



# Summary

1. Introduction
2. Preparing your visit
3. Themes
4. Deepening the discussion in the classroom
  - Age group 6 - 9 y/o (1st to 3rd/4th primary)
  - Age group 9 - 12 y/o (4th to 6th primary)
  - Age group 12 - 15 y/o (1st to 3rd secondary)
  - Age group 15 - 18 y/o (3rd secondary and above)
5. Literary and cinematographic references
6. Focus on a few works
7. Practical Information

# Introduction to the Exhibition

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Marie Zolamian, born in 1975 in Beirut, is a Belgian Lebanese multidisciplinary artist of Armenian descent. She grew up in Lebanon until the age of fifteen and now lives in Liège, where she teaches at the Beaux-Arts. In 2022, she created a 76 m<sup>2</sup> public mosaic for the peristyle of the KMSKA in Antwerp, a work for which she was awarded the lanchelevici Prize.

Her visual language begins with painting but extends to other media: murals, small-scale paintings, drawing, sound, and video. Her works feature landscapes, architecture, human figures, hybrid creatures, and decorative motifs. These elements bring various visual references into dialogue, stretching from East to West, ranging from medieval miniatures to monumental frescoes, as well as very ancient images and everyday gestures such as ex-votos.

The exhibition brings together recent works and a selection of emblematic projects produced over the past twenty years, alongside a new work commissioned especially for the exhibition at WIELS. It follows an artistic trajectory attentive to materiality and to the connections between beings and things: humans, animals, languages, objects, places, and countries.

Starting from inner sensations, observed images and sometimes recomposed memories, “Confabulations” explores the zone where reality meets fiction. The exhibition invites visitors to invent narratives, compose fables, and travel through landscapes that feel both familiar and wondrous.

Alongside the exhibition at WIELS, a monograph will be published, offering an overview of the artist’s multifaceted body of work.

# Preparing your Visit

## A few questions to explore overarching themes and spark pupils' curiosity

### For primary students

On the theme of **displacement/movement**:

- When you arrive somewhere you don't know, what makes you feel welcome? And you, how can you make someone feel welcome when they're arriving for the first time?
- When you come back from an outing or a trip, what do you keep in your mind (an image, a smell, a feeling)?
- Do you sometimes bring back a small "souvenir" (an object, a ticket, a photo)? Why that one rather than another?
- Imagine a "mix-and-match" image made of: an object from your home, a place you like, and a moment from the past. What would we see in your image?

On the theme of **identity and memory**:

- Do you still make up stories in your head, or while you play?
- Do you ever forget a detail of a story (a birthday, an outing, a dream)? What do you do to remember it again?
- When we have forgotten part of a story, can we "fill it in" by using our imagination? Can that help, or can it make things more confusing?
- Do you sometimes feel like "a mix" of different influences (from home, from school, from your friends)? Which ones?

On the theme of **language and plurality**:

- When you don't understand a language, can you still guess if someone is happy, angry, worried or in a hurry? How can you tell?
- In a playground or in the street, you can hear lots of voices at the same time. How does that make you feel: does it reassure you, annoy you, amuse you, tire you out? Why?
- Do you know a word that exists in several languages, or a word that makes you think of something else?
- How do you feel when you hear a language you don't know: curious, uncomfortable, happy, lost?
- What does "changing your point of view" mean to you? How can you try to see things the way someone else does?

## For secondary students

On the theme of **displacement/movement**:

- How would we like to be welcomed in a place that isn't our own? How might we welcome people arriving in a place that isn't theirs?
- What do we take away from our journeys? What material and immaterial traces do we keep?
- Marie Zolamian undertakes **chosen exiles** by working in new **micro-localities**. Does changing your workplace change the way you think, or what you create?
- The artist combines images from different periods and cultures, creating a **constellation of images**. If you could take an object from your home, a landscape you love and a moment from history, and blend them into a single image, what would it look like?

On the theme of **identity and memory**:

- Did we invent more stories when we were children?
- Have you ever forgotten part of a story? What could you use to fill in missing memories?
- What happens when imagination replaces a missing memory? Does this "false memory" (a confabulation) become part of our "true" personal story?
- If you had to make up (invent) a part of your city's or your family's history to make it more beautiful or more interesting, what would you choose to invent?
- Marie Zolamian has Eastern and Western heritages. Which parts of your identity come from different worlds (family, culture, friends, the internet) and make you **hybrid**?

