

MAP

FOR ARTIST-LED PUBLISHING AND PRODUCTION

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SEARCH

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THE YOU IN US

Kylie Gilchrist reviews Lydia Ourahmane's
solo exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery,
London, 26 January - 25 March



Lydia Ourahmane, *In the Absence of our Mothers* (2018). Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London. Photo Andy Keate

The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but

that they remember only the photographs... Narratives make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us.' [1]

This insight from Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* articulates a key concern of Lydia Ourahmane's *The you in us*. In this new commission and first London solo exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery, Ourahmane extends her ongoing inquiry into the intersection of individual and collective histories, emerging from the personal context of her home town of Oran, Algeria. In place of images that shock and enthrall, or trouble us with the politics of witnessing, the artist invites our imagination to undertake its productive work. Reconceiving the form of storytelling in the present day, *The you in us* conveys the complexities of global migration, colonial histories and the violence of national borders, while deftly circumventing the spectacular economy of image production that accompanies, and even drives, these phenomena.

The you in us begins with contact. We must press our way through weighty double doors to reach the exhibition. These are, in fact, the work, 'Doors' (2018), made of solid, sulfur-blackened silver. They not only demand our interaction but also record it: each visitor's touch wears the sulfur, restoring the metal's sterling sheen. They mark this threshold as a moment of passage and, as we imprint our fingertips on their bituminous surface, perform memory work. While their dark and cumbersome presence strikes an ominous, perhaps mournful note, their silver glint also suggests latent transformation.



Lydia Ourahmane, *Doors* (2018). Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London. Photo Andy Keate

'Doors' opens onto a tenebrous expanse, dimly lit and nearly empty. In

the absence of images and objects, the resonant waves of Ourahmane's sound installation 'Paradis' (2018) saturate the space. Amidst low thrums and drones, this hour-long audio work intersperses bursts of daily life and speech in Arabic and French, collected from field recordings made by Ourahmane in Oran, with subtly melodic interludes composed and performed by the artist and friends. Sounds of road traffic and boat travel are layered in moments of transition. The pulsing tones emanate from amplifiers in various corners and cascade through the gallery's temporary parquet floor, installed at a slight elevation to house speakers below. These produce full-body tremors when one happens to resound underfoot. 'Paradis' invites us to explore and linger in this complex soundscape, somatically registering the conjuncture of the varied rhythms and seemingly distant places.

In her interview with Chisenhale curator Ellen Grieg, Ourahmane notes that 'Paradis' was born of conversations with young men in Oran, after seeing them lingering on street corners for hours on end. Their unoccupied time suggests one manifestation of the economic crisis driving widespread migration—as the artist further describes, numerous Oran youth readily discuss their plans to emigrate and 100,000 Algerians claimed European asylum in 2017 alone. [2] 'Paradis' evokes this intricate geopolitical context by conjoining temporalities of idleness and travel, both voluntary and imposed. It compels us to revalue the assumed passivity of waiting as an act of attentive listening—and one that inextricably implicates us as embodied participants. Relating the experience of travel to that of narrative transmission, 'Paradis' reconceives forms of oral tradition and attunes us to the heterogeneity of collective histories. The soundscape thus offers a mode of knowledge that is qualitatively different from than the violent seizure of conceptual thought; and with it, indicates possible sites for resistance and recuperation. [3]



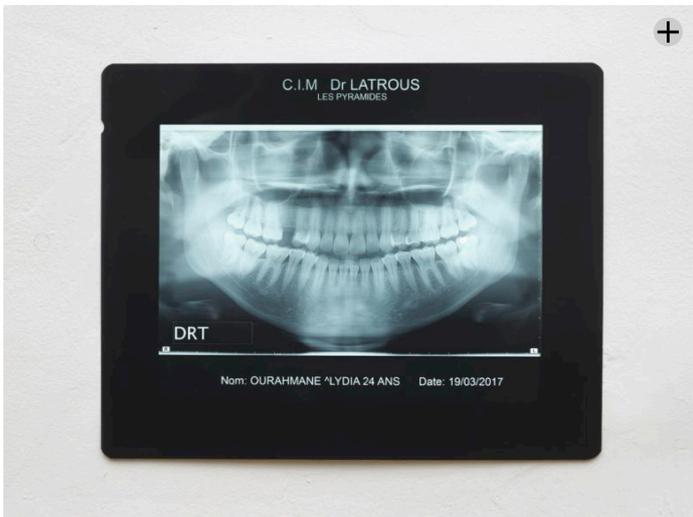
Lydia Ourahmane, *Paradis* (2018). Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London. Photo: Andy Keate.

