

PRESS RELEASE

Mouna Karray

همهمة

Murmurer

7 – 30 January 2011

Forgotten Walls or the Poetry of Urban Cicatrices

Mouna Karray photographs 'walls', abandoned architectural barriers, to be more precise, which continue to surface in the cityscape of Sfax, the biggest industrial town and seaport in the South of Tunisia.

In the last four decades public places in Sfax have gradually become non-accessible areas without any function. Curiously, places appear and disappear, but their borders are still standing ..., the artist, who herself is a native of Sfax, describes the scenario.

Built primarily to protect and conceal, these barricades lose their credibility when decayed, dilapidated or partially demolished and remain squalid scars on the surface of the city.

But stop! Are these images really so unattractive? Don't these black & white photographs with the auspicious title "Murmurer" ('mur' means wall and 'murmurer' whispering in French) appeal in a certain way? There is something special about them, something captivating, an enchanting spirit, a wavering of the walls, a murmuring, and a promise of hidden adventure. The mystery that lies behind these discouraging and dismissive walls extends an invitation to peep behind the partitions or even to scale them.

(...)

Aesthetization of Wounded Walls

Mouna Karray's photographs are documentary in nature. By portraying urban unconcern the artist explores political and social circumstances. There is no tone of accusation instead, her photographs bear a message of resolution. The decayed condition of the walls even evokes hope, which is visualized by open doors, heavy cracks in the masonry, ripped up fences or a flight of steps.

The pure aesthetics of the black and white photography of Mouna Karray, who studied in Tunisia and Japan, softens the harsh reality and blurs the immediacy of the issue. Time seems to stand still in her pictures.

Minimalism combined with a strong, conceptual composition of horizontals and verticals makes viewing Mouna Karray's art work a poetic experience. In one image the loosely coiled barbed wire takes on scriptorial character. Dramatic cloud formations and the desolate condition of the walls radiate melancholy and transience. Choosing the square as the leading format – also a mechanical result of her medium format camera – refers to the Muslim concept of aesthetics wherein the square is the foundation. *Everything takes place in the square, the whole form, the letters*

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*(Kufic), Mekka is a square, the courtyard of a house is square.*¹ A crucial step Mouna Karray's artistic development is the curtailment of the scene. Seeing only a précis version, a detail of the whole structure, the real dimensions are lost to the viewer. Only one picture in the series provides an indication of the actual height of the wall. Herein a shadowy denizen flits by, while a spindly citrus tree casts an impressive cloud onto the massive wall.

It was the absurdness, the pointlessness of these architectural sites, which caught my attention. The not-knowing, what is going to happen to them? Will they be continued or will they be demolished within the nearest future? From the beginning I was fascinated by the stories the walls seem to whisper to me and by the question for their former purpose. Some of them have faced alterations with time, doors or windows were added, some of them were filled again provisionally with debris. The traces of time mark them like scars.

It is their status being a mistake, which suits me, reveals the photographer in an interview with the author.²

When the French theorist, Roland Barthes, questions what it was 'per se', that differentiates one photograph in a community of images,³ he appoints the 'force of attraction' as the leading thread in his research: *A photograph which I distinguish from others, which I love [...] generates an inner state of excitement, a celebration, as well as labour, the pressure of the unutterable, that wants to be uttered. What else then? Interest? No, that's not enough.* Finally the term 'adventure' was identified as the closest term for describing the 'force of attraction', as the reason why one photo reaches somebody (m'advient), while the other does not. Later Barthes juxtaposes this 'attraction' with 'animation'. The good photograph 'pricks' or 'bruises' the viewer, inspires and animates the thinking process: and therein lies the adventure.⁴

Looking at Mouna Karray photographs is an expedition. A quick glance upon them is not enough to appreciate the intricate composition. Exploring layer upon layer opens up a myriad of questions, some of them never to be answered. The 'force of attraction' of Mouna Karray's "Murmurer" series is not only fed by the complexity of its contents and sublime symbolism but in particular by the poetry of its black and white imagery. Mouna Karray's sensitive photographer's eye and her systematic and personal way of composing an image convert the blemishes into beauty.

¹ Nacer Khemir, Chapter 7.

² Mouna Karray, Interview with the author, La Marsa, Tunisia, 22. October 2009

³ Roland Barthes, *Die helle Kammer: Bemerkungen zur Photographie*, 1980, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989, 11, English translation by the author.

⁴ Barthes, 28–29.

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*When I love a photo, when it disturbs me, I dwell on it,*⁵ continues Roland Barthes in his Reflections on Photography.

By Christine Bruckbauer

⁵ Barthes, 110.