On the theme of **language and plurality**:

- If you heard different voices and languages blending into a **vibrant hubbub**, could you still understand people's intention or emotion, even without understanding the words?
- The word *Bab* means both "door" (in Arabic) and "father" (in Armenian). How can a single word have two such different meanings, and what can this teach us about culture?
- What does it mean to "decentre" yourself? Does it mean setting aside your own way of seeing in order to adopt someone else's?

# Themes

## 1. Confabulation and the (re)construction of memory

The exhibition explores the concept of **confabulation**: an imaginative production that fills a gap in memory, blurring the boundary between reality and fiction in order to generate new memories.

## 2. Cultural hybridity and voluntary uprooting

The work presents itself as a **moving atlas**: a collection of traces, images and stories that evolves over time. It is an experimental documentary, set between observation and imagination, showing how cultures can meet and blend. It brings together Eastern and Western references, gathered through voluntary departures and stays in small places.

## 3. Language and the polyphony of narratives

The *Babel Bab* installation is a **polyphonic portal** in which voices, languages, stories and sounds overlap in a **vibrant hubbub**, evoking a crossing of languages that echoes the myth of the origin of languages.

# Deepening the discussion in the classroom

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**Age group 6–9 years old (1st to 3rd/4th primary)**

**Links: discovering sounds, shapes, colour and bodily expression.**

## **Activity 1: The wall of spoken rhythms**

A collective workshop in which pupils develop their **phonological awareness** by repeating complex phrases or onomatopoeia, varying intensity, rhythm and pitch. They also incorporate sounds from different languages.

Link with the exhibition : Directly inspired by the sound installation Babel, where voices and languages overlap in a **vibrant hubbub**. The aim is to open up to the diversity of sound worlds.

## **Activity 2: The great hybrid atlas**

Creation of a collective fresco or large wall drawing. Pupils use organic and geometric forms to invent an imaginary landscape, mixing familiar architectural elements with fantastic animal or plant figures. They experiment with mixing primary and secondary colours.

Link with the exhibition: The activity reflects the artist's idea of a **moving atlas** and **cultural hybridity**, by creating a space that exists only in the imagination.

## **Activity 3: The door of passages**

A simple, physical role-play activity. Pupils invent postures and gestures that evoke entering into a space, working on expressiveness of body and face to communicate emotions (joy, fear, surprise). The discussion focuses on the rules needed to make a place welcoming and open to everyone.

Link with the exhibition: Based on the word *Bab* (meaning “door”), this workshop explores the ideas of threshold, passage and welcoming others.

## Age group 9 - 12 y/o (4th to 6th primary)

**Links: exploring narratives, distinguishing trace from fiction, composition and world music.**

### **Activity 1: Chimeric mapping**

Pupils create a 2D or 3D piece by combining different textures (natural, artificial) and reclaimed materials to make a map or fragment of an imaginary territory. They choose a viewpoint for their work.

Link with the exhibition : This workshop extends Zolamian's approach of **fictional ethnology**, where a large landscape or map is built from disparate elements.

### **Activity 2: The memory game**

Reading excerpts from archives or testimonies. Pupils are then invited to work with each excerpt and cut out sentences, sentence fragments or words to create a new story, a new testimony.

Link with the exhibition: The activity focuses on **confabulation**, questioning how memory transforms, regenerates and becomes hybrid by filling in its gaps.

### **Activité 3 : The polyrhythmic workshop**

Pupils listen to a musical extract (for example, a polyphony) and practise tapping either the **pulse** (regular beat) or the **rhythm** (how musical elements are organised), sometimes using different parts of the body. They improvise rhythmic sequences. Teachers can share music from different cultures, for example drawing on the Growing Into Music project (available for free on YouTube), which aims to show how children learn music in other countries.

Link with the exhibition: It develops the sensitive listening required by the sound piece Babel, helping pupils decode artistic fundamentals through musical and bodily practice.

## Age group 12 - 15 y/o (1st to 3rd secondary)

**Links: critical analysis, interpreting artistic codes, philosophical debates on plurality.**

### **Activity 1: The invisible scene**

Pupils devise a short scene or choreography using the body, voice and a sound environment to explore a complex theme (such as a social issue or a philosophical concept). They analyse how music or sound shapes interpretation.

Link with the exhibition: This workshop puts into practice the encounter between the visible and the invisible, and explores art as a space of freedom and imbalance, often present in the artist's work on subjects such as exile or confinement.

### **Activity 2: Perspective laboratory**

Using visual arts techniques (including digital tools) to approach perspective, planes, the vanishing point, scale, and proportion. Pupils study the impact of neutral values and contrasts in creating a pictorial atmosphere.

