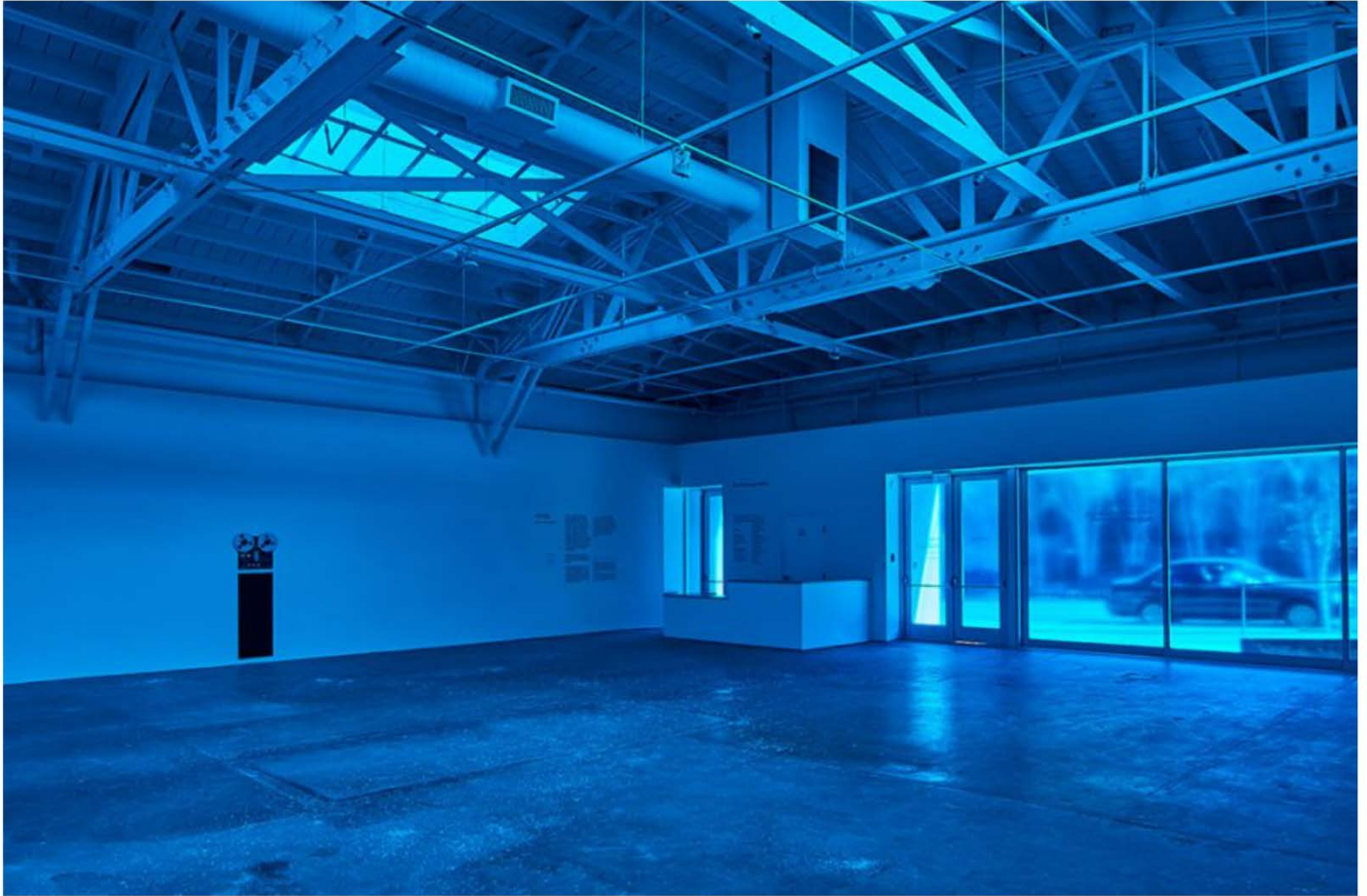


Lydia Ourahmane @ CCA Wattis

MARCH 2, 2020

by Dore Bowen



Installation view: Solar Cry

Solar Cry, the first solo exhibition in the United States by Algerian artist Lydia Ourahmane, creates an immersive environment made from parts that do not fully dissolve into the indigo blue light emanating from the gallery's skylight and front windows. It consists of two rooms. The first and largest features blue light combined with a sound collage: first and foremost, a woman's voice wobbling between notes, which emanates from two reel-to-reel tape decks embedded in opposing walls. It mixes with the intermittent sound of salt crystals grinding against the cement floor as you move

through the space. The only object in the room is a pedestal upon which sits a 42-page, single-spaced text: far more than any visitor will likely read.

