

METRO PICTURES

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Latifa Echakhch, *Romance* installation view at Fondazione Memmo, Rome 2019

Nine fantastic concrete sculptures, in a site-specific installation on the gallery floor, lead to artificial grottos and hidden trolls, along with scattered objects from everyday life and fake rocks and trees: a pathway into the poetic balance between actuality and perception, originality and affectation. Each single work's caption represents a real, short romance per se, a lyrical travelogue through evocative verses, sampling the stratifications of history upon which the city of Rome has been built and revealing, at the same time, the centrality of *planting* and *displanting* to colonialism. With her solo show *Romance* at Fondazione Memmo in Rome, Latifa Echakhch acts upon collective references, internalizing and enhancing them, exceeding their canonical and aggregating character and investing them with the evocative power of a personalized and intuitive remembrance.



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GINEVRA BRIA: Let's start with some of your older works: *L'air du temps* (2013), *Die Vögel* (2013), *For each stencil a revolution* (2013), *La dépossession* (2014), *Fantômes* (2011), *Tkaf* (2011), and *Fantasia* (2011) are installations dealing with the *disparition en série* of natural landmarks and landscapes. How has your narrative idea of *paysage manquant* evolved over time?

LATIFA ECHAKHCH: I am particularly interested in the exact moment coming after an action or an event, when we have before our eyes some traces which we—as viewers—have to rebuild as a narrative chronology, in order to be able to understand the context, as a kind of detective practice. It's one of the main tools I use to involve the public, first of all to establish a contemplative ground and then to push it in an active direction. I have to leave viewers with a visual understanding.

GB: In your practice, apparently ordinary objects always turn into transitional, oneiric igniters of daily life: semantic, integral centers of your three-dimensional installations, from *Certificate de Vie* (2002) to *Globus* (2007), *Stoning* (2010), and *Skins* (2010), among others. How does your relationship with objects and the way you gather and collect them influence your sculptural practice?

LE: Everyday objects have affected me since I've been conscious of it in my childhood. This strangeness in the questioning of the world around me pushed me to a multiple reading practice, driving me to become an artist. It's this particular feeling that I try to look for when I am collecting objects. What I am looking for is absolutely not spectacular, not too exotic, but enough to disturb the meaning landscape of an exhibition. Some of them are a bit like Proust's *madeleine*, archaic but discretely powerful. I am like a hunter: sometimes it takes me months to find an object; sometimes I find something completely by chance, and it gives me a euphoric joy. Like the shell-shaped lamp exhibited in *Romance*: I was hunting for it for months in France, for the exhibition *Air du Temps* at Centre Pompidou in 2014, because it's exactly the same as the lamp displayed in my parents' living room. And then, here in Rome, I found the same lamp in the flea market! It means that my strange little lamp, which drove me to so many contemplative dreams when I was a kid—it's just an object that was reproduced in a series and is not so singular, not anymore.



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GB: After more than fifteen years of your work, how did your personal, speculative bridging between political and historical fields find another spirituality, maybe another meaning, through *Snow in Arabia* (2003)?

LE: I have in my practice different protocols and temporality in my gestures. It's like writing an album of music: some pieces are in a slow tempo, some more orchestral, some more loud. I need these different tempos in order not to linger in a too comfortable practice. But in the field of political and historical links, I always take care to not be too frontal, too simplistic—the political context is more complex than that, and my rule as an artist is not to make any obvious politically oriented messages. It's a question of power and postures. I found deeply suspicious any works that are too direct, too not questionable, too manipulable. I have no other goals but questioning the world around me.

GB: In relation to the brand-new installation presented at Fondazione Memmo, the title of the show—*Romance*—could represent a sort of allusion to your etymological procedures in sculpting. Why does this single word sound so appropriate to describe your approaches to spaces and to Rome itself?



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LE: When I was building this installation, I had to let it go, to let my hand draw curves without thinking too much. In fact, I learned then not to think at all, just to make it [the installation], preserving the most organic gesture possible. Most of the time, in my practice—even if I care to be involved in the making—I avoid the idea of a genius’s process, by introducing accidents, hazard, destruction; even if it’s a little planned, it leaves a lot of uncontrolled results. I find it so beautiful, because it’s surprising and strange, as if it was not my work at all. Thus, when I look at it eventually, I learn so much. My approach was so new this time, it even surprised me, so much. I created these elements directly in the space, but differently than a sculptor would. The *maîtres rocailleurs* are not artists but real amateurs; most of them are workers specialized in concrete and metal building and techniques developed in the beginning of the twentieth century that create, in a very pre-industrial moment, these forms of natural elements, most of them improvised and handmade, that the only specification have to last in time. They also mostly have to respond to preexisting contexts of parks and buildings, and the elements are like “natural-looking parasites” of the architecture or of the site.