Link with the exhibition: This draws on painting and the *Bab* fresco, which unfolds an iconographic vocabulary where motifs carry traces of cultural hybridity and where space is constantly reconfigured.

### **Activity 3: The door of languages**

A structured debate on **cultural plurality**. Referring to the myth of Babel, pupils discuss how to make room for and celebrate all languages and cultures within the same territory, supporting their arguments with examples.

Link with the exhibition: Encourages pupils to question concepts linked to cultural diversity and the notion of "door" (Bab), in relation to welcoming and otherness.

## Age group 15–18 years old (3rd Secondary and above)

**Links: autonomy, digital experimentation, aesthetic critique, social engagement.**

### Activity 1: The confabulated autobiography

A writing and visual / mixed-media workshop. Pupils choose a gap in their personal memory, a blurred historical event in their community, or a **cultural heritage** that they do not fully understand or do not remember clearly. They then create a narrative work (short text, comic strip, collage, photo montage) to fill that gap by **integrating elements of acknowledged fiction**. The aim is to show how imagination can build memory and identity, even if it is not “true”.

Link with the exhibition: The activity questions the central concept of **confabulations**, defined as an “imaginary production taken for a memory, which fills a gap in memory”. Pupils are encouraged to create **new memories and cultural heritages**.

### Activity 2: The pictural palimpsest workshop

Using compasses and rulers, pupils begin by lightly drawing several geometric shapes in grey pencil on a sheet of paper. They then select only some of the lines and go over them with a felt-tip pen. Starting from these reinforced lines, they draw new shapes in grey pencil, as if the previous marks had become a point of departure. Once again, they choose a few lines to trace over in felt-tip pen. The process is repeated several times, leaving the traces of earlier stages visible: the “pentimenti”, marks of trials, corrections and successive gestures that reveal how the drawing is built up.

Link with the exhibition: This workshop foregrounds the **archaeological** dimension of Zolamian’s painting and her process, which **unfolds in layers** and seeks to connect with the invisible. The idea is to experiment with process and impermanence.

### Activity 3: Haunted spaces and analysing places

In-depth critical analysis and contextual research. Pupils choose a work by Zolamian that interacts with a specific site or archive (such as her work on the Geel psychiatric hospital or the KMSKA mosaic). **Working independently**, they **analyse** the historical and social context of the site (the “ghost” or “memory of the place”) and **justify or nuance** the artist’s intention. Discussion will address how contemporary art can transform horror into tragedy, reality into the imaginary.

Link with the exhibition: The project builds on the artist’s practice: during her **chosen exiles** she gathers stories tied to attachment to a place, a landscape or a heritage, and uses art as a way to “give voice” to figures marginalised in history.

# Literary and cinematographic references

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## 1. To read

- *Le grand camouflage : écrits de dissidence (1941-1945)*, Suzanne Césaire

What particularly interests Marie in Suzanne Césaire's writings is the notion of Païdeuma, which Césaire takes up from the anthropologist Leo Frobenius. She describes Païdeuma as a vital energy underpinning the manifestation of a civilisation. In her context (Martinique in the 1940s), Païdeuma becomes a fundamental concept for deflecting the exoticisation so often applied to the Global South, and for asserting a creative force specific to Black peoples.

This idea of a creative energy that becomes visible through a civilisation's cultural productions resonates with Marie's work, insofar as her works could be seen as excavations of that underlying force: a constant search for the primary, primordial gesture (what Césaire calls the "organic being") that she looks for in every place she moves through. This also touches on questions of identity and cultural heritage: what defines us as heirs to one or several cultural traditions, or "civilisations" in the sense used by Césaire?

- *The Art of Losing*, Alice Zeniter (search of identity, memory)
- *Imagination, Imaginaire, Imaginal* – ed. Cynthia Fleury  
<https://www.fr.fnac.be/a1820670/Fleury-cynthia-dir-Imagination-imaginaire-imaginal>
- *The Dignity Clinic*, Cynthia Fleury (hospitality, immigration)
- Glenn Albrecht on concepts such as the **symbiocene** and **solastalgia**, which informed and inspired Marie Zolamian's work and several of her titles: <https://www.philomag.com/articles/glenn-albrecht-nous-avons-besoin-dun-mot-pour-nommer-nos-emotions-quand-le-monde-ou>

## To watch:

- *Departures (Okuribito, 2008)* by Yōjirō Takita

*The artist began her series of small paintings on the act of death (Dormition) after seeing this Japanese film, which focuses on funeral rites and the transition from life to death. This reference offers an entry point for addressing themes of passage, ritual and the fragility of existence.*

- *Ismyrna*, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige (imaginary without images, displacement)
- *The Ballad of Suzanne Césaire (2024)*, Madeleine Hunt-Erich
- *Growing into Music (2021, available for free on YouTube)* is a film that explores how children from diverse cultures around the world acquire musical skills and knowledge. Filmed between 2009 and 2012, it shows children learning and performing within some of the world's best-known oral traditions: Hindustani classical music and dance in northern India; the folk music of the Langa and Manganiyar communities in Rajasthan; Mande and Bobo music in Mali and Guinea; Azerbaijan's Mugham and ashig traditions; Afro-Cuban music and dance in Cuba; and Música Ilanera in Venezuela (linked to the plurality of languages and to displacement).

