

GALLERIA CONTINUA

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LEILA ALAOUİ

YA RAYAH

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Galleria Continua is proud to present for the first time in China an exhibition of the work of Franco-Moroccan artist **Leila Alaoui**. The title of the exhibition has been borrowed from the Algerian song by Dahmane El Harrachi, **Ya Rayah**: 'O, you who are leaving'. This song of exile was written in the 1970s and remains popular to this day. Its words are steeped in homesickness and the sufferings of exile, while its melody distils an unspeakable melancholy.

Whether in *No Pasara*, her first work as a professional photographer, for which she worked with Moroccan youths yearning for a nearby yet distant Europe, or in her unfinished project with the immigrant workers of the old Renault factory in Boulogne-Billancourt—L'Île du Diable—, or in her encounters with Syrian refugees in Lebanon for Natreen or Sub-Saharan African migrants for Crossings, Leila Alaoui was consistently aiming her lens at exiles, those who have been abandoned, left to disappear behind clichés and statistics. In so doing, she brought into focus the faces and the return gazes of men and women and children, with all that these told of the loss of home, of waiting, of regrets in the face of harsh reality, and of hope despite everything. Alaoui's encounters with these people are humbly revealed in a

sensitive body of work that she herself defined as primarily social.

The exhibition opens with the series *Les Marocains*, in very large format, on the same scale as the exhibition space. This long-distance project, inspired by Robert Frank's *Americans*, saw Leila Alaoui travelling through Morocco with a mobile studio, weaving together a multifaceted portrait of a country through its inhabitants. Arabs and Berbers, women and men, adults and children can be found side by side in a mosaic of traditions, cultures, and aesthetics. As many customs were gradually disappearing in the face of unbridled globalisation, these portraits constitute something like the outlines of a visual archive. But more than a simple documentary, *Les Marocains* was also a way for the young photographer to seek out her own heritage, to bring together the distance implied in the whole apparatus of camera with a form of intimacy that drew on her Moroccan roots and that was forged through the encounters she made with the people on her journey. An irrevocable way to make a claim for an autonomous aesthetic, freed of all Orientalist folklore and focusing on the dignity of individuals and of a country.

No Pasara, Alaoui's first photographic project, acts as a sort of manifesto for her social engagement. This series shows the many faces of a Moroccan youth looking for a passage to Europe, candidates to an uncertain exile, uprooted in the heart of their own country. Remarkably humble as a portraitist, Alaoui knew how to observe them, to listen to them, only taking up her camera after long periods of shared time and exchange. She wished to grasp as best she could something of the lives, the dreams and mirages of those called Harragas ('those who burn'), along with the necessity they all felt for leaving their birthplace.

Crossings, with its portraits of Sub-Saharan African migrants, is also the expression of encounters. This series, which began as a video work before becoming photographic, approaches these women and men who have left everything behind in their quest for a better life on the other side of the Mediterranean, with all the dangers of a journey in which others have lost their lives, and attempts to let them speak. Those who made it as far as Morocco, washing up almost at the door to Europe, bear the visible or invisible scars of their unfinished voyage. In the intensity of their gaze and of their stories, one discovers a continuity both with the *No Pasara* photographs and those of the Syrian refugees fleeing war and chaos in another series, *Natreen*, which Alaoui made in Libya in 2013. Men, women, and children in a foreign country, dispossessed of their land and their property, hoping for a better future but stuck in an apparently interminable holding pattern. Morocco, Syria, Central Africa: other places, other reasons to flee. Everywhere, the same uprooting, the same hope, illusions crashing against the same reality. Leila Alaoui determinedly fixed her sights on this reality, making herself into an echo chamber for these distant voices, even while she was able to delicately, humbly retranscribe the beauty of these people already become something more than the anonymous figures of the news.

The project *L'Île du Diable*, which is presented here in video format, is a work that Alaoui began near Paris in Boulogne-Billancourt, where she had sought out the one-time immigrant workers of the Renault factory that used to be situated on Seguin Island—

nicknamed 'the Devil's island' by the workers. The factory, which today has been completely demolished, was one of the biggest in the country, a veritable pin-up of French industry that over its years in operation, from the 1930s until 1992, employed a large number of foreign workers, especially from Africa and Asia. After her first projects, in which she sought out people wishing to migrate in order to tell the story of their attempts at departure, their hopes, and the obstacles lying in their way, Alaoui now turned her gaze to those who had arrived. Uprooted workers labouring in difficult conditions, they were actors in the great social struggles of the 1960s to defend their rights and their dignity. This unfinished project of Alaoui's aimed at letting them tell their story, letting them recount the social memory of immigrant workers. The video presented here shows their faces, either in portraits or as witnesses returning to the site of the old factory. The video was to be the first part of a larger project, in which the younger generations of immigrant workers were to have been invited to speak also, contributing to a global perspective.

Leila Alaoui, Franco-Moroccan artist, photographer, and video maker, was born in 1982. She studied photography at City University in New York. Her work explores the construction of identity, cultural diversity, and migration in the Mediterranean. She used photography and video art to express social realities through a visual language situated somewhere between documentary and visual art.

Her work has been exhibited internationally since 2009, including in Paris at L'Institut du Monde Arabe and La Maison Européenne de la Photographie, in Sweden at Malmö Konsthall, and at the Cascais Citadel Palace in Portugal. Leila Alaoui's humanitarian engagement includes photographic commissions from NGOs including the Danish Refugee Council, Search for Common Ground, and the Human Rights Commission.

In January 2016, while working on a commission from Amnesty International about women's rights in Burkina Faso, Leila Alaoui fell victim to the terrorist attacks in Ouagadougou. She died from her wounds on 18 January 2016. The Leila Alaoui Foundation was created to preserve her work, defend her values, and inspire and support humanist artistic engagement.