

Cécile Bourne-Farrell interviewed Zineb Sedira, on Thursday November 27, 2019 in the artist's studio, in Brixton, London.

Born in Paris, Zineb Sedira lives in London and works between Algiers, Paris and London. Her work focuses on social and political developments in modern societies and questions of displacement and memory in contemporary history. Stressing his particular interest in archives and for the collection, recording and transmission of stories, his work has often been identified with post-colonial issues and in particular with his family history.

Zineb Sedira is selected to represent France at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2021. Her work has been presented in several solo exhibitions at the Jeu de Paume (Paris, 2019), at the IVAM-Institut Valencià d'Art Modern (Spain, 2019), at the Beirut Art Center (Lebanon, 2018), the Sharjah Art Foundation Art Spaces (EAU, 2018), Art On the Underground (London, 2016), the Blaffer Art Museum (Houston, 2013), the Charles H Scott Gallery (Vancouver, 2013), the Prefix - Institute of Contemporary Art (Toronto, 2010), the [mac] Musée d'Art Contemporain de Marseille (2010), the Palais de Tokyo (Paris, 2010), the Kunsthalle Nikolaj (Copenhagen, 2010), BildMuseets (Sweden, 2010), Pori Art Museum (Finland, 2009), New Art Exchange (Nottingham, 2009), Wapping Project (London, 2008) and at Photographer's Gallery (London, 2006).

As part of the new edition of Arts Cabinet on migration, I am conducting a series of interviews with artists around sugar as a common vector around the history of slavery and its contemporary relationships. Many contemporary artists have treated this subject contingent on slavery, the environment and its economic challenges of yesterday and today.

The personal exhibition of Zineb Sedira "L'Espace d'un Instant" [1] at Jeu de Paume in Paris is a magnificent perspective on our time of emergence, some of the works presented resonate with this subject that holds me at heart, sugar. Zineb Sedira takes a unique look at this commodity which has enriched [2] many generations for the benefit of others whatever the geographies and traces that these grains of cane carry within them which also speak of the color of the skin. Sugar is also grains, like sand. The Tuareg who have so much difficulty defending their place and the recognition of their culture, say that "sand is the representation of memory", let's talk about it.

1 / The first time I saw your work in 2003, it was about the *Djinns*. The evocation of *Djinns* already initiated the idea of showing what is not visible. Is this not an introduction to any work of art, any project of the imagination and of personal and collective memory. In the video installation entitled "The end of the Road", produced in 2010, you put us in situations where we have the possibility of looking between the cars reduced to scrapping, where there are gaps. Everyone can find their story there, the one we want to find there, I see pierced bodies, crossed shapes....

*Memory is my ghost of mine, it is one of the contestable, contested things. "The end of the Road", 2010, filmed in Kent refers to a large presence of disappearance. The ghosts and human beings in this video are for me a metaphor for death. The deaths of all these immigrants in a boat, like that of the 29 Vietnamese in a truck a few weeks ago. Today, it is no longer just deaths in boats, it goes far beyond. At the same time, in this work there is death linked to ecology, which refers to the hyper consumerism of the means of transport especially cars in the context of this piece. Slavery*

2 / What is interesting in this video is that you show the transformation, the process, the Nature that comes back to the environment.

*It is especially reminiscent of the Nature that returns, especially in Muslim cemeteries, because we have very few tombstones. We often have plants and trees growing in the grave itself, like the elements of cars passing through people's bodies.*

3 / I also found in the way of filming that you were on the ground, which means that we are this accumulation of strata of cars, these same geological strata that we find in work around sugar, for me it's the same visual information report. How did this sugar story come about?

*I was contacted in 2012/2013 to do a project within the framework of Marseille Capital of Culture of Europe. I had been designated the port of Marseille, except that I believe they wanted me to operate Marseille as a port but also as a 'twin sister' of Algiers, around the French Exodus, around the colonization. I wanted to move on to something else, because I had already made a work "Transmitting in the abyss" around a photographic archive of a Marseille photographer. These two very different works come together through the port and this story of mobility and boat travel.*

*While visiting the place, I was disappointed because obviously the port of Marseille before the 60s and 70s was something alive, the port activities were more energetic and intense by its vibrant colors (fruit, vegetables & loose sugar) but also it was noisy (cattle transport, workers screaming from the top of the ships). By cons in the 2010s, there are few of these market activities! The only place I found interesting was the Saint-Louis sugar silo by the sea (the refinery factory being in the center of the city) and which I believe has been closed since. So I decided to explore this place, not only visually, but also its captivating smell.*

