

Tassili is commissioned and produced by Mercer Union, Toronto; SculptureCenter, New York; rhizome, Algiers; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; Kamel Lazaar Foundation, Tunis; and Nottingham Contemporary.

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Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art

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PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

fORUM

Lydia Ourahmane

24 January 2023 6:30PM EST

Main Hall
1 Spadina Crescent
John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design
University of Toronto

Lydia Ourahmane leads an artist talk around her new film and the subject of her first exhibition in Canada, *Tassili* (2022). Documenting a two-week journey on foot with a group of artists to Tassili n'Ajjer—a plateau spanning the border between Algeria and Libya—the film is an ambitious undertaking that exemplifies Ourahmane's research-driven practice at the intersections of spirituality, contemporary geopolitics, migration, and the complex histories of colonialism. The talk will look at recent works that have addressed bureaucratic processes affecting the mobility of persons, objects and cultures, and will focus on the potential of art to examine and transgress such controls.

fORUM is Mercer Union's ongoing series of talks, lectures, interviews, screenings, and performances. Admission to our public programming is free, and all are welcome.

This lecture is presented in partnership the **MVS Proseminar** at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture Landscape and Design at the University of Toronto; and **Images Festival**, Toronto.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Lydia Ourahmane is an artist with a research-driven practice that links the personal, spiritual, and geopolitical, drawing on complex histories of colonialism to engage paradoxes of belief and ideas of displacement.

In 2021, Mercer Union joined SculptureCenter, New York together with a group of institutional partners to co-commission Lydia's new film titled, *Tassili* (2022) and began working with the artist towards her first exhibition in Canada. The work documents a two-week journey on foot with a group of artists to Tassili n'Ajjer, a plateau spanning the border between southern Algeria and Libya. Both a rigorous undertaking and a large, open-ended proposition, *Tassili* obliquely studies the longing and limitations left by French colonial exploration, conquest, and knowledge production in Algeria.

Mercer Union's collaboration with Lydia emerges from our long-held commitment to commissioning new work, and creating milestone opportunities for artists to bring their visions to fruition in Toronto. Through our commissioning platform *Artist First*, we invest in the lifecycle of a project from conception to realization, cultivating discovery, risk-taking, and artistic development through long-term support and dialogue. To learn more, visit mercerunion.org/artistfirst



Lydia Ourahmane is based in Algiers and Barcelona. Recent and forthcoming solo exhibitions include MACBA, Barcelona (2023); SMAK, Ghent (2022); Portikus, Frankfurt (2022); KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin (2022); De Appel, Amsterdam (2021); Triangle-Astérides, Marseille (2021); Kunsthalle Basel (2021); CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco (2020); and Chisenhale Gallery, London (2018). Her work was included in the 34th Bienal de São Paulo (2021) and the New Museum Triennial, New York (2018).

Image: Lydia Ourahmane, صرخة شمسية *Solar Cry* (2020). Installation view, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, San Francisco. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Impart Photography

Lydia Ourahmane:
Tassili

28 January – 15 April 2023

An essay by Isabel Valli



In early March 2022, a diverse group of participants began a journey on foot through Tassili n'Ajjer, in the Algerian desert. As a psychiatrist my presence would not be an obvious choice for such an expedition, however, Lydia explained that this journey called for a multiplicity of perspectives.

Tassili n'Ajjer translates to 'bed of rivers' in reminiscence of its fluvial past. Now a vast desert plateau that no human can inhabit, it was verdant for millennia and communities flourished here, leaving thousands of engravings and cave paintings as a testimony of their presence, their surroundings, and their beliefs.

Those who traverse the plateau today are thus exposed to a timeless proximity with ancestral forces, uncovered by the painted messages. To move through this landscape is akin to a *katabasis*, the mythological journey to the underworld that was thought to differ from death itself, in that one returns to the world of the living from below. Or like a *nekyia*, that is a different way to connect with the underworld, through ritual communication with the dead rather than by undertaking the actual physical journey. Both are considered metaphors for the deep descent into one's own unconscious.

The symbolic descent in Ourahmane's film defies verbal language. Instead, we are aided by the enchantment of music as a mythological device that can grant access to inaccessible

places. I'm reminded of the myth of Orpheus, who was allowed into the underworld thanks to his divine ability to play the lyre, breaking the rules of life and death to return to the world of the living.

