



Dawit L. Petros, *Nearness and distance constitute a position*, Nouakchott, Mauritania, 2016, archival color pigment prints. Courtesy of the artist and Tiwani Contemporary, London.

Dawit Petros at Artspace

CRISTINA ALBU on January 9, 2017 at 10:44 AM

Offering multiple vantage points on the fraught histories of migration and modernity, Dawit Petros's photographs and video works invite reflection on the visible and invisible borders that separate us from others. *The Stranger's Notebook* exhibition at the H&R Block Artspace in Kansas City presents meaningful glimpses into the artist's 13-month journey across countries in North-Western Africa and Western Europe. This nomadic experience prompted Petros to explore the deeply interwoven past and present histories of migration. Wary of dichotomies that reinforce hierarchical relations between cultures, the artist combines allusions to the arrival of European settlers to Africa with references to recent waves of immigrants crossing the Mediterranean space.

Photographs of young men supporting oblong mirror panels on their shoulders or holding up images denotative of 19th century migration conceal individual identities constructed on cultural thresholds and direct one's attention to shared histories that surpass national affiliations.



Dawit L. Petros, Untitled (Prologues), Nouadhibou, Mauritania, 2016, archival color pigment prints. Courtesy of the artist and Tiwani Contemporary, London.

The human figures that appear in Petros's works are often engaged in acts of active observation, having their faces disguised or turned away from the potentially objectifying gaze of the viewer. His carefully staged visual compositions share aesthetic affinities with Kader Attia's photographs of the shores of Algiers and Isaac Julien's triptych video installations evocative of colonial and postcolonial entanglements. Petros masterfully juggles with shifting degrees of distance and proximity to subvert the fixity of visual representation and convey the destabilizing experience of moving between multiple territories.

The existence of migrants seems to unfold between the coordinates of the sea and the desert, two contrasting geographical and symbolical markers that speak to the transgression of boundaries and the liminal condition of nomads. The experience of precariousness is at the core of two sets of photographs, which display intensely colored fabric bundles that twist and turn in the air over the ripples of the sea or the striated surface of the sand dunes. Strategically positioned on two facing walls, these works speak to the permeability of boundaries and the fluidity of relations to others. The animated bundles hovering above the horizon or plunging into the abyss powerfully convey the unpredictability and hazards of migrant life. They are made of headscarves the artist collected from different African territories throughout his travels. The gestural language of morphing fabric evokes both hope and despair in a more visceral manner than if Petros had chosen to direct the camera lens to the actual movements of migrants.



Dawit Petros, *The Green March (Beyond the conclusive logic of monumentality)*, Tamougrite, Morocco, 2016, archival color pigment prints. Courtesy of artist and Tiwani Contemporary, London.

Petros's video works also build on poetic visual metaphors and suggest that cultural differences can only be preserved and enriched if identities are not inscribed in rigid categories. Infused with Édouard Glissant's thinking on the right to opacity, they do not fully disclose the personal narratives of protagonists portrayed, but introduce the viewer to somewhat ambiguous scenarios, which obliquely point to historical and geographical coordinates. In *The Shop* (2016), a sewing machine with a prominent "Bright" trademark appears to embody the ideals of the Enlightenment while its quickly revolving wheel hints at the juggernaut of modernity. The face of the tailor using it is never fully revealed, the interplay of light and shadow purposefully maintaining opacity. Similarly, the scenes in *The Forms of Passage* (2016), a three-channel video work shown on the upper floor of the gallery, play upon perceptual ambiguity to connote a sense of irrevocable distance and impede immediate access to the representation of migrant experience.

Petros takes this obliqueness one step further in his audio installations located at the very end of the exhibition. Progressively limiting the viewers' access to concrete visual evidence, he eventually asks them to sit down and listen to the voices of migrants speaking in Arabic, English, and French about the need for openness towards others and the multiple modes in which geographical spaces come to shape cultural concepts and social attitudes. The gradual shift from visual markers of border transgression to abstract motifs of migrant bodies, and eventually to audio recordings of reflections on nomadic life in the desert is conducive to a deepening feeling of intimacy. Through imaginative allusions to displacement and intersecting cultural histories, Petros compels us to relinquish a fixed vantage point upon the world and embrace ourselves the condition of strangers.

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