When you look at Rome, everything is so *heavy*—in a historical way—it has so many layers, like a big, messy paradise of historical architecture that has found its own very amazing and fragile equilibrium. When you look into details, you have all these fake marble painted walls in churches mixed with real ones, fake stones, true amphoras, real antique columns fit into contemporary walls. If you want to add new constructions, you do not have any other choice than to incorporate them into the past ones.

GB: In *Romance*, could the gigantic plane-tree leaves on the floor enhance not only a decolonizing mission specific to your artistic role, but also a *poétique de l'étranger*, formulating a sort of a clue for a new phase of your personal *enquête sociologique*? Could you please describe the choice of displacing those narrative and figurative elements?

LE: The history of botany itself is so related to the discovery of territories, and it's indeed colonialism. The plane-tree species used for the exhibition is the *Platanus hispanica*; it's a mix between the *Platanus occidentalis* and *orientalis*. This species was cultivated and planted in Europe because its leaves disseminate the least number of seeds possible and do not propagate like other trees. As a controlled and restricted *metissage*. This is the nonromantic part of the lecture, and it's not the first thing that we are thinking about when we have a quiet walk in a park. I like the posture of a *flaneur*, but not the naive actor!

GB: You've always been intrigued by the lack of a definitive perception and by the idea that reality is a willed, created thing. Actually, *Romance* does deal with the analogical element of memory, the idea that there's no such thing as a true memory, as an artificial nature. And, looking at how this concept has been molded, when you consider that memory is identity, then what does this say about your actual identity? Which role has the self-portraying assumed in your practice (about *Les Figures*, [2018])?

LE: I can also use other people's portrayals, but the mental exercise is more useful if it's applied to myself. It left aside the question of the *modèle* in art history and its *objectalisation*, and the power game indeed: the artist is above all and the model as a material of judgment. My own personal story is not that singular, but not a universal one. I am interested in the process of allowing other possible readings of it, dilating it in a very banal mixture of elements. I am absolutely not an example and not a *porte drapeau*. When I show these banal elements of my memories, I also prove that we can all have the same kind, and that the principle of what we can call my identity has nothing to be targeted as incredibly personal.

GB: Which kind of conceptual liaisons does *Romance* graft from the historical representations of the Exotic Garden of Monaco, analyzed within the show *Le Jardin Mécanique*, presented at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco in Monte Carlo in 2018? On another topic, which kinds of gestures, objects, surfaces, and techniques, drawn from *Le Jardin Mécanique* research, did you hypostatize into *Romance's* sculptures?

LE: The *Le Jardin Mécanique* project was about to deconstruct the mechanism of romanticism in the fake landscape of Monte Carlo, the one set in the Opera Garnier for many plays, the one set in the Jardin Exotique and its collection of Mediterranean cactus and plants, and also the city in itself, which was mainly built for that purpose: the definition of a romantic landscape, but a constructed one. The garden in the rocks of the upper city has several additions of concrete rocks, trees, and elements to improve the natural beauty.

GB: Could you please formulate a message, a thought, introducing *Romance* to Italian visitors?

LE: Just read the title of the works; one after the other, it's made this text: *The green of the leaves becomes brighter, and suddenly the wind tables all the colors. Turn back to road taken two minutes before. Mud appears to be more and more humid, shoes going deeper every step. Wondering how long it could take until knees. A cloud passes on the last slice of moon, leaving darkness blurring every trunk. Shaking the head and stretching out arms until touching something. Frail branch brush against the back, turn immediately and run away. Until forgetting why. Raising head to the maximum, closing eyes, feeling cold breeze inside the nose. Feet becoming heavier and difficult to move. Shaking arms, lifting a knee then the other. Make two steps and then turn to the left. Sun appears slightly. The road widens to become a clearing, flat and brown. The head rotates to a perfect ninety-degree angle. Focus on a gray and white pebble, above a lichen, above a curve of a branch, fall. Then turning back. A crack under the foot disturbing the silence, resonating until a breath clears up the atmosphere. Trembling legs move from one step to the other.*



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GB: Could you please reveal which new projects you are developing for the near future?

LE: My next steps will be in Kunsthalle Mainz in Germany (July 2019) and BPS22 in Charleroi, Belgium (January 2020). These are such different landscapes, more industrial, more *thick* in terms of socioeconomic aspect, where the ideas of memory will deal with the obsolescence of modernity and its ruins. It's another kind of romanticism, but maybe it's just coming back to the roots of it, when the industrial era started to invade the world; then the artists start to question historicity, the blind belief in progress, the melancholic. That's how the romanticism starts.