

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: LYDIA OURAHMANE

Lydia Ourahmane

The you in us

26 January – 25 March

Ellen Greig: Your exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery, The you in us, consists of three interrelated works. Perhaps we should start with the work, In the Absence of our Mothers, which comprises two gold teeth, a scan of your mouth and some documents. Would you like to talk about this piece?

Lydia Ourahmane: In 2015, while I was researching immigration from Algeria to Europe I met a 23-year-old man in Medina Djedida (a market in Oran), who was standing on one of the streets selling a woman's gold chain for €300. He said it was his mothers and she wanted him to sell it for her. This struck me, because a few days earlier, I had heard from someone else that €300 was the average price that people were paying at that time for a seat in a boat to cross to Spain. I ended up buying the chain for €300.

Over the summer, when I was in Algeria visiting an uncle. He told me stories of my grandfather, who was a sniper in the French-Algerian military. After years of compulsory military service in the French army my grandfather was ordered to fight in World War II against Germany. As the French had already lost 1.4 million soldiers in World War I they began pulling out from the empire. At this point he was married to my grandmother, they had 3 children (they would have a further 9). He knew that if he went to Germany he would never return. His friend advised him that if he pulled all his teeth out he would be dismissed from the army. So, in January 1945 he pulled all of his teeth out and was subsequently discharged in February of that year.

From 1954 he become very involved in the fight against France for an independent Algeria. I noticed that his French passport was issued to him in that same year – which would make sense as one of his main roles during that time was smuggling arms from Morocco into Algeria, it may have been useful to lighten security checks at the borders during the war. He fought on both the Moroccan and Algerian frontiers and was part of The Oujda group, who would later become affiliated with the Algerian The National Liberation Front, and subsequently, the ruling government of independent Algeria.

When I heard this story of my grandfather it prompted me to consider this narrative in relation to the chain. Both acts – one being my grandfather extracting his teeth and this young man possibly stealing from his mother and departing against her knowledge and will – are forms of achieving escape as the last resort. In both cases their gestures are permanent and final; these two narratives are borne from the same 'flesh'.

Earlier this year, I melted the gold chain down into two 4.45g gold teeth, one of which was implanted into my mouth. Through the insertion of this gold tooth into my mouth, the anatomy of the bone has been permanently changed. For me, this definitive act resonates with my grandfather's story and the narrative around the gold chain. This work exists in different locations. One gold tooth exists in my mouth and the other being somewhere else. It also exists in the realm of a narrative, an oral history and an exchange.

EG: Alongside In the Absence of our Mothers you have presented documents relating to your grandfathers identity and official military papers. Why have you decided to show these documents?

Droit Du Sang (blood right) (2018) is a series of documents that deal with the legacy of my grandfather. They include an archive of his military documents and identity papers that have surfaced over the past year. These documents are currently being used by my family to claim French citizenship by right of blood.

An aunt of mine recently successfully claimed French citizenship based on my grandfather having a French passport, and his children being born before independence, therefore, they are French by birth. This revealed that my family on the Ourahmane side are eligible for citizenship. This realisation made me think about the possibility of this becoming a strange paradigm shift...

EG: *While you were working on this commission you were living in your family home in Oran. Can you talk about this time and how it shaped your thinking around this new body of work?*

LO: When I was invited to do this show, I was spending time in Algeria. During that time my dogs were stolen from the roof of my house while I was inside. I fell asleep on the sofa and woke up to the sound of one of the dogs running away from the stairs and very quiet footsteps above my head on the roof. A few minutes later, the engine of a car started outside the house and drove off playing really loud music. I'm referring to this incident, as I experienced it sonically, which became an integral part of my thinking around this commission.

In the morning when I woke up, the dogs were gone. I tried to report it to the police, but in order to file the report I had to give names of people that I thought could have been involved. This led me on an investigation to try to find the person, or people, who stole the dogs.

EG: *You have made a sound work embedded in a temporary wooden floor throughout the gallery space. The surface acts as a speaker, vibrating and projecting the sound throughout the gallery. Can you talk about this work?*

LO: The sound installation is called, *Paradis*, which refers to a coastal area of Oran called, Paradis Plage. I initially started making recordings in and around this area when I was trying to look for the people who had stolen the dogs.

When I was thinking about the atmosphere and shape of the sound piece, I showed Dante Traynor, my sound collaborator and friend, this picture that I took outside my house in Oran of four guys waiting on the corner. When I was talking to one of these guys a few days after I took the picture, I asked him, "What do you guys do on the corner all the time?" He responded, "Oh, you know, we just watch people come and go in cars, and talk about people, pass time."

Taking this premise of waiting, I wanted the rhythm of the sound piece to feel as if you were watching a car come from one corner of your eye and watching it leave from the other corner of your eye. We've edited *Paradis* around a series of sound waves that literally move audio across a wooden surface that occupies the entire gallery space. This wooden structure sits approximately 10cm above the gallery's floor. In this cavity we have installed 12 transducer 'bodyshaker' speakers. The speakers vibrate onto the wooden surface, creating amplification through contact. The idea is that the audio resonates through the floor into the body of the viewer.

EG: *Why does this act of waiting interest you?*

LO: In Arabic there is a word 'sobri' which translates as the act of waiting in a positive sense. That something better will come.

