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BIENNALES RETURN:
VENICE, WHITNEY, SYDNEY
DAVID CRONENBERG
LYDIA OURAHMANE
SONIA DELAUNAY



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A LANGUAGE OF ONE'S OWN

NEGAR AZIMI ON THE ART OF LYDIA OURAHMANE

I HAD HEARD about Lydia Ourahmane long before setting out to write about her curiously affecting art, had heard about her improbable backstory as the child of an Algerian father and a Malaysian Chinese mother who had fallen in love at a school for evangelical Christians in the UK. I'd seen images of her work, too—invitingly minimalist installations perfumed by mystery, chaos, and accident. Our wide-ranging conversations began in the pandemic's second year, and before long I had grown accustomed to the artist's elliptical, zigzag patter. The vibe was both history lesson and *séance*, a seamless braiding of personal history and politics.

Here are some things I learned over the course of our phone calls, paraphrased from my scribbled notes. *Psychogeography* (the term for a signature concept popularized by the Situationists in 1950s Paris) was actually the coinage of an illiterate man from the Kabyle region of Algeria. The evangelical Christian movement in 1980s Algeria began with an injured football player's miraculous healing. Ourahmane, who frequently speaks of "energies," has had a facsimile of an ancient warrior girl tattooed on one arm and a gold tooth permanently drilled into her mouth. She has a keen interest in glossolalia, the ecstatic experience of speaking in tongues, though she has not, as yet, had the pleasure. She does not regret her decision, back in the day, to inform her classmates at her new school in London that she'd had a previous life as a child pop star.

To be clear, the pop-star story is apocryphal. Ourahmane was nine years old when her family emigrated from Oran, a gloriously decaying Algerian port city wholly obscure to her British peers. Born in 1992, near the beginning of her country's decade-long civil war—a conflict that pitted an authoritarian military government against Islamist guerrillas—Ourahmane spent her childhood in a series of safe houses that her parents, members of Algeria's persecuted Christian minority, founded and ran. She got used to living alongside perfect strangers. Communal spaces served as rudimentary sets for underground Christian TV and radio broadcasts and ad hoc puppet shows based on Bible tales. Nothing about this decidedly unusual childhood prepared Ourahmane for life at an English middle school. "I was never able to connect my own experience to anyone else's," she says. "I had this feeling that I was always treading water, that I had to renegotiate the terms with every move." Her fictitious pop stardom was an act of self-fashioning. "At some point," she says, "you start writing your own language."

A language of one's own: That's one way of evoking a multifarious art practice that eludes tidy summary. A typical Ourahmane exhibition is sparse, a psychic ecosystem characterized by the subtle deployment of light and sound, a smattering of talismanic objects that provide few clues as to their origins but end up being vehicles for smuggling in larger histories, many of them connected to Algeria's colonial past and illiberal present. Often the work is haunted by its own imminent obsolescence; *Finitude*, a wall made of ash and chalk crammed into a narrow alcove at the New Museum during its 2018 triennial, crumbled to dust over the course of the exhibition, a process hastened by periodic sonic vibrations. At the entrance to her 2018 show at London's Chisenhale Gallery, Ourahmane treated two large silver doors with black sulfur, which rubbed away in dribs and drabs as grasping hands made contact each day. For an exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Chicago this past winter, after several failed attempts to FedEx mud from the banks of the Nile—an act forbidden by Egyptian law—she and her occasional collaborator Alex Ayed ended up transporting bootleg bottles of river water, which evaporated over time. It could be said that Ourahmane's predilection for the ephemeral is an echo of her early years in clandestine contexts amid the scourge of civil war, when she was painfully aware that at any moment she might have to pack

Opposite page: Lydia Ourahmane, *Finitude*, 2018, ash, chalk, steel, inductor base stereo system. Installation view, New Museum, New York. From the 2018 Triennial. Photo: Maris Hutchinson/EPW Studio.



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up, move on. "I wake up every morning thinking this could be the last day of my life," she says.

THERE IS ONE Ourahmane artwork that squeezed my heart when I first read about it four years ago. *In the Absence of our Mothers*, 2015–18, hinges on two narratives of escape separated by some seventy years. The earlier involves the artist's grandfather Tayeb Ourahmane, a skilled sniper who spent more than a decade in grudging service to the French Algerian Army. Upon learning, after the outbreak of World War II, that he was to be sent to fight on the eastern front, he decided he wanted out. Mindful that the disabled were exempt from service, he proceeded to have every one of his teeth extracted in a single day. Underscoring the madness of the gesture, Tayeb Ourahmane used no anesthetic. He would go on to lend his military expertise to the cause of the anticolonial FLN (Front de Libération Nationale).

