

Lydia Ourahmane: *Tassili*

By Dina A. Ramadan, Jul-Aug Issue 2022

SculptureCenter



Installation view: Lydia Ourahmane: *Tassili*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2022. 4K video, 16mm transferred to video, digital animation, sound, 46:12 minutes. Commissioned and produced by SculptureCenter, New York; rhizome, Algiers; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; Kamel Lazaar Foundation, Tunis; Mercer Union, Toronto; and Nottingham Contemporary. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Charles Benton.

Much of Lydia Ourahmane's work has been an exploration of the multiple connotations of *barzakh*, the barrier or threshold that separates two things that must be kept distinct. In Islamic philosophy, this is the liminal place which the soul inhabits after death, while awaiting the Day of Judgment. For the multi-disciplinary artist based between Algiers and Barcelona, this space of limbo between life and death has generative potential. In 2021, she borrowed the concept for the title of an installation in which she shipped the entire contents of her Algiers apartment, including the double entrance door, and recreated it in the gallery space, a commentary on migration and displacement, and on the ability of objects to move across borders with greater ease than humans, especially during COVID restrictions. Saïda-born and London-raised, Ourahmane uses sound, photography,

installation, film, and text to create conceptual and research-based projects. For her first institutional solo exhibition in New York, she has produced a mesmerizing forty-seven-minute moving-image piece which uses Tassili n'Ajjer as a site through which to continue probing questions of colonialism, climate change, mobility, and state oppression.

Tassili n'Ajjer (plateau of rivers) is a 72,000-square-kilometer plateau in the Sahara Desert, in southeast Algeria at the borders of Libya, Niger, and Mali. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1982, it has over 15,000 prehistoric cave drawings and engravings that are between 6,000 and 12,000 years old. Through this exploratory expedition, Ourahmane inserts herself into a familiar narrative of colonial “discovery”: French archeologist Henri Lhote has historically been credited for unearthing the “Tassili Frescoes” in 1956—shortly after oil was found in the region—which he was convinced were evidence of contact with extraterrestrial creatures. His findings have since been discredited by accusations of falsified drawings and damage to the archeological site. More recently, the plateau has served as a key migration route; however, it is largely inaccessible and travel there is limited and requires the direction of Tuareg guides. Ourahmane’s convoy was led by two Tassili n'Ajjer natives whose families were displaced from there in the 1980s.

In her artistic practice, Ourahmane has repeatedly focused on journeys taken over treacherous terrains that depend on trust and collective effort for survival. In *Haraga (The Burning)* (2014)—titled after the slang Arabic name given to those who try to immigrate illegally from North Africa to Europe, a reference to the practice of burning one’s identity papers—the artist received three one-minute videos shot by Houari, a twenty-five-year-old immigrant, as he attempts to cross to Spain in a Zodiac boat with a group of twelve friends, only to be apprehended a few kilometers before reaching his destination. The videos capture the aspiring migrants’ excitement and dreams for their new lives. In *Tassili* (2022), Ourahmane undertakes a fourteen-day trip on foot, accompanied by a group of collaborators and twenty donkeys, during which routes and resources must be precisely calculated. This in turn circumscribes the nature of the work.



Lydia Ourahmane and Yuma Burgess, *Untitled*, 2022. Photogrammetry, generative adversarial network, polylactide thermoplastic, anodized steel. 222 inches x 106 inches. Courtesy the artists. Photo: Charles Benton.

The film is a collage of material that combines first-person movement with more static shots, as well as footage captured on 16mm film, night vision images, and digital animation based on scans of the plateau. Despite the absence of dialogue, *Tassili* leads the viewer through a narrative; we accompany Ourahmane on her journey, which unfolds through the sequence of the day and night footage. Time passes and yet simultaneously feels suspended. The contrast between the scale of the screen and the rock forest that surrounds us, and the details and textures of this striking landscape, enhances the immersive nature of the work. We are dwarfed by an otherworldly terrain, unable to see beyond it, captive to the camera's first-person perspective. The range of Tassili n'Ajjer is composed of sandstone, cast in red and black from metallic oxides, shaped by thousands of years of erosion, into natural arches and deep gorges. The corrosive effects of the natural elements have resulted in a particular morphology as the plateau has been carved by water and softened by winds. Ourahmane's camera traces the features of the plateau, caressing the remnants of prehistoric life, a register of centuries of climate change

chronicled through the five traditions of rock art (Archaic, Round Head, Pastoral, Horse, and Camel) that reflect the transformations in life in Tassili n'Ajjer over centuries.

The footage is accompanied by an enchanting four-part score—Nicolás Jaar, Felicita, Yawning Portal, and Sega Bodega each composed a piece—which heightens the extraordinary, dramatic effect of this arresting landscape. The musicians were not part of Ourahmane's pilgrimage, instead responding to the artist's images of the plateau. The varied energy of the soundtrack registers their differing responses, introducing multiple, and perhaps contradictory, narrative voices to the site.

Parallel to the film screen, a high-relief topographical sculpture hangs suspended from the ceiling, a collaboration with the 3D artist Yuma Burgess who made scans of the landscape and printed it in thin, black, thermoplastic tiles. The sculpture relies on a general adversarial network (GAN) to generate new material to fill the gaps between the original scans. Like the film, the sculpture is a seductive yet limited attempt to fully comprehend this inaccessible terrain.

Ourahmane's meditative engagement with Tassili n'Ajjer is inspired by the Tuareg writer Ibrahim al-Koni's understanding of the desert as an existential question, "a symbol of human existence," and "the only place where we can visit death and return to our home safely." By centering the desert in this work, al-Koni reimagines the geography of North Africa, which has historically marginalized native Berber communities as a result of Arab-Islamic hegemony, the Sahara acting as an imagined barrier separating the Maghreb from the African Sahel. Similarly, Ourahmane recognizes the desert as deceptively barren; in her attempts to comprehend the enormity of the Tassili n'Ajjer, the space unfolds into a series of questions that expand beyond the boundaries of time and space.