

New Cartographies: Algeria-France-UK

Cornerhouse Manchester 8 April to 5 June

‘New Cartographies’ maps out changes in cultural perception of boundaries inside and outside of Algeria. The exhibition is arranged over three floors using these themes: migration; resources – physical, economic and human; and memory and history. Both emerging and established artists reflect the diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the Algerian diaspora. Indicative of a raised level of consciousness across North Africa, ideas have been conceived with political acumen in new media formats yet the subject matter is expressed and espoused with considerable feeling.

Katia Kameli’s large-scale video and sound installation *Dissolution*, 2009, forms a locus of many of the critical issues in the show. A short, looped video sequence intends to place the viewer in the position of an Algerian, perhaps a child, gazing across the Bay of Algiers where the occident, as Katia describes, ‘blurs like a fiction’. In the background haze lie stationary tankers

out of focus. In the foreground the tops of two industrial chimneys exhaust heat and smoke into the middle-ground of this seascape, where a colourful tanker traverses the screen as it makes its turn into port. Just as the tip of the ship touches the chimney vapour, a small tug enters the screen from the left-hand side. The miniature guide escorts the flaming colossus as it liquefies through industrial heat. Katia describes this event as a ‘transition or rebirth’ as the tanker enters the orient. The dissolution of the ship is echoed by a wall of sound that engulfs the viewer in the installation. The sound is the audio equivalent of the visual evidence of heat emanating from the chimneys: a discordant and meditative hum. *Dissolution* uses the moving image to demonstrate where radical opposites momentarily fuse.

‘Harragas’ means to burn or transgress boundaries and is a term used to describe migrants desperate to leave Algeria for the West. The metaphor of the flame develops as transcendental homelessness in *Harragas*, 2010, the title of Zineddine Bessai’s installation of small photographs of male figures with candles strapped to their backs like effigies. Bessai, an Arab Muslim, is a recent graduate from the School of Fine Arts in Algeria and was not granted a visa to come to the opening of the show: immigration authorities stated that he might not return home.

Most of the work in the exhibition does not make reference to Algerian history beyond the War of Independence of 1962. Where reference is made it is as spectre or as erasure. Amina Menia's photomural *Chrysanthemum*, 2011 is a comparative study of grave monuments shown in immaculate upkeep or in various states of neglect, depending on the political acceptability of those commemorated. Sophie Elbaz's video installations *L'Île Fantastique*, 2007, and *Qacentina*, 2007, trace her Sephardic Jewish heritage. Born in France she returned to Constantine, in Algeria, which boasts a landscape of large gorges and natural rock arches; her video journey records simultaneous layers of enchantment and lamentation. In conversation with me she described the pre-Roman beginnings and the subsequent history of Jews in Algeria. The video evokes her family's experiences, now completely disconnected from their origin. Portraits of her grandfather from the colonial era, her father and herself are superimposed, merge and fade to become enveloped, dream-like, by billowing sand. The memorable image of a down-turned bed is suggestive of her phantasmagorical journey.

Personal accounts of journeying, as the curators Joseph McGonagle and Edward Welch state, are the main thrust of this exhibition. Visual journals and oral history accounts address the

complexity of current issues around identity politics with directness. Bruno Boudjelal's *Algeria from East to West*, 2001-03, is a photo-journal presented as a large mural with vivid imagery, following the 1990s civil war, of encounters with relatives in Algeria. Yves Jeanmougin's photographs revisit sites associated with the pied-noir poet Jean Segnac; the silhouetted image of a famous haunted house – a shell that is now a monument following the war of independence – resonates with Segnac's absence. '...while drawing water from a well', is a fragment of a caption from Omar D's understated and poignant A4-size slide presentation *A Biography of Disappearance, Algeria*, 1992-2007. The captions follow ID photographs of men who disappeared during the civil war. Each image offers about a minute of viewing, enough to remember the face, and is followed by a caption which states where they were last seen. John Perivolaris's *North to North*, 2011, a journey from the north of England to the north of Algeria, includes a photograph taken of a Muslim woman entering the underground in London. Seen from behind, her flowing garments and purposeful stride synthesise a gamut of conflicting feelings, from vestiges of orientalist exoticism to politicised awareness of a culture in ambitious transition.

Edward Said has argued that the west's view of the orient has transferred from colonial, paternalistic fantasy to a U.S. dominated 'matter of policy'. This has resulted, he says, in an increasingly dehumanised view of the orient. It follows that the landscape of Algeria is seen primarily as a material resource. Kader Attia's severe work *Oil and Sugar*, 2007, a video installation, has no obvious human or literary element. Crude oil poured over a stack of processed sugar dissolves into cultural sludge as a conceptual critique of the reduction of both nature and culture to policy. The use of video as an extension of the seductive power of mass media imagery always risks critical impotence and complicity. Yet the significance of Attia's work is that the concoction of oil and sugar remains jarring and conceptually difficult to consume. The soundtrack that accompanies the video is of the barely audible sound of someone singing, the only human element that suggests reprieve in this otherwise stark work.

The War of Independence of 1962 was an intellectual revolution that was spurred by writers and artists. This is affirmed by Zineb Sedira's *Gardiennes d'Images*, 2010, a large-scale video installation on two adjacent walls that records conversations with Safia Kouaci, the wife, assistant and now archive keeper of her husband Mohamed Kouaci's photographs. The photographs

document the revolution, but it has not been possible to find an official home for the archive. The camera angle, the juxtaposition of images and the editing allow a relaxed viewing of Safia's engrossing first-hand account of the events leading to independence. The video enables the viewer to become familiar and connected to Safia's cause, as she speaks of preserving her culture for the future. *New Cartographies* is about traversing boundaries, yet the show culminates with a change of pace, in *Gardiennes D'Images* Safia Kouaci acts as a sentinel, a guardian of a fragile cultural border made of photographic paper.

Stephen Lee.