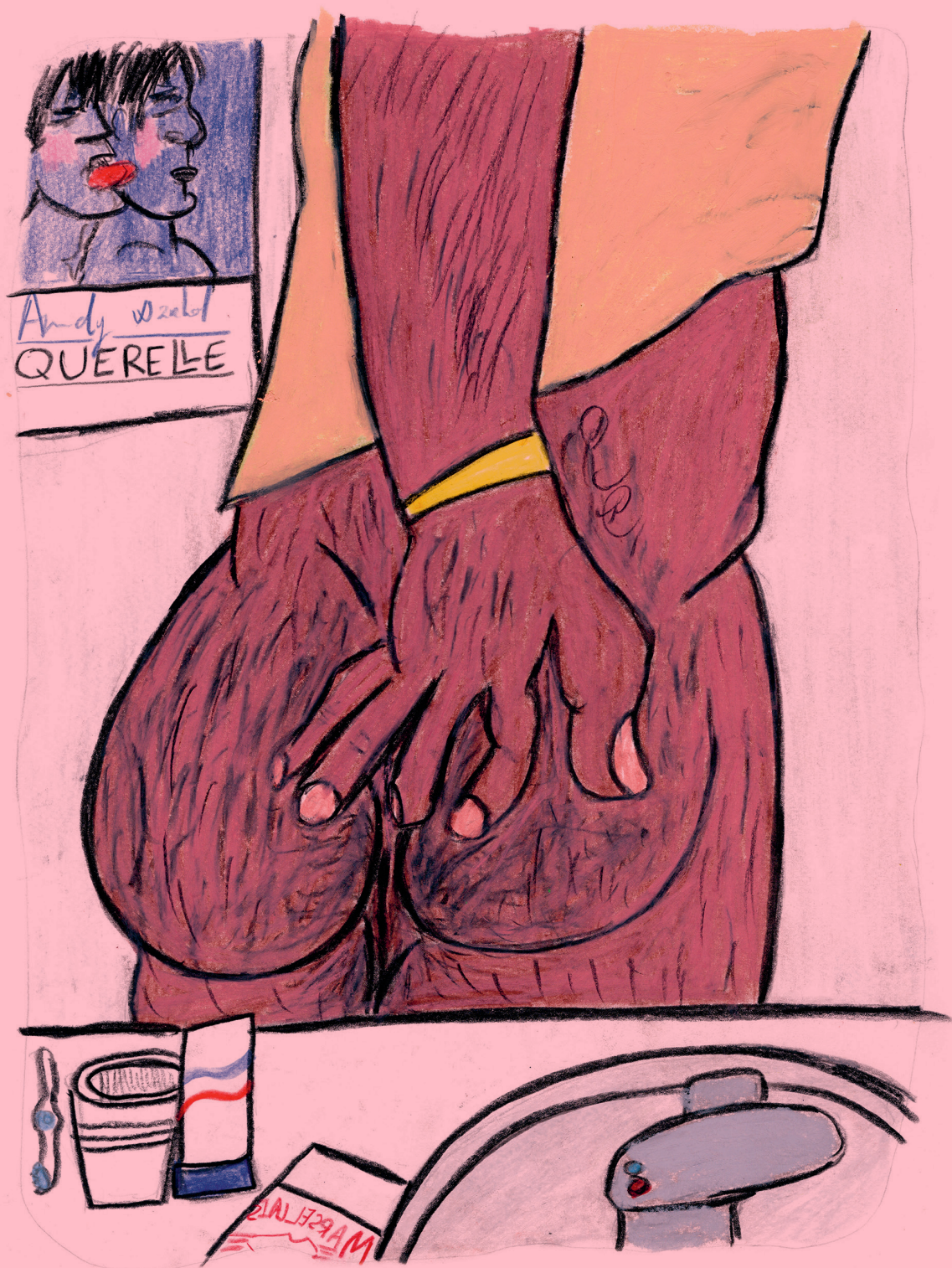
**Bedwork — ‘Stay beautiful even if you’re lying on the ground’**





Bedwork – 'Don't leave me'





Bedwork – 'Mirror, mirror, on the wall'





Bedwork — 'Portrait of a famous artist reading Proust'





Bedwork — 'Samuele reading about bunnies'