The second room features small Polaroid photographs of geological formations and prehistoric paintings from the artist's journey to the Tassili N'Ajjer region in the Algerian Sahara desert. At the far end of the room, a section of the outward-facing wall has been removed and placed face down, struts up. The Hebrew [Aleph-null symbol](#) has been scraped into the exposed cement foundation underneath. Nearby, an immense video projection shows close-up views of the artist's arm receiving a tattoo of a female warrior with exaggerated breasts and a shield—a 12,000-year-old figure found by the artist in Tassili N'Ajjer. Nearby, in a semi-concealed alcove, a metal detector buzzes incessantly, its sensing mechanism wild from having locked onto one gram of gold, set into the cement floor. The journey through the exhibition ends here.



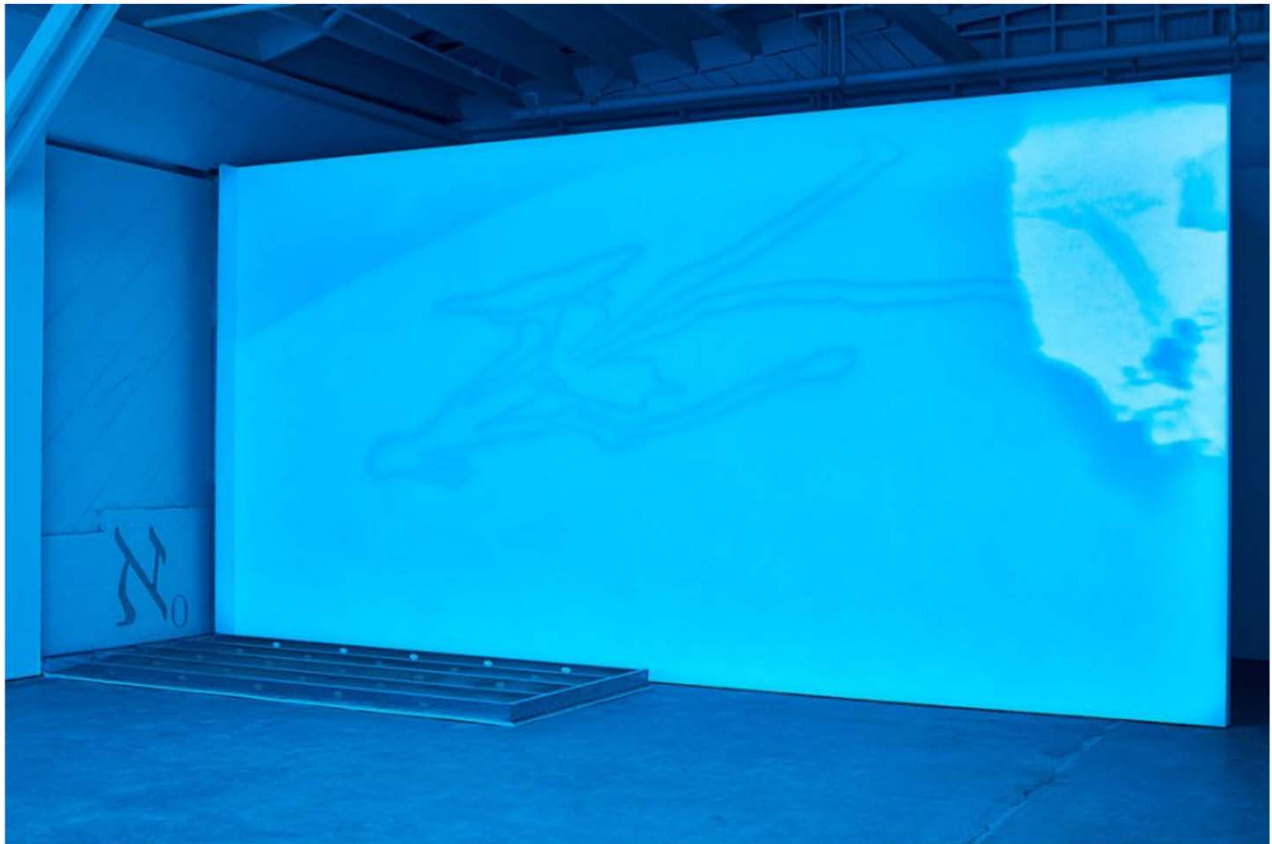
Neolithic Tumulus c.6,000-12,000 b.c., 2020; Cave painting of a Woman giving birth c.6,000-12,000 b.c., 2020; both Polaroid 3 ¾" x 4 ¼"

Returning to the first room, past a dividing wall that shakes with sub-decibel vibrations, the viewer finds, again, the pedestal with its text. It is an autobiography by the artist's mother—a thrilling story that stretches from Malaysia and Britain to Algeria, from girlhood to parenthood, highlighting her Christian belief in miracles and wonders, despite difficult circumstances and her fragile status in Algeria. It contains many exclamation marks.

