

HYPERALLERGIC

Who Has the Authority to Tell a Region's History?

Lydia Ourahmane asks whether her journey to the remote Tassili n'Ajjer plateau should be considered neocolonial tourism or an artistic exploration of cultural heritage.

By Annabel Keenan, July 22, 2022

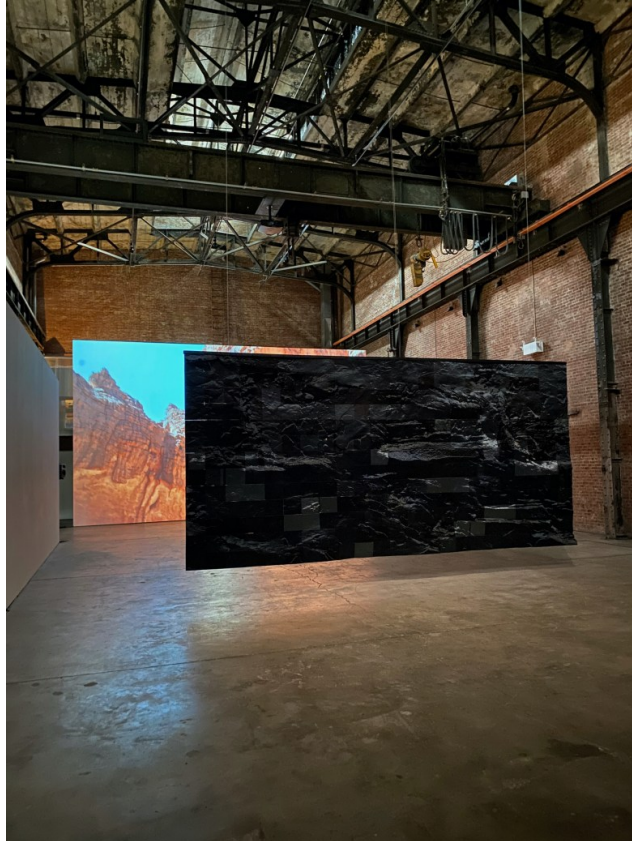
SculptureCenter



Installation view of Lydia Ourahmane: *Tassili* at SculptureCenter (all photos Annabel Keenan/Hyperallergic)

Only two artworks comprise Lydia Ourahmane's *Tassili* at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, New York, yet the exhibition is far from small. *Tassili* is both the show's title and the name of the Algerian-British artist's 46-minute film, for which she traveled to the Tassili n'Ajjer plateau, in a remote desert between Algeria and Libya — a bureaucratic feat in the contentious region. The film is paired with a lustrous, black, high-relief topographical sculpture suspended from the ceiling of the spartan exhibition space. Together, the works pose complex questions about the historical and political significance of the artist's project.

Visitors hear Ourahmane's film before entering the cavernous gallery. The score accompanying *Tassili* booms through the lobby, a teaser for what's to come. Shot during a 14-day journey, the awe-inspiring film shows inaccessible cliffs and crags in striking landscapes, emphasizing the stillness and absence of life in the area. Not a single person is shown, and the only signs of vegetation are a few dried trees and grasses. Ourahmane manipulates scale, juxtaposing extended clips of the camera carefully navigating the difficult terrain at a walking pace with static imagery of seemingly endless rock outcroppings and barren desert.



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Despite its remote location, the plateau is home to thousands of prehistoric engravings and cave drawings, some dating back to 8,000-6,000 BCE. Tassili n'Ajjer translates to "bed of rivers," as the area was once a fertile ecological landscape. The cave drawings gained modern political significance in the 1950s when they were discovered by French archeologist Henri Lhote and subsequently used to support France's campaign to continue its colonial control during the Algerian War of Independence. The film shows drawings of people, ancient demons, animals, and long-gone rivers and forests. The camera lingers on these images, the only evidence of human life in the area, and then cuts back to the desolate, arid scenery, a reminder of the region's drastic ecological change.

The music builds and drops to accompany breathtaking views. By dramatizing the imagery, the score questions whether or not the film sensationalizes an area fraught with issues of colonialism and displacement. An essay written for the exhibition addresses this directly and explains that visiting the plateau, which is not usually accepting of such professional filmmaking, requires local Tuareg people to serve as guides. Despite their crucial role at the government-protected site, the guides were born on the plateau and displaced by the Algerian government in the 1980s.



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The film raises many questions: How are these drawings in a place so remote? How did Ourahmane visit such a typically off-limits location? The essay provides further context, inviting viewers to consider the history of the land, including its present-day use as a path for migrants across Africa, a journey that often involves violence. The artist asks whether her own journey, funded and undertaken by foreign parties who would normally be forbidden from visiting, should be considered neocolonial tourism or an artistic exploration of cultural heritage. Adding another layer of tension is the fact that the composers created the score without visiting Tassili, raising questions (addressed in the essay) of who has the authority to tell its history.

The sculpture suspended from the ceiling continues this interrogation. Made of thin, black thermoplastic tiles, the 3D-printed work shows a

partially invented landscape created from scans of sections of the desert surface that were connected using a general adversarial network (GAN) to fill in the blanks between the edges. Made in collaboration with artist Yuma Burgess, the sculpture acts as evidence of the artist's journey and a souvenir from the desert. The peaks and valleys can suggest that visitors are given an inside look at this remote region, yet the sculpture, like the film, was created from carefully chosen topographical features to emphasize certain elements and achieve a specific overall feeling of awe.

Ourahmane tells a layered story of the people and events that Tassili n'Ajjer has witnessed across millennia. While the accompanying essay provides important context that enhances the film's allusions to the continued effects of colonialism, the exhibition inspires curiosity. Visually stunning and sensorily engaging, *Tassili* offers an introduction to the beauty, complex history, and politics of Algeria.



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Tassili continues at SculptureCenter (44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens) through August 1. The exhibition was curated by Kyle Dancewicz, deputy director of SculptureCenter.