



NADIA KAABI-LINKE

NO FRILLS

OPENING 22 JAN. 10PM

23 JAN . 11 MAR

After her first show in Portugal, at the Centro de Arte Moderna, Gulbenkian Foundation (Lisbon), in May 2014, Nadia Kaabi-Linke, a Russian-Tunisian artist born 1978 in Tunis, presents her first exhibition at Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art Gallery, also in Lisbon. In "No Frills", the exhibition now shown at the gallery, the artist presents several series of images, drawings, prints, and one sculpture. The serial systematization of the works has a strong temporal aspect opposing the singular and the universal and is made under a perspective that is inscribed in her investigation process. Without the intention of inventorying the historicist models she often recovers in abandoned and forgotten (or censored) archives, the artist examines them without losing track of their political and anthropological meaning at any particular time, but whose historical correlate comprises a time span that includes many issues we face in our daily lives.

In this sense, and concerning the referents she convokes (without being literal) in the visual and plastic expression she employs in her work, this universal dimension of her work is timeless. This procedure opens (to the viewer) a field of possibilities that makes it possible to connect a multiplicity of contemporary realities and meanings with different historical records, associated with human practices that we recognize in the laborious relationship we have with difference, ever present in actions and behaviours based on codes we believe to belong in the past, but that remain present.

On the other hand, and whatever the technique she uses, the works by Nadia Kaabi-Linke are produced with graceful artistry, as is the case of the piece "Stretched Perm" (2014), in which she produces lines introducing her own hair in the printing press. And here we return to how the artist constructs the dialectic relation between the singular and the universal, between what hair means to all humans and her own hair used as a matrix in the printing process. This action is potentially politic in the sense that her body, not being used as the model in a passive and contemplative perspective, is the matter and the register, if we can say so, of the inscription of time in her own existence as a human being and as a woman corporealized in this apparently repeated image, in the succession suggested by the series. However, these images imply another stratification of her work, one that is not limited to a simple action of decontextualization, and chooses to systematize the fragment, extracting it from its unifying context. The piece "Faces" (2014) is a prime example of this practice, revealing the reaffirmation of identity that the individual portrait configures in western tradition. Each image is a portrait almost spectral that preserves a sign of life in the eyes of the depicted South African

natives. Belonging to different ethnic groups, such as the Zulu, Basuto, Matabele, or Swasi, these natives were often uniformed in a group image that was later reproduced in some kind of poster, or in propaganda imagery used in newspapers or travel guides in Britain. These individuals were, however, workers in South African mines and participated in this “mise-en-scene” as performers and hoping to achieve some financial gain with these representations. In this perspective, these natives are part of the propaganda construct that supported the fiction that these South Africans, represented as savages, would become more civilized through the contact with Western culture, religion, and education, glorified in the United Kingdom as agents for civilization and salvation. The images in the piece “Faces”, reproduced with contemporary technology and in high resolution, remain faithful to the original pictures and were not subjected to any kind of photographic manipulation, thus establishing a historical correlate with the form and technique used in the representation of difference.

Nonetheless, in her work the fragment is not only used as a device. It is also a metaphor of memory and presence the dynamic chronicle of an absence, whether factual or interpreted as a social deprivation. “Bicycle” (2015) is a piece that occupies a large area on the gallery wall. Like a vast screen where, in each drawing, graphite signals the shadow of a bicycle a common model of feminine typology parked in a street in Berlin from daybreak to sunset. Also here, the work by Kaabi-Linke reveals a certain uneasiness, a recontextualization of what is factual and inscribed in her work. The bicycle is identifiable, its movement is there, and the fact that it is an urban object, with ecological connotations that today have a strong expression in our culture, is also present in the work. But it is a deferred presence, playing with our relationship with the visual memory of the object that, in this work, is represented by the projection of its shadow, moving under the aegis of the sundial that partitions and conditions our daily lives. The movement of the shadow of this open frame bicycle translates, in the artist's thought, as a metaphor for change and transience an active memory of her country of origin as this analogy with real time corresponds to another transformation: the political and constitutional transition that now in Tunisia materializes in the women's struggle for autonomy against an Islamic system.

As we can see in the sculpture “No one harms me unpunished” (2012), these and other issues propose a political dimension of her work that is not shied away from any topic or power structures that somehow, and independently of their historical time, affect and determine our human condition. Because of this, the political dimension of Nadia Kaabi-Linke's work singles out and identifies symbols and customs that represent acts of resistance or oppression. An ethical stance that reveals the contradictions and inversions of meaning in the historical construction of the world we live in. As we face “No one harms me unpunished” we are confronted with a sculpture in which we apparently recognize a bed made from narrative sediments we can trace back to other eras, but are at the same time symbolically present in their meaning. They are stories of war between Vikings and Scots, but also the thorns of the crown worn by Jesus on the cross. The basic structure of this sculpture, tangled wire supporting a mattress, entails a reflection on the objects we recognize from our first days, such as the bed, place of rest, of love, or of death. This bed can be the space of what is to be, a space that in its formal beauty can be rediscovered as the place for thought, a place where to reflect on the sociocultural transformations in progress in our ever changing and acculturating societies.

In the work by Nadia Kaabi-Linke, history is a precarious and transient membrane that unveils our ways of life, confronting us with them and with their possible use as symbols of submission, repression, or resistance.

João Silvério
January 2015