Traversing the gallery, we find two additional works discretely installed on its far wall. In a simple wall-mounted vitrine, 'Droit de Sang (Blood Right)' (2018) presents documents including a military conscription card from 1933, a French passport from 1954, and proof of participation in the Algerian Revolution (dated from 1969), each belonging to the artist's grandfather Tayeb Ourahmane. A sheet of wall text connects this work to the second with a chronicle of familial history and recent encounters. Tayeb Ourahmane, it explains, was born under French colonial rule and conscripted to serve the empire's army at a young age. Drafted to fight in World War II, he resisted by removing all of his teeth and successfully rendered himself unfit for further military service. He would go on to participate in Algeria's war for independence by smuggling arms and sheltering wounded fighters.



Lydia Ourahmane, *Droit de Sand (Blood Right)*, 2018. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London. Photo: Andy Keate.

The adjacent work, ‘In the Absence of Our Mothers’ (2015–18), revives the story in the present day. This evolving piece includes an x-ray scan of the artist’s mouth and two identical gold teeth—one delicately protruding from the wall and the second, we are informed, implanted in her jaw. [4] The tooth was produced from a gold necklace Ourahmane purchased in 2015, from a young man in Oran who claimed to be selling it for his mother. As its €300 price matched that charged by traffickers for passage to Europe, Ourahmane suspected the man truly intended to emigrate.



Lydia Ourahmane, *In the Absence of our Mothers* (2018). Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London. Photo: Andy Keate.

With this alchemical substitution, Ourahmane illuminates the economic underpinnings of global migration—both European dependency on low-cost labour and the industrial complex of human trafficking—and roots it within an extensive history of colonial exploitation. [5] At the same time, she points to alternate forms of value and circuits of exchange as sites of contestation, in which political agency can be claimed. These include black markets where her grandfather traded arms and young people gain funds to pursue their escape. They also include intimate networks of personal affiliation, expanded beyond the closed circuit of kinship—as Ourahmane indicates by redressing her grandfather’s dental extraction with the insertion of a tooth made from the possession of a man who is related not by blood but a shared place, problematics and desires.

Lastly, they include the dissemination of stories. We could conceive Ourahmane’s sonic transmission as a form of cinema without images—

inviting us to reconstruct these tales in the inner theatre of our minds, she activates both the empathy borne of sharing an embodied condition, and the link between our memory of the past and anticipation of what lies ahead. In a world where 'you' and 'I' only exist, Ourahmane provides a space for imagining what 'us' could be.

Kylie Gilchrist is a London-based writer and editor. She also works with the nonprofit [Art Resources Transfer](#)

[1] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004). References that follow engage with the [Reading List](#) developed by Ourahmane and the Chisenhale to accompany the exhibition

[2] Lydia Ourahmane, interviewed by Ellen Greig. [Chisenhale Interviews](#) ed. Polly Staple. 19 January, 2018

[3] Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* poses a contrast between two modes of understanding: the appropriative form of comprehension (in French and English, based on the Latin root of 'prendre', or 'to take'), versus that of *donner-avec*, translated as 'gives-on-and-with'). The latter is appropriate to the ethico-political concept of 'relation' that Glissant advocates as mode of being with others and in the world. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997)

[4] An earlier iteration of 'In the absence of our mothers' was presented at Ellis King (Dublin) in 2015.

[5] On the industry of migration, see Ruben Andersson, *Illegality, Inc.: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2014)

FAMILY / POLITICS

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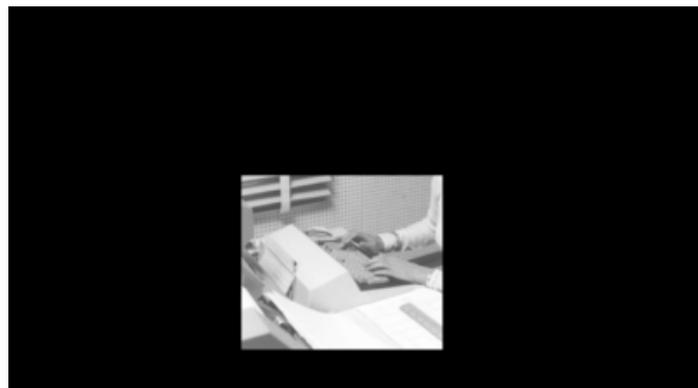
IN THE SHADOW OF THE HAND : OBJECT 4A

A collaborative project by Sarah Forrest and Virginia Hutchison

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IN THE SHADOW OF THE HAND : OBJECT 4B

A collaborative project by Sarah Forrest and Virginia Hutchison



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QUIET HEAT: AN INTRODUCTION

Dave Young introduces 'Quiet Heat: Archive Machines and War Fever'. Commissioned as part of 'Footnoting the Archive', and produced using research conducted during a remote residency at the Artist Run Data Center, run by Servus in Linz, Austria, in late 2015. The extended text is hosted by the Artist Run Data Centre and accessible at quietheat.dvyng.com

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