Ourahmane had this kernel of family lore in the back of her mind when, one day in an Oran market, she encountered a boy keen to sell her a gold chain. She questioned him about its provenance. It was his mother's, he said, and it could be hers for the sum of three hundred euros—the going rate, as it happened, for smuggling one person across the Mediterranean to southern Spain. Ourahmane was no stranger to this desperate traffic. She knew people who were saving up to make the trip, knew people who had tried it. Some had failed; some had paid with their lives. Ourahmane couldn't help but imagine that the boy was planning to use the proceeds to book his own passage. She bought the chain.

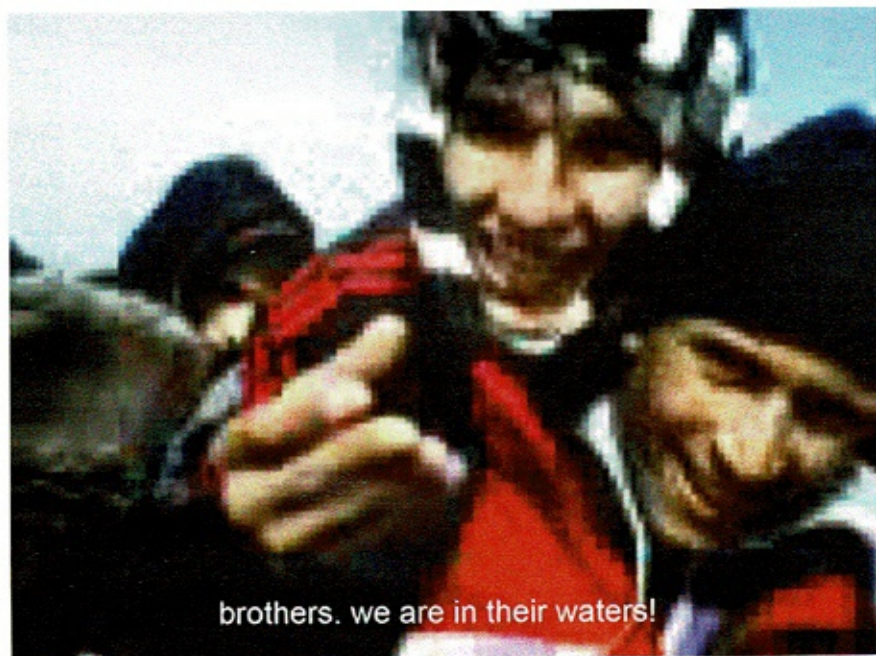
One day, recalling the story of her grandfather's defiant automutilation, she decided to have the chain melted down and fashioned into a pair of gold teeth, one of which now resides in the back of her mouth. The other tooth became the centerpiece of her Chisenhale show, jutting out from a white wall like an ancient rock formation in miniature. Presented alongside it were her grandfather's identity card and other bureaucratic ephemera. As a metaphysical transaction and a distillation of metaphor into form, the golden tooth represented a double gesture: both an homage to her grandfather's Dada-esque act of refusal and an acknowledgment of the failures of the state he fought to bring into being, where today the indignities of everyday life compel so many hopeful young people to fling themselves toward the cold heart of the metropole.

In the Absence of our Mothers built on earlier works by the artist that consider the ways in which colonialism imprints itself on human bodies—how it sets out to conscript, categorize, control. And while Algerian independence was achieved in 1962 after an eight-year guerrilla war, Ourahmane suggests that those imprints have never really disappeared. If at the core of every colonial regime is a violent separation between settler and native, colonizer and colonized, colonialism's successor states continue to reproduce the sins of the fathers. There are any number of theoreticians of this post-colonial paradox—Mahmood Mamdani and V. S. Naipaul among them—



but it should be said that Ourahmane's quietly inspiring art blooms in the cracks and crevices of the postcolony, amid the psychic and emotional debris, the ineffable hum of melancholy, defeat, and, despite everything, hope.