*So I went there several times and depending on the times when I arrived the silo was full or empty. In both cases, it was visually magical and very inspiring. Depending on the age of the sugar it becomes more and more white, so it looks more and more like sand, mountains, territory. Depending on the destination (provenance), the color varies, which is reminiscent of the analogy with the desert, the land or the color of the skin. I immediately understood that it was necessary to film in the room and in analogy to emphasize / accentuate the grains of sugar and their colors as well as the traces / testimonies written on the walls. The photos produced are of high quality and allowed me to create 'monumental' prints.*

5 / What is the origin and size of these mountains of sugar, it's so huge?

*In order to show the difference in sugars, I made a sort of sampling of the different types of unrefined sugars. A selection of the countries appearing there are Zambia, the Antilles, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Guadeloupe, Guyana, Madagascar, Swaziland, Reunion ... Here we have the sugar of Guadeloupe for example which is clear. This sampling contrasts with the monumentality of the silo and speaks above all of the question of the color of the skin and the samples on the ground to know its composition and its fertility potential. This work talks about migration, mobility and slavery. You can't talk about cane sugar without talking about slavery. In this silo, a significant amount of sugar is imported from countries in South America.*

6 / I wanted to talk about these magnificent anchors and propellers again? There is a kind of tenderness in these objects which is very particular (cf. Meret Oppenheim, object in fur), in the dichotomy evoked by these two forms?

*I wanted to create functional objects, an anchor and a propeller produced with the sugar found in the silo. These two objects are of real size, copied on a scale of one. The propeller is a metaphor for movement, crossing, traveling while the anchor represents the halt, the stopover, the stillness. But these objects also appear as precious figures due to their fragile and 'precious' appearance reminding that in the past sugar was a rare and luxurious commodity: a currency of exchange....*

8 / In your images, the walls seem to transpire from their own history?

*Yes, it speaks of slavery and travel even if this silo dates from the 70s. We can actually observe the traces of sugar stored for several decades and those of the wheels of backhoe loaders which transport the sugar, scrape the material, creating 'memorial' traces on the walls. By examining these brands, we can see the movement and history of sugar as well as its different origins.*

9 / What is interesting is the light on the grain, it is almost cosmetic.

*Yes, formally the sugar in my photos evokes a certain fragility, despite the mass represented, a mountain, a geological strata of materials. Here the photographs are metaphors for the land, the territory, cartography and geopolitics.*

10 / Saint-Louis is a huge industry, compared to England did you have the opportunity to research sugar here too?

*The port of Marseilles was after that of Liverpool the largest port of slavery and importation of sugar. I'm preparing the Liverpool biennial, and so I've already looked a bit into the activity of the port. I will exhibit this sugar project at the Open Eye Gallery on the harbor. Tate & Lyle are major English importers based between London and Liverpool and have a problematic history with the English colonies and slavery. I have to examine this history in relation to French colonial history.*

11 / We all know that the Tate has built its empire on sugar. It is very easy to find that Mr. Tate Leye [3], this entrepreneur (whose business still exists [4]) built the building, gave a background and works at the beginning of this institution....

*At this stage I have done only summary research on the subject, but we all know that Liverpool was the port of importation of slaves in England. Suddenly, the city expressed a symbolic forgiveness for this slavery. What should be done everywhere and elsewhere has not been done in France!*

*Speaking of institution and œ works, I would like mine to be exposed at the Beirut Art Center in November 2018. We had pasted the images on colored walls. Depriving the photographs of their frames (and glasses) by sticking them to the same walls transmits another reality or fiction ... I would like the audience to be in strong relation with my monumental images by immersing themselves there ... As for the anchor and the propeller I expose them sometimes separate, it depends on the exhibition spaces. Sometimes intertwined, or separated, like here in*

*Dubai. I like to initiate a kind of dichotomy between stability and movement that these two forms evoke.*

*Finally, there are obviously still many negatives that I have not exploited ... pending ... like the crystallization of sugar on the structures of the silo which also speaks to me ...*

London, December 2019

[1] <http://www.jeudepaume.org/?page=article&idArt=3419>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/29/slavery-abolition-compensation-when-will-britain-face-up-to-its-crimes-against-humanity>

[3] <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/history-tate>

[4] <https://www.tateandlylesugars.com>