

# Driss Ouadahi takes on fences in latest exhibit

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By Jessica Zack

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Photo: Courtesy Driss Ouadahi And Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco

Driss Ouadahi's "Gentle Breeze," above, acrylic and oil on canvas; at right is "Breach in the Silence," oil on canvas.

Ever since Todd Hosfelt first exhibited the Algerian painter Driss Ouadahi's work in a Hosfelt Gallery solo exhibition in 2007, he has been captivated by the repetitive geometry of Ouadahi's urban imagery — his anonymous gridded cityscapes and seemingly endless labyrinthine subway tunnels.

Yet Hosfelt, who was introduced to Ouadahi's work by German architectural painter Stefan Kürten, says his understanding of Ouadahi's work shifted significantly several years ago when he received in the mail "two small, simple paintings from Driss of fences, which he'd done with tiny, meticulous brushstrokes."

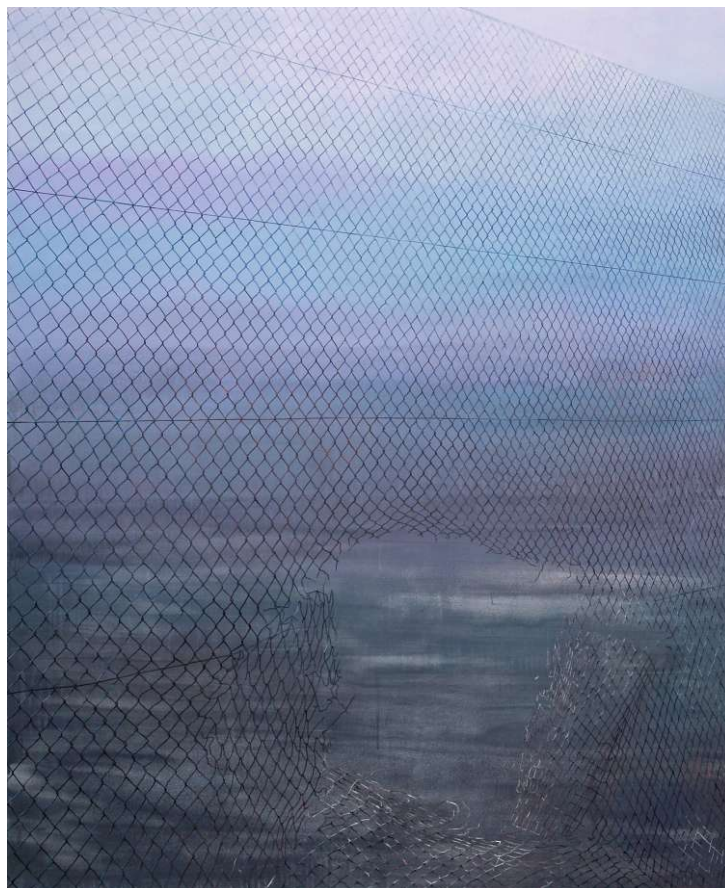
"Looking at that fencing, suddenly I saw that his entire body of work to date, the high-rise facades and brutalist concrete buildings, were all connected by the idea of how our built environments are constructed to shut people out, to keep people from one another. Everything was about separation."

In Ouadahi's most recent body of work, he has created stirring large-scale photo-realistic depictions of chain-link fences, some slashed open or bent as if from the struggle of someone's desperate climb over. They are on view, along with his distinctive architectural canvases, in "Driss Ouadahi: Breach in the Silence," the artist's fifth solo show at Hosfelt Gallery, which runs through Aug. 20.

Ouadahi's fence paintings are powerfully suggestive of the cultural and political significance of boundaries and human migration at a time when border-tightening figures prominently in political discourse in both the United States and Europe. One can't help being reminded of Donald Trump's recent presidential campaign promises: "I will build a wall" and "Nobody can build a fence like me."

"I started painting my fence paintings a long time ago, but today my motive has become increasingly to say 'no' to exclusion and inhumane conditions," Ouadahi wrote in an email from Dusseldorf, Germany, where he now lives.

Born in Morocco in 1959 to Algerian political exiles, Ouadahi studied architecture in Algiers before immigrating to Germany, where he attended Dusseldorf's world-renowned Kunstakademie. Since last July, Ouadahi has volunteered as a translator and facilitator with refugees from the Middle East after seeing them in greater numbers across the street from his studio, streaming into a sports hall turned emergency camp.



"I no longer had the distanced view we'd all had for years of the refugees coming in boats across the Mediterranean to Europe," he says. "Suddenly they were here right in front of my eyes. The men, women and children I've met changed my own mental viewpoint, away from distanced abstraction towards direct activity."

Ouadahi says he channeled his deeper understanding of their risky migrations and the urgency of their plights into his recent body of work, no longer feeling like "the passive spectator."

"While others are busy building borders, it feels very good to me to paint disrupted fences," he says.

*Jessica Zack is a freelance writer who frequently covers art and film for The San Francisco Chronicle.*

**Driss Ouadahi: Breach in the Silence:** Opening reception 4-6 p.m. Saturday, July 16. Thursday, July 14-Aug. 20. Hosfelt Gallery, 260 Utah St., S.F. (415) 495-5454. [www.hosfeltgallery.com](http://www.hosfeltgallery.com)