

SLEEPING UNDER THE SHADOW OF AN UNKNOWN TREE

Stéphanie Saadé

10 October - 21 November 2020

AKINCI is proud to announce Stéphanie Saadé's new solo exhibition *Sleeping Under the Shadow of an Unknown Tree*. Born in Lebanon in 1983, Saadé's refined conceptual practice delves deep into her personal history, from which she extracts memories and objects that she carefully modifies and introduces into new scenarios. She shapes artworks and situations that absorb the personal layers and reflect socio-political ones instead, as well as psychological and philosophical ones. The presented works were conceived before the October 17 Lebanese revolution, the devaluation of the Lebanese pound and the massive inflation that ensued, the Coronavirus pandemic and the August 4 devastating explosion in the Beirut port. However, they can only be perceived today through the filter of these recent and still on-going blazing events.



Terre Pourrie (Rotten Earth), 2020, snail shell, "Terre Pourrie" pigment, structure.

At the entrance of the exhibition hangs *The Encounter of the First and Last Particles of Dust*, a large installation composed of ten embroidered curtains (initially 2 ensembles of 6 pink curtains and 4 blue curtains). The curtains originate from Saadé's family home's common spaces (living room, dining room, etc.). They are embroidered with a total of 37 – this number corresponding to the artist's current age – of the most significant routes that she underwent in Lebanon from 1995 to 2001 – the time span from when the curtains were installed in the house until the year when she left the house. Retraced on the map of Lebanon, in the way that they used to be made at the time, the cleanly embroidered paths now overlap with the faded patterns of the worn curtains. The fabric of the curtains bears the physical traces of their use: folded or unfolded, exposed to light, humidity and dust. Their surfaces and colours are full, on a subtler and more imperceptible level, with all that happened inside the domestic spaces that they belonged to.

At AKINCI, the curtains unfurl in a new space, of a different nature but also of different dimensions than the original one. The curtains fall heavily on the ground, testifying of the spaces from which they have been extracted – where the ceiling was higher for example –, carrying and conveying silently their intimate histories. The time span between 1995 to 2001 coincides, on a broader level, with the period succeeding to the end of the Lebanese war. During that period it had become easier to travel in Lebanon and many regions that were inaccessible became accessible. In addition, many areas had become accessible in the sense that they had been constructed or reconstructed and now constituted actual destinations. *The Encounter of the First and Last Particles of Dust* is linked to the notion of displacement in many different ways: the memories attached to the embroidered trajectories intertwine personal stories with the country's history of that particular time. These reminiscences are themselves not considered as fixed moments in time but are associated to motion: trips made but also the movement of memory itself when one travels back into the past – travels by imagination, the only kind of travel that one is likely to make nowadays.

A second large installation, *The Travels of Here and Now*, occupies this time the space at the end of the gallery. It also adapts to it as it was conceived and tailor-made for another space: presented for the first time in Museum Van Loon in Amsterdam in September 2019, it originates from the history and the dimensions of the Drakensteyn room of the eponym museum. The work departs from the XVIIIth century wall-hangings by Jurriaan Andriessen of the Drakensteyn room of Museum Van Loon. Initially painted for the Drakensteyn Castle in Lage Vuursche, their overall journey, from their initial location to their new home in the museum, with the adaptation and thorough restoration that they underwent, offers a myriad

of poetical visual stories to tell; they trigger notions of displacement, estrangement identity and nostalgia, recurrent in Saadé's work. The seascapes, an exception in the painter's oeuvre, moreover represent scenes taking place on the Mediterranean seashore, familiar and dear to Saadé. In *The Travels of Here and Now* she calls back and makes visible again the paintings' beautiful 'ghosts': all the presently invisible parts which have been cut out, grafted, overpainted or interchanged, highlighting a rich and fascinating patchwork. In Museum Van Loon, the strips of painting were confronted with the original wall-hangings that surrounded them and which they had been copied from. This time, the fragmented images, mainly parts of landscape (sky, grass, plants, sea, ...) are given a chance to exist independently, a possibility to escape their original space-time frame and the history associated with it. They can be looked at in a different way. The viewer could relate them to different contexts and geographies from her/his own memories, desires or projections.