For *The Third Choir*, 2014, which she made while still an undergraduate at Goldsmiths, Ourahmane arranged for the migration of twenty empty oil barrels from Algeria to London—a miracle of bureaucratic wrangling and, notably, the first artwork to be legally exported from Algeria since the country's independence. The barrels were arrayed in a diamond shape in the gallery, each containing a cell phone that broadcast an ambient sound piece using a radio transmitter. Alongside the installation, a tsunami of documents inventoried the herculean efforts that had gone into the shipment, from ardent exhortations and groveling supplications to endless customs forms. It could be said that the rusty containers stood in for the bodies of all the people who could only dream of making the same journey. On this as on other occasions, Ourahmane's determined negotiations with



Opposite page: Lydia Ourahmane, *In the Absence of our Mothers* (detail), 2015–18, X-ray, text, two 4.45g 18-karat gold teeth. Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2018. Photo: Andy Keate.

Above: Lydia Ourahmane, *HARAGA (The Burning)*, 2014, wireless video transmission, color, sound, 3 minutes 37 seconds.

Below: Lydia Ourahmane, *The Third Choir*, 2014, twenty Nafatl oil barrels imported from Algeria, CZ-SHE radio transmitter, twenty Samsung E2121B cell phones, audio, 33 1/2" x 9' 10 1/2" x 16' 4 1/2".



and against a parodically opaque bureaucracy constituted a choreographic work in itself.

Another early work explores immigration in a more affective register. The video *HARAGA (The Burning)*, 2014, features a grainy clip of young Algerian men crammed onto a precarious skiff moving toward Spanish waters. You can find still images on Ourahmane's website: a moment of pure jubilation, the ecstasy of success written on exhausted faces. "Brothers, we are in their waters!" exclaims one of the boys. "I wanted people to feel what I had felt when I saw that clip, the way it cut me up," she told me. *Haraga* is Algerian Arabic for "those who burn," a reference to migrants who incinerate their passports before embarking. That all but one of the boys ended up being sent back to Algeria heightens the work's considerable pathos. *HARAGA (The Burning)* was shown as part of Bloomberg New Contemporaries, a coveted showcase for young British artists, the year it was made. Ourahmane's contribution was a tiny placard inviting viewers to log in to a wobbly Wi-Fi network hosting a bespoke website on which only a few people at a time could watch the video. Most walked on by. That didn't bother Ourahmane, who had opted to elide the mass-mediated quality so prevalent in representations of migrants. Making it difficult to see—making the seeing itself intimate—was the point.

WHEN I FIRST started speaking to Ourahmane, she had just finished making arrangements to ship the entire contents of her Algiers apartment to the humdrum Swiss town of Basel. She had been living in Algeria's seaside capital when the pandemic struck. Like many of her compatriots, she wilted under the weight of the country's onerous Covid regulations, opportunistically exaggerated to stifle antigovernment protests. In the summer of 2020, she left the country for Europe, thinking she would be back shortly, never imagining that Algeria's borders would be sealed for nearly a year and that she wouldn't be able to return. It was in that interminable window that plans for her upcoming exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel took shape. In Arabic, *Barzakh*, the name she gave to the Basel project, evokes a state of betweenness or limbo, but it carries other connotations, too: a thin strip of land connecting two seas; a refuge; a place where the spirit awaits judgment for earthly deeds.

Ourahmane spent two and a half months working closely with friends in Algiers, calling in every possible favor to ensure the meticulous migration of every last thing to Basel: books, bric-a-brac, clothes, photos, diaries, furniture. But the contents of the apartment were not hers alone. Ourahmane had had a difficult time finding a landlord willing to rent to an unmarried, which is to say unchaste, woman; her French-built fin de siècle apartment was the thirty-fourth flat she had seen when searching for a home in Algiers. The previous owner, since deceased, had lived in Germany before Algerian independence, and the stuff of her life was everywhere. Ourahmane inherited the woman's cumbersome mahogany furniture, her handkerchiefs and sheets, a generic oil painting of an Alpine landscape. She never dreamed of disposing of them, but rather resolved to accommodate the spirit of her predecessor. "It was like having a roommate," she says, with a degree of seriousness that rattles me.

In Basel, the motley assemblage was spread out across three rooms, a little like items at an estate sale. At the heart of the exhibition was the apartment's front door, or rather doors: the original wooden one from 1901 as well as a metal one, with nine heavy-duty locks that had been added during the civil war in the 1990s. Set slightly ajar, the doors made for a stirring sculpture, a palimpsest of histories. "*Barzakh*" pointed to the many complexities—emotional, political—of "home." Walking through the installa-



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tion, sitting on the couch, peering into Ourahmane's closet, reading from her private notebooks, one had the sensation of communing with ghosts.

