



# GALLERIA CONTINUA

SAN GIMIGNANO BEIJING LES MOULINS HABANA

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## LEILA ALAOUI

### Je te pardonne

Opening: Saturday February 18<sup>th</sup> 2017, Via del Castello 11, 6pm-midnight  
Until 23.04.2017, Monday-Sunday, 10am-1pm, 2-7pm

Galleria Continua is honoured to present, for the first time in San Gimignano, a solo exhibition by the French-Moroccan photographer and video artist Leila Alaoui. The show comprises photographs from various series of the artist's work, so viewers can fully appreciate the humanistic commitment displayed by Alaoui throughout her life.

The exhibition opens with a text, "*Je te pardonne*" ('I forgive you'), written by the artist's sister, Yasmina. Imagining the words Leila might have said to her murderer, this deeply moving letter gives us a glimpse of the artist's sensibility in the face of the social realities experienced by marginalized people around the world – women and men with forgotten faces, hidden behind statistics or stereotyped images. A globe-trotting artist, Alaoui saw her mission as being essentially social. The people she met speak to us, through her portraits of them, of a powerful and difficult reality. And despite this, the expressions captured by the artist are imbued with great humanity, restoring to those who have been forgotten the dignity they deserve.

*No Pasara*, Alaoui's first photographic project, is the leitmotif of the show. A kind of manifesto of her commitment, this series of shots, a mix of colour and black and white photos, reveals the multiple faces of Moroccan youth in search of a ticket to Europe, candidates for an uncertain exile and somehow lost in their own country. A humble portraitist, Alaoui observed and listened to them, picking up her camera only after she had spent time with and talked to them. Her wish was to understand as much as possible about the lives, dreams and mirages of the so-called *Harragas* (literally, "those who burn [borders]"), and what prompts them to abandon their homeland. *Crossings* is a portrait of the migrants of sub-Saharan Africa, and an expression of her encounter with them. A video and then photographic work, this series of images tries to give a voice back to women and men who have left everything behind them in order to set out in search of a better life on the other side of the Mediterranean, embarking on a fraught and dangerous journey during which some of them lost their lives. Those who hung on as far as Morocco, before getting stuck at the gateway of Europe, carry on their skin the visible or invisible scars of this incomplete journey. The intensity of their gazes and of

their stories offers continuity with the photos of *No Pasara* and ties in with the portraits of *Natreen*, a series of photos taken in Lebanon in 2013, which focus on Syrian refugees fleeing the chaos of the civil war – women, men and children who ended up in a foreign country, having lost their land and possessions, hoping for a better future but caught in an apparently unbreakable limbo. Morocco, Syria, Central Africa: other places, other reasons to flee. Everywhere there is the same disorientation, the same hope, the same harsh, illusion-shattering reality. Alaoui explored these realities with great determination, giving voice to distant words and re-transcribing with sensitivity and humility the beauty of people who, thanks to her work, were able to elude their destiny as anonymous figures in the news.

The video *Crossings*, in which the voices of migrants blend in with the sounds of their lives, will be screened at the Teatro dei Leggieri during the private view. This will be preceded by a presentation about the artist and her work. The video will then run throughout the opening evening.

The exhibition also showcases portraits from the series *Les Marocains*. A broad-ranging project inspired by Robert Frank's *Americans*, it led Alaoui to travel the length and breadth of Morocco with a portable photographic studio. In the course of her encounters, she built up a protean portrait of the country through its inhabitants: Arabs and Berbers, women and men, adults and children. Together they form a mosaic of different traditions, cultures and aesthetics, revealing many customs that are gradually disappearing as a result of rampant globalization. In

producing this set of portraits, the artist laid the foundations for a full-blown visual archive. More than just a documentary work, *Les Marocains* was also a way, for the young photographer, to begin to discover her own inheritance, offsetting the distance inherent to the camera with a form of intimacy, thanks both to her Moroccan roots and the ties she forged with people during her travels. It was a way, in short, to affirm an independent aesthetic, free from any Westernizing folklore, and to highlight the dignity of individuals and of an entire country.

The artist, photographer and video artist **Leila Alaoui** was born in 1982, and studied photography at the City University of New York. Her work explores the building of identity, cultural diversity and migration in the Mediterranean area. She used photography and video to express various social realities through a visual language lying on the boundary between the documentary and the plastic arts. Since 2009 her works have been shown in various countries, amongst other places, at the Institut du Monde Arabe and at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris, at the Konsthall of Malmö in Sweden, and in the national palace of the citadel of Cascais in Portugal. Alaoui's humanitarian commitment also included various photographic missions for prominent NGOs, such as the Danish Refugee Council, Search for Common Ground and HCR. In January 2016, while working on an Amnesty International commission about women's rights in Burkina Faso, Leila Alaoui was seriously wounded in the terrorist attacks in Ouagadougou. She did not recover, and died on 18 January 2016. The Fondation Leila Alaoui was set up to preserve her work, defend her values and inspire and support artists working to promote human dignity.

For further information about the exhibition and for photographs:

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