What to make of all this? In her previous exhibitions, Ourahmane unites the fractured shards of her family story by foregrounding her bodily relationship

to history. The show *In the Absence of Our Mothers* (2018), commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, for example, references the artist's paternal grandfather, who, we are told, pulled all his teeth out to avoid conscription into the French army during WWII. In response to this story, the artist acquired a gold chain from a street vendor, bought for the "approximate fee charged by traffickers at the time for a place in a boat migrating to Europe," and melted it down into two gold teeth—one of which she had implanted in her mouth, the other mounted in the gallery. Through this ritual, Ourahmane connected to her grandfather, and to countless other migrants looking for a way out of the region.

In the Absence of Our Mothers suggests that the gaps in recorded history can be filled with a quantity of gold, a powerful imagination and a good story. In *Solar Cry*, however, there is no satisfactory embodiment of history; even tattooing, an act that parallels the insertion of the gold tooth, is presented as a spectacle, with an oversized, projected image that bleeds to the edges of the wall. No rocks or rubble from the caves.



warrior girl c.12,000 b.c., 2020; Single-channel digital video, sound; 3:44 min

No skin. No blood. No material evidence is offered except by way of two tape decks, photographs, a video, a sub-decibel recording, a metal detector, salt and a text. Highlighting the role that media, technology and translation play in this exhibition, the curatorial essay by Anthony Huberman is in both Arabic and English, as is the exhibition's title, and comes punctuated by text boxes from the artist, as if she were texting the author missives as he writes. Despite this, Huberman states that the artist is ultimately interested in how belief is registered on the body. He concludes by arguing that the exhibition enables listening, rather than speaking. "Listening impacts the body....without being mediated by language, logic, or anything else, it touches the body and makes it move." He writes that by activating listening, as well as silence and the unintelligible, the exhibition makes unmediated communion possible, and "we vibrate together."

Indeed, the gallery feels like a prehistoric chapel, complete with choir and ritual body modification. Yet, the exhibition also pushes back against the idea of faith, at least the blind faith espoused by the artist's mother. The Aleph-null sign scraped into the cement foundation behind the gallery wall means, according to mathematician Georg Cantor, that infinity takes many forms, and, while seemingly boundless,

it can be measured. Likewise, the artist asks viewers to seek another kind of faith—not the immeasurable faith of miracles and mercy expressed in the text, but faith in something more ancient and cruel, what Georges Bataille calls the "solar cry." Thus, rather than putting a gold tooth in her mouth to make the miraculous more real, Ourahmane creates an environment in which the miraculous becomes unreal; it fades out, like a photograph, like a recording of a human voice, like gold mixed in concrete, like the sound of grinding salt mixed with recorded chanting. Tellingly, the text on the pedestal is crudely printed and situated in low light. Perhaps the artist is afraid it will speak too loudly. Yet, while it is difficult to embrace the tenor of this text's miraculous accounting, there may be answers here to the empty riddles posed in the exhibition...a Christian safe house in Muslim-majority Algeria...the challenge of work and marriage....and forbidden fruits given by God to those who wait. But, the artist refuses this call, a call from a mother to her daughter, so that other kinds of faith might be revealed.

In the midst of such ethereal chaos, the curatorial essay serves as an anchor to the exhibition. It expresses the artist's ideas, and, in the process, these ideas become like polished stones, like stories that, told many times, blend fact and rumor. Huberman writes, for example, that on her journey to the desert:

the artist learned that the area had once been a route for trade between Algeria and Niger, where fathers would sell their sons for the price of three kilos of salt—as the story goes. Today, people go there with metal detectors and search the sand for lost gold.



Tin Merzouga, 2020; Polaroid; 3 3/4" x 4 1/4"

This narrative situates elements in the gallery (salt, metal, detector) in the context of historical maxim while implicitly underscoring the difference between Ourahmane and other artists making immersive art today, such as Olafur Elliason. Yet, the historical inferences made in this exhibition are

partial. The artist is cautious about giving too much information, and, in the end, we are left with effects and tall tales. The intimate stories suggested by the sounds, images, words, light, and vibrations dangle like threads in what feels like a wide blue sea. Still, one imagines they might one day drift down to the floor en masse and settle into a comprehensible form, if not another kind of faith.

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Lydia Ourahmane: "Solar Cry" @ [CCA Wattis Institute of Contemporary Arts](#) through March 28, 2020.

About the author:

[Dore Bowen](#), PhD, writes about art. Her monograph Bruce Nauman: Spatial Encounters, co-authored with Constance M. Lewallen, was published by the University of California Press in 2019. She also publishes in journals, including Art in America, Culture et Musées, Afterimage, and Invisible Culture. Currently, she is completing a book on the diorama and another on queer feminist appropriation. She is currently Associate Professor of Art History and Visual Culture at San José State University and can be found online by clicking [here](#).