# Focus on a few works

In the exhibition, each gallery presents a group of works that function like archipelagos. Brought into relation with one another, they form a shifting cartography. This fragmented display reflects the diversity of the artist's practice, revealing its layers, its recurring motifs, its movements from one medium to another, and the gaps that open up between them. The exhibition thus unfolds as an open constellation, with Babel Bab as its poetic and sensory culmination.

## ***Ensuquer, 2024***

**Oil on canvas on panel**

**Plant-man, hybrid figures**



### **Links to the curriculum, by subject :**

- **Citizenship:** the human–nature relationship
- **Philosophy:** mirror symbolism; hybrid and chimeric creatures; dream and reality
- **Visual arts:** figurative and abstract art; Eastern and Western art history; techniques exploring colour and a range of materials

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***Between fantasy and denial, 2012***  
**Video (26min30)**



In 2012, Marie Zolamian spent time in Palestine in response to an invitation from the Qalandiya Biennale. Multiple drawings, notes and a video emanated from her stays in the villages of Birzeit and Abwein (close to Ramallah). In the video *Between Fantasy and Denial*, the sunset is reflected into a glass of brush water. The work reflects the artist's approach to painting as a medium capable of "creating playgrounds" where the reality of manufactured cecity in Palestine can be pictured through a mesmerizing scene. While the soundscape inscribes the video in the actuality of the traffic and everyday sounds of Birzeit, the image draws us into a magical spectacle resembling an assembly of fireflies.

**Links to the curriculum, by subject :**

- **Social sciences and communication:** relationship to storytelling; testimony; traces (focusing on a detail rather than the main action)
- **Citizenship:** access to water (linked to geopolitical issues encountered during her travels)
- **Visual arts:** painting, video, sound, détournement (creative reuse/appropriation)

## ***Babel Bab, 2026***

### **Digital simulation of research for the *Babel Bab* installation Sound work and fresco In situ creation**



The choral installation *Babel Bab* (2026), created especially for this exhibition, is driven by “a circulation of knowledge, a hybridization of cultures in a world in turmoil.” Its double title engages the complexities of language, translation, and transformation. *Babel* refers to the biblical myth of the origin of languages and their diversity, while *Bab el Bab* in Arabic means “the gate of gates,” or the ultimate passage. Conjuring images of crossing and translation, the work operates as a portal made of voices, languages, and layered narratives.

In a polyphonic, sometimes cacophonous composition, the sound piece *Babel* compiles audio archives collected by the artist in many places since 2011. Upon entering the room, one first hears the hum of a crowd; then, as one moves through the space, individual voices come into focus. Garba, caretaker of an inn in Porto-Novo (Benin), speaks about the importance of landmarks and orientation. Elsewhere, voices describe the use of medicinal plants in a botanical garden in Dakar (Senegal). In another corner, Armenian grandparents talk about their daily life in Istanbul (Turkey), while six young boys guide visitors through the archaeological site of an 18th-century castle in Abwein (Palestine). The in situ mural painting *Bab* embodies ephemeral presences that accompany this choral chant. They appear as the portal’s guardians, inviting us to think of dissonance as a space that can generate conviviality.

#### **Links to the curriculum, by subject :**

- **Citizenship:** migration, displacement, languages
- **Visual arts:** sound-making / sound creation, immersive work

# Practical Information

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## Accessibility :

Step-free access via the rear of the building  
All activities can be trilingual FR-NL-EN

## Tarifs visites guidées :

(1 guide per 20 persons)  
Group of adults : €180 (1h), 220€ (1h30), 250 (2h)  
Primary and secondary schools : Free (1h)  
Higher education and NGO's : 85€ (1h)  
Article 27 : 1,25€ per participant

Bookings can only be made via our website and  
at least 20 days before the visit date.

Link : <https://www.wiels.org/fr/visitesguid%C3%A9eswiels>  
(Select your option and a form will appear)

## Contacts :

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