In between these two structuring installations are scattered several smaller-scale works, such as *Digiprint*, an enlarged photograph of Saadé's mobile phone screen. This photograph belongs to a series that relates in its own manner to routes and displacement: the frequent manipulation of the object results in it being covered with a thin film of grease. Coating its sharp design, this undesirable organic residue nevertheless constitutes an essential material for the image to be taken: fingers, but also nails, cheeks, ears, hair, sculpt the oil layer, and allow the camera to capture the light refracted by this ephemeral and ever-changing relief. Despite their painterly aspect, the recorded images document purely functional actions such as communicating, researching, or idling, as well as the daily use of GPS systems to navigate in the city and on wider territories. This particular image is however different from the previous ones of the series, which show a profusion of fingerprints and swipes: we only face a cloudy blur almost deprived of any strokes. Taken on October 23, 2019, after the start of the Lebanese revolution, the photograph takes the symbolical aspect of a tabula rasa, and even more so today.

Another striking example of a work on which new layers of meaning keep building up is *Becoming a Painting*, an oil painting initially belonging to the artist's grandparents, that was hit by shrapnel during the Lebanese War. The peaceful landscape represented is disturbed by the shrapnel holes, and the architecture of these impacts has even conditioned the way that the painting aged and cracked. *Terre Pourrie*, a found hollow snail shell, formerly a home, is filled with a pigment called rotten earth...

Accidental metaphors of the current state of the artist's country of origin, but also of our infected world, the works still retain the freedom of escaping these situations. They have and will be read again in deep but lighter ways in the future.

Stéphanie Saadé graduated in Fine Arts from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, France and attended a post-graduate program at the China Academy of Arts, Hangzhou, China. She was an artist in residence at the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht (2014/2015), and the Cité Internationale des arts, Paris (2015). Saadé is the 2018-19 recipient of the AFK (Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst) 3Package Deal program, a 1year interhistoricity scholarship linked to 4 renown museums and institutions of the city of Amsterdam.

Stéphanie Saadé has had institutional solo exhibitions in Museum Van Loon (The Travels of Here and Now, 2019) in Amsterdam, Parc Saint Léger (Crossing States, 2018) and Maison Salvan (Destiny Without a Beholder, 2018) in France. Her work has been exhibited at a.o. Punta della Dogana, Venice, Italy; MOCA Toronto, Canada; Les Abattoirs, Toulouse, France; La Criée, Rennes, France; Sharjah Biennale 13, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates; MAXXI, Rome, Italy; MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium; Kunsthaus Pasquart, Biel, Switzerland; National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavík, Iceland; Oslo Kunstforening, Oslo, Norway; Ystad Konstmuseum, Ystad, Sweden; Hessel Museum of Art, CCS Bard, New York, USA; Marres, Maastricht, Netherlands; La Traverse, Centre d'Art Contemporain d'Alfortville, Alfortville, France; Museum Schloss Moyland, Bedburg-Hau, Germany; Mosaic Rooms, London, UK; Casa Árabe, Madrid, Spain; Casa Árabe, Cordoba, Spain; La Conservera, Centro de Arte Contemporaneo, Murcia, Spain; Home Works 7, Beirut, Lebanon; Parc Saint Léger hors les murs, Nevers, France; Van Eyck, Maastricht, Netherlands; Le 59e Salon de Montrouge, Montrouge, France; Beirut Art Center, Beirut, Lebanon; Beirut Exhibition Center, Beirut, Lebanon; A. M. Qattan Foundation, Ramallah, Palestine; Qalandyia International Biennial, Qalandyia, Palestine.