Recently, I've felt more tension when going home to Oran. There has been a shift in my experience of the place I think of as home. And this work simply records events or swells of time within which that shift happened.

I made contact with a guy I had met when I had taken the police into his house, because he had apparently been involved in stealing the dogs. I asked him if he would be interested in making a film together. From the get go, we were both extremely suspicious of each other. He thought that I was trying to get him in trouble, but I was interested in him as a way of getting the dogs back and I also wanted to know what he was about. As soon as we started hanging out, we would just drive around, or go to places and he'd show us things – where he would hang out. I met a lot of his circle...

Every young person you speak to, within the first conversation you have – specifically in that area, will tell you how far along they are in the process of leaving, what they have in place and how much money they have got together. It is a very active reality, and not limited to the conceived young male stereotype – there are many women and children also. It's not something that even needs to be sought out, it is very apparent. The migration from that area is driven by an economic situation, last year 100,000 Algerians claimed asylum in Europe. People have specifically asked me if I could do anything to help, because I have a British passport.

EG: *Much of your work is borne out of exchanges with people. The sound work samples some of these exchanges. Can you talk about the sounds we are listening to?*

The audio is comprised from recorded compositions performed by myself and by friends of mine. These sounds have been slowed down and mixed alongside edited recordings made in Algeria, over the last year. The samples are ripped from videos I was recording with numerous people I met while I was there. A lot of it is conversational; some of it is sound from street corners, or from recording landscapes.

Some of the samples that you can hear in the work are taken from sound recordings of an Algerian style of music called, Gnewa, which is a form of Sufi worship. I was specifically interested in the instrument that the Sufi's use, which is called a Guembri. This instrument is made out of the neck of a camel, one piece of wood and then the strings are made out of the intestine of a goat. They talk about how the instrument is therefore made out of three souls, and the souls that are present in these materials bring you into a state of 'trance' on hearing this instrument being played. I was really taken by the idea that an object could hold such significant charge – that an object could resonate spiritual, or emotional significance, and embody these past lives. I am interested in how this object has charge beyond the space that it physically occupies. For me, this idea speaks directly to the other works within the exhibition also, such as the tooth work and the doors as well.

EG: *The sound work literally vibrates through your body when you are in the gallery space. Why is the physical engagement with this work so important to you?*

LO: I hope that visitors will sit, or even lie down on the wooden surface and physically, as well as sonically, experience the sound work. One of the reasons I have worked with these transducer speakers was because they are used in sound therapy, where consistent vibrations are played directly onto the body, creating a 'trace-like' state of calm. I wanted to work with this idea and create a physical engagement with the sound piece.

I am interested in an experience that has the potential to exist beyond language. I was talking to a friend the other day about echolocation, which is the ability for humans to detect objects

in their environment by sensing echoes from those objects – a spatial understanding which isn't conceived by vision. I see place or objects or spaces as 'living', in a way that they absorb and release what they have borne witness to. In Algeria superstition and the existence of the spiritual realm within the physical realm is widely practiced and accepted. There were certain things that I couldn't describe in any other way.

EG: So, sound allows you to reconcile between, as well as map, a physical, mental and emotional space?

LO: Yes, but also within a context that I am not so involved in, and am still always outside of and will always be outside of because of my position of being able to leave when I want.

What is always brought up in my work is that there is this pre-established right for many Algerians to Europe, because of the recent history of colonisation. There are very tangible effects of wider social and political fractures that have surfaced as a consequence of Algeria's recent history.

French occupation of Algeria, where the French imposed their culture, language, architecture etc. onto the country, has developed a physical and ideological right to space. I have been thinking a lot about these studies about trauma being passed down through peoples DNA, and how this concept relates to post-colonial control – how this right is embedded in ones body in the same way.

For example, the Arabic that I speak, having grown up in Algeria, has so many French words in it, to the point where I don't even know the classical Arabic word for those French words. That is how involved it is in the everyday. It has linguistically removed parts of the culture, which will take a while to return.

Growing up between different cultures and places, stories and memories of these other spaces always inhabited the same realms of reality for me – whether they were mine or someone else's in present or past, so I guess what has always been really important for me is the process by which I can extrapolate my own interpretations from histories that I have always existed in relation to.

EG: You've made a set of silver-oxidised doors that mark the entrance and exit of the gallery space. When people pass through the doors they mark the façade of the doors with the imprint of their hand. The idea is that eventually the oxidation will erode and the silver will re-appear. Again, the idea of mapping a space and physical engagement is important here?

LO: The material significance of what my work *does* is very important. The doors are made out of silver plated brass, which has been put through a chemical process using sulphur, which transforms silver to black.

The doors are very heavy, with the intention that to enter and exit the gallery you would have to use your body weight to do so, and in this act you are conscious of your presence. Through this bodily and tactile interaction with the doors, areas of the blackened surface will eventually become silver again. The doors act as a record, for a period, or swell of time – everyone who comes to the show will leave a physical imprint of their presence here. And they all would have facilitated the reversal of the tarnish on the silver. I see this as a cathartic act.

Interviewed by Ellen Greig, Curator: Commissions, Chisenhale Gallery, on Friday 19 January 2018. Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.