But not all ghosts are friendly. At the entrance to the exhibition, a sign proclaimed **WARNING: THIS AREA IS UNDER 24HR SURVEILLANCE**. A series of amorphous blown-glass sculptures arrayed throughout the galleries contained microphones that captured ambient sounds. Some of the noises were redistributed through invisible speakers. Phone numbers posted on the kunsthalle's website permitted anyone to listen remotely. Ourahmane called the listening devices "witnesses with no history." Elsewhere, laser beams shot across two rooms, evoking high-end security systems; as people passed through them, their bodies, for a brief moment, interrupted the sonic transmissions in progress. This insistence on viewers' being physically implicated in her work, entangled in a dense mesh of sensuous *qua* political associations, is an integral element of Ourahmane's practice. Which is to say she disdains the possibility of a disembodied spectator, a detached onlooker.

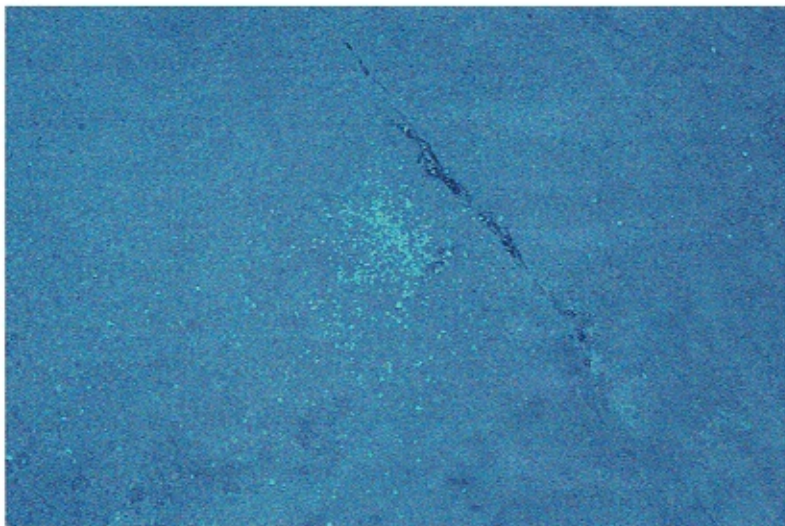
WHILE OURAHMANE has addressed her own history in this and other exhibitions, there is one subject she long steered clear of: her parents' work in the Christian underground. As a child, she fabricated stories about what they did for a living. As she grew older, she avoided the subject altogether, mindful of the awkward connotations of "missionary work," fearful of trivializing her mother and father's sacrifices. Fearful, too, of drawing attention, as their work remains dangerous. And yet something shifted last year. Ourahmane began to worry that her parents' legacy might be lost. She channeled this feeling into *Survival in the afterlife*, 2021–22, an immersive installation hinging on archives of the various communities her parents have shepherded since the late 1980s. In an exhibition at Frankfurt's Portikus, a carefully curated selection of photographs showed people swimming, sharing food, praying—moments of communion and solidarity. On one wall, Ourahmane hung a "tear catcher," an antique implement (found on eBay) for measuring the duration of grief, a silent sentinel to loss and an evocation of empathy.



Opposite page and this page,
above and below: Views of
"Lydia Ourahmane: *Barzakh*,"
2021, Kunsthalle Basel.
Photos: Philipp Hänger.

Right: Lydia Ourahmane, *21
Boulevard Mustapha Benboulaïd*
(details), 2021, mixed media.
Installation views, Kunsthalle
Basel. Photos: Philipp Hänger.





The day after the Portikus opening, Ourahmane took me on a tour of the show via FaceTime. We lingered in the upstairs space, a large, gym-like expanse, suffused with red light, that felt like a womb. Handwoven pillows made by the artist and friends were scattered amid colorful floor mats, an invitation to lie down and become mindful of the membrane between the sacred and the profane. An incantatory soundtrack by the collective Yawning Portal, described as “music to levitate to,” permeated the space. Ourahmane has spoken of sound as an equalizer, a medium that transcends the awkward barrier of language, and even through our fitful connection, the soundtrack’s mystical beat went straight to the gut. A friend described the experience of lying down and listening in the company of others as the closest thing they’ve had to an ecstatic religious experience.

