

METRO PICTURES

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Latifa Echakhch Between Deposition and Dispossession

Dispossessing a work of its anecdotal content and formal rigidity so as to keep only the intensity of the allegorical dimension: the work of Latifa Echakhch occupies the gap between poetics and politics, dispossession and reappropriation. As winner of the Prix Marcel-Duchamp, she is exhibiting at the Pompidou Center's Espace 315 from October 8, 2014 to January 5, 2015.

A falling theatrical sky, bowler hats filled with black ink, a crumbled brick wall, a posed tightrope walker's balloon, a lawyer's gown and a sans-culotte's clothing suspended from a hanger, a go-go dancer's outfit thrown on the floor, a fairground target, a row of sports shoes, walls covered with carbon paper, broken Moroccan teacups, prayer mats hollowed in the middle, jasmine garlands hanging from a shirt, a collapsed circus tent, stones scattered over the floor—these disparate objects are all linked by a certain kind of obsolescence. Most are remains, the leftovers of actions, relics of

techniques, ruins of situations. Taken out of their usual context (whether music hall, justice, domestic life, the circus, or religion, history), these objects live another life, a life that is at once poetic and political. Echakhch's works all have a twofold intensity. They are essentially allegorical, but never illustrative. This allegorical quality is paradoxical in that they usually play on a form of literality. To make *Dégradation* (2009), for example, the artist carried out meticulous research into insignias, medals, epaulettes, buttons, braiding and swords in the time of Captain Dreyfus. "When I got the material, there I was in the gallery, sitting on a chair with the costume on my knees, having to tear off the buttons and the ornaments. [...] Even if my position was comfortable, I found this action of stripping extremely violent. The question I asked myself was what was left after this kind of ceremony." The same kind of question lies behind *Stoning* (2010), a work that implicitly refers to a stoning scene. "The question I asked myself was fairly simple, both naïve

and stemming from a kind of guilt: what does a stoning scene look like, when you take away the victim?" By evacuating the victim from the crime scene, Echakhch redoubles the violence of the original situation (again, a kind of wrenching). But the stones thrown by the artist are not found stones. They were made out of old bricks and sculpted into pebble shapes—a way of distancing the work from the pathos of the situation evoked. Echakhch plays on these ambiguities: "I thought this piece might look like a Richard Long sculpture that someone had thrown a firecracker into. But thinking that upset me. Still, I did make it in the end." Instead of the art of displacement, of the readymade, typical of the 1980s, Echakhch de-

De haut en bas / from top: «Tour de Babel». 2010-2011. Bois. Exposition «Out of the collection: Latifa Echakhch», Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz, 2012. (Ph. Altenburger, Zurich).
«Mer d'encre». 2012. Chapeaux melon, résine, encre
Exposition «Tkaf», kamel mennour, 2012 (Ph. F. Seixas). "Sea of Ink." Bowler hats, resin, ink



plays an art of deposition. It is a question here not of reappropriation but of dispossession: pieces are usually placed on the floor or suspended, off their bases, off their pedestal. There is no assumption, no elevation. As in a readymade, the objects chosen are cut off from their original context, but they are not elevated (this is not the aesthetic of the found object, but the practice of the wrested object). Burned tires (*Smoke Ring*, 2008), a set of playing cards scattered on the floor (*Eivissa*, 2010), trails of gunpowder (*Sans titre [Gunpowder]*, 2008), collapsed walls (*Tkaf*, 2011), flagpoles without flags (*Fantasia*, 2011), prayer mats with no center (*Frames*, 2001), crumpled world maps (*Globus*, 2010)—all the objects in Echakhch's work are downgraded and deteriorated. Echakhch's art involves a kind of minimal romanticism. It has romanticism's privileged relation to literature and the poetic (Paul Celan is one of her favorite authors); from minimalism, it takes an acute sense of form and economy of means. "I grew up on the edge of the lake dear to Alphonse de Lamartine, a romantic landscape par excellence. Later I moved to Paris, after the creation of the *Revue de Littérature Générale*. It was sublime!" The whole of Echakhch's art lies between these two poles. The artist links her desire to make art to her childhood reading of Charles M. Schulz's cartoon *What Have We Learned*, *Charlie Brown*, which itself was inspired by a poem by John McCrae, *In Flanders Fields*, written during World War I, in which it is said that before the slaughter the poppies were white, and were reddened by all the bloodshed. Her sojourn in Lebanon in 2011 reactivated this ambiguous feeling: "We spent five days visiting the war archives, a Palestinian refugee camp. We saw some pretty harrowing things. Walking around the city I noticed that there too the earth was very red. Obviously, I related the color to the stories people told me about the civil war." If politics (Palestine anti-Semitism, fundamentalism, the Arab spring) is present in many of her works, this is never obvious or frontal but always oblique. Echakhch is careful to keep the right distance between referent and form. Form is the antidote to the illustrative tendency that is one of the pitfalls besetting political art. The referent is what keeps the work from lapsing into formalism. Depositing an object is not the same thing as laying down one's arms. It means getting rid of its superfluity, letting the anecdote go so as to keep only the living intensity. Echakhch's art dispossesses the artwork of its grandiloquence, of its sufficiency, in order to highlight its simplicity, or even its naivety. The collapsing theater sky (*La Dépossession*, 2014) is a perfect allegory of this process of *desublimation* and *dispossession* in Echakhch's work. Is not the sky the traditio-



nal seat of Ideas, of transcendence, of the Sublime? This falling theater set is an image of illusions collapsing, in the spirit of René Magritte and Marcel Broodthaers (Magritte of course comes to mind when we see her bowler hats filled with ink (*Chapeau d'encre*, 2011). This is a melancholy way of indicating that art cannot really transform the world, that the most it can do, in the best case, is help change the way we look at the world.

LATIFA ECHAKHCH AT ESPACE 315

Once again, the artist is placing theatrical notions at the center: backstage, theater set, and trace. Although made up of several sculptural elements, the exhibition immediately comes across as a whole. Echakhch sets out to construct a dramatic stage. By playing on what is behind the scenes, the ensemble offers a range of meanings and interpreta-

De haut en bas /from top:
« Fantasia (Empty Flag, White) ». 2011
Porte-drapeaux blancs en fibre de verre, bases en acier.
Exposition « ILLUMInazioni/ILLUMInations »,
54^e Biennale de Venise, 2011. (Ph. R. Marossi)
(Court. kaufmann repetto, Milan). *Flagpoles, steel bases*
« Les Sanglots longs », Documenta,
Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Cassel, 2009.
(Ph. Nils Klingner). "Long Sobs"

tions, from disappointing materiality to images of mental landscapes. Between sky and earth, she transforms the place into a dense, oneiric landscape, in a kind of twilight zone. Walking through the space, the visitor discovers different fragments of history, objects that are almost ridiculous, childhood memories dredged from the depth of a memory and immersed in black ink. ■

Translation, C. Penwarden