During our voyage on the plateau the paintings of Tassili n'Ajjer often revealed themselves unexpectedly. Sometimes they seemed too sudden, too present, or too close. Other times they appeared where they were not—imagination can confabulate within the gaps of perception, constructing figures from shadows that lure the eye from afar. On other occasions they seemed to hide, concealed from sight like spectres. Their hidden presence permeated with an invisible fullness, as if they were contained *within*. This sense doubled in the universality of representations such as the mother or the child, for instance, which resonated with the kind of archetypal figures or ideas present across cultures and *within* each of us. These images gestured to a common humanity, unencumbered by the concepts of othering that have shaped the imaginative geographies of orientalism.¹



The landscape itself was able to distort the elastic experience of spacetime. Vast spatial distances can open one's mind to far removed futures that have a large hypothetical distance from the present state of the self.² Yet, witnessing depictions of vegetation and life whilst walking through an inhospitable desert brought the tangible reality of progressive changes in the ecosphere to an unsettling proximity in time. The uncanny quality of foresight that was attached to this realization enhanced the sinister warning of a secret in plain sight.

However, the eerie atmosphere of the landscape didn't purely rest upon its metaphorical prophetic value. I think of Mark Fisher here, who identified the essence of such aesthetic experience, suggesting that "the eerie" arises when "there is something where there should be nothing, or there is nothing where there should be something."³ A landscape emptied of its inhabitants can surface Fisher's notion; in Tassili n'Ajjer, a sense of alterity stems from the mysterious message of the paintings and the remote disappearance of those who produced them.

But the eerie quality of the scenery went beyond the spectral presence of humans-past. It pervaded with sentient solemnity a landscape that is governed by absence. The labyrinthine gorges and pinnacles echoed forsaken urban architectures, giving erosion a sense of intent. In a landscape that demands to be engaged with on its own terms, our attempts to employ it as a memory palace were destined to fail. The visual repetition rhymed constantly with itself, in an aural maze where hearing is fragmented and retracing one's own steps leads to unpredictable paths. Prediction defies perception. Illusory reconstructions of past, present, and future become synchronous in an ellipse where time can disappear into geological patterning.

The resulting perturbation of common experience and the pervasive eerie atmosphere of the plateau left the group of us in a state of derealization—an alteration of perception where the outside world transfigures as distant and unreal, almost dreamlike. Psychoanalyst James Hillman, in his study of the relationship between myths and psychic events, considered dreams to belong to the underworld,⁴ asserting that dreams are not messages to be deciphered but rather the psyche speaking to itself in its own language. For Hillman, we can come close to the unconscious with images, but the unconscious itself cannot say what it wants any more than the dead in a mythological underworld can speak, except in a whisper. Just like the underworld, the unconscious is by definition invisible and unknown.

Yet, similar to Tassili n'Ajjer, the mythical geography of the Greek underworld described several rivers. Among these, the river Lethe was said to flow around the cave palace of Hypnos, the god of sleep. Hypnos was the son of Nyx, goddess of the night, and the twin brother of Thanatos, god of death. He was often pictured sitting on a couch of ivory instead of a throne, in his palace surrounded by poppies and other sleep-inducing herbs. Flowing around the cave, the river Lethe was infused with the amnesic power of the god. Drinking its waters of oblivion would lead the dead to forget their previous life as they entered the underworld. In Orphic mystery cults, this forgetting preceded the transition onto a new life

in the cycle of metempsychosis. Upon descending from the plateau, none of the participants were able to recount their experience. And it still remains impossible to describe, as if the journey undid itself, much like the river of unmindfulness and its order to undo memory so as to enable a transfiguration of the soul.



1. Edward Said, "Imaginative Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental." *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.
2. Dragos Simandan: "Proximity, subjectivity and space: Rethinking distance in human geography." *Geoforum* 75 (2016). 249-252.
3. Mark Fisher: *The Weird and the Eerie*. London: Repeater Books, 2017.
4. James Hillman: *The Dream and the Underworld*. Harper Collins, 1979.

Dr. Isabel Valli is a psychiatrist and neuroscientist. She graduated in Medicine at the University of Milan, Italy, trained in Psychiatry in Milan and London, UK, and holds a PhD in Neuroimaging from King's College London. She is currently Marie Curie fellow at the University of Barcelona, Spain, and visiting fellow at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London. Her research uses neuroimaging techniques to study the brain mechanisms involved in the development of psychotic disorders and examines their potential use for the early identification of vulnerable individuals. She has published extensively in high impact journals, presented her work at international conferences, and collaborated with artists in multidisciplinary projects.

Cover and Interior images: Lydia Ourahmane, video still from *Tassili*, 2022. Courtesy the artist.