MY LAST CONVERSATION with Ourahmane transpired this past winter, as she returned from what she had come to refer to as “the abyss.” At a conference in Delphi three years ago, the artist Sophia Al Maria had passed her a note with the message “Take me to Tassili” written backward, Leonardo da Vinci style. Tassili n’Ajjjer is a remote plateau in the Sahara near the borders of Libya, Niger, and Mali, filled with cave paintings, some dating back to 6000 BCE. Notoriously inhospitable, Tassili invites myth, having resisted conquest over the millennia. The expanse was once known for its salt trade—its trade in humans, too. Today, it is home to Tuareg nomads as well as smugglers of arms and other booty. Ourahmane was ensorcelled by the thought of traveling there.

She made a short trip a few months later, a sort of reconnaissance mission. One outgrowth of that journey was an exhibition at San Francisco’s CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, which opened the first week of February 2020. The show’s title, “Solar Cry,” was drawn from a short text by Georges Bataille that describes the sun as the most abstract of objects, impossible to see directly—its combustible visage liable to strike its viewers blind or mad. Even by Ourahmane’s standards, the show was enigmatic: A wall text announced the artist’s intention to explore how faith can be registered on the body. (In this way, it felt like a prelude to *Survival in the afterlife*.)

Throughout the Wattis space, which was bathed in blue (the color of “the invisible becoming visible,” per Yves Klein), occult instruments played their part. A recording of an opera singer straining to hold a single note for



Above, left: Lydia Ourahmane, *3Kgs salt*, 2020, crystal salt. Installation view, Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco. Photo: Impart Photography.

Above: View of “Lydia Ourahmane: *Survival in the afterlife*,” 2021–22, Portikus, Frankfurt. Photo: Ian Waelder.

Left: Tear catcher from the collection of Lydia Ourahmane, ca. 400 B.C., blown glass. Installation view, de Appel, Amsterdam, 2021. Photo: Jimena Gabriella Gauna.

Opposite page: Lydia Ourahmane, *Tassili*, 2022. 4K video, 16 mm transferred to video, digital animation, color, sound, 46 minutes 12 seconds.

sixty minutes combined unevenly with a recording of the same woman holding a slightly different note, her voice in both tracks cracking with exhaustion, conjuring the human desire to transcend bodily limits. The discordant buzz of a tattoo gun resounded from a video projection of the artist acquiring the tattoo of the warrior girl. A field recording of the immense silence she had experienced in the desert could be “heard” by pressing one’s body against a wall in which the recording had been embedded; inaudible vibrations were palpable, if barely. Nearly seven pounds of salt crystals were scattered on the cement floor, transforming the footsteps of audience members into irregular percussion.

Ourahmane fantasized about going back to Tassili to make a film. This past February, she and twelve collaborators set out with a sheaf of permits and fifteen donkeys. Al Maria, who was unable to attend, was represented by a rock that Ourahmane had given to her after her first visit. She realized that she had to return this object, she told me, to respect this geography, “which French archaeologists and so many others had been pilfering for years.” She wasn’t yet sure where the work was going, but she knew that she wanted to communicate the experience of the place “on its own terms,”

to convey its boundlessness and infinitude, where one is stripped of the protective carapace of modern life. In the desert, she says, “you’re just a body under the beating sun.” She found inspiration in the work of Ibrahim al-Koni, the Libyan writer, who has described the desert as “an oasis for contemplation, because it is the isthmus between total freedom and existence, between death and life.” The resulting film, presented at New York’s SculptureCenter, is overpowering, a hallucinogenic environment of stone, sand, and sky that fascinates and perplexes in equal measure. An exquisite corpse of scores—Ourahmane has given four different composers free rein—amplifies the work’s transportive powers; each segment feels like a universe of its own. If Ourahmane’s previous works have staged, in her own words, “highly controlled” explorations of serendipity and circumstance, *Tassili* represents her ambition to let go—to embrace a place at the edge of comprehension. Like the plateau itself, which has perennially resisted incorporation into any empire, the film evokes an unassimilated and perhaps unassimilable quality. “I feel hesitant to use the word,” she confessed to me one day, “but every moment in that desert feels like a miracle.” □

NEGAR AZIMI IS THE EDITOR IN CHIEF OF *BIDOUN*. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

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