

Silvie
Defraoui

The Tremor
of Certitude

10.3.2023 –
21.5.2023


Exhibition
Guide

MUSÉE CANTONAL DES
BEAUX-ARTS LAUSANNE



The exhibition *Le tremblement des certitudes* [The Tremor of Certitude] offers an overview of the past thirty years of work by a major figure on the Swiss art scene. In her work, Silvie Defraoui (*1935, St. Gallen) questions our relationship to images and the way they mediatize reality. She invites us to see the impermanence of the present as one of the conditions of human experience. Cut-up and reassembled photographs, videos that are screened on the wall, on the floor or on salt, paintings on canvas, and neon lights bring together texts, symbols, and graphic elements, like a rich trove of clues from which we can rethink the narratives of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

All of Silvie Defraoui's output is part of the jointly created the *Archives du futur* [Archives of the Future], which she founded in 1975 with Chérif Defraoui and to which she has added on her own since 1994, the year her partner passed away. Like a network of ideas, this corpus forms a long commentary on questions concerning image, memory, history, and the connections between space and time. "*Archives du futur* means looking at the present to know what tomorrow is going to be made of," as the artist points out. For what is peculiar to the present moment is indeed that it is always in motion. It is forever weakening our certainties and demanding a constant reevaluation of the stories, images, and motifs making it up.

This guide is an introduction to the artworks featured in the show. Visitors, however, are free to create their own order for touring the exhibition. Groups of works that have been singled out for commentary are indicated on the label by the pictogram .

Destinations and Indices de variation

Destinations (1994-1995) is a piece grounded in the work of collecting words and images. Postcards representing landscapes, ornaments, or monuments offering viewers impressions of travels in Egypt are brought together in a single frame. Using collage and superimposing motifs that go back millenniums, Silvie Defraoui recomposes new landscapes that are subjective and fragmentary – they are the landscapes of memory. The piece is displayed as a frieze on the wall. The frames making it up, arranged on two levels, form two horizon lines. They are arranged with a regularity that suggests ornamentation while inviting us to read them on two levels, i.e., as image on the upper line, and writing in the frames of the lower line. These texts reproduce the names of geographic localities in Egypt that exist. Yet despite that reality, they do not refer to the places depicted in the postcards positioned above them.

On the walls opposite *Destinations*, four photographs from the series *Indices de variation* ([Signs of Change], 2001-2002) make the notion of time an integral part of the image thanks to a subtle manipulation. Ripples – those of a wrinkled piece of cloth – slip into the photograph of a place or town that is in the process of being transformed, suggesting its imperceptible metamorphosis over time.

Dans le cadre des histoires...

In each iteration of this series, a monochrome image of vegetation is cut off by geometrically shaped frames, which are themselves arranged on the wall like the different elements forming an ornamental motif. The center of this image features a black-and-white photograph that conjures up a personal memory for the artist. And cut up in this way, the central image is hard to piece back together mentally. It escapes us just as the recollection of a moment is disrupted and confused by impressions, the passage of time, or a faulty memory obliterating it. *Dans le cadre des histoires...* ([Within the Frame of Stories], 1996-1999) reminds us that our perception of the world and its representation are always fragmentary and even limited by a frame – the frame imposed by the elements in a motif, our way of seeing things, a form, the memory itself. With this piece, Silvie Defraoui likewise returns to the origin of forms, which in every age and in all cultures have been inspired by plants and nature.

Poème and Echo

Because they figure among the most ancient images of humanity, ornament and motif are found at the heart of Silvie Defraoui's work. The artist has long been interested in the decorative nature of writing, the letters of which, because they are so often read, are no longer seen for what they are as well, namely, signs and symbols. In *Poème* ([Poem], 2000), letters assume once again their character as image. Here, a verse by the American-born English poet T.S. Eliot evoking the dissembling nature of shadows, can no longer be read; it is viewed. Laid out on fifteen canvas paintings and cut along a horizontal line that erases the lower third of each letter, the writing is returned to the domain of geometry and ornament.

On the same wall and positioned high up, the neon piece *Echo. Sombras electricas II* ([Echo. Electric Shadows II], 2009) adds relief to transform the look of the letters spelling the word "echo." It can only be read from one precise point of view. The letters are distorted as the reader moves with respect to that point, stretching and modifying both the script forming the word and the word's immediate original meaning.

Faits et gestes

The series *Faits et gestes* ([Facts and Gestures], 2009-2014) contrasts two realities. On the one hand, there is the reality of current events and disastrous world news, whose images come to and at us daily and at such a rate they end up becoming banal to the point of making us numb. And on the other, there is the reality of domestic comfort, that favored place from which we take note of that news. Here the two registers are superimposed. That is, in each of the pieces a press photograph depicting a disaster of some kind, enlarged to the point of revealing the Ben-Day dots making up the image, is juxtaposed with a photograph of flowers that are like those that normally decorate a garden or the interior of a home. The reality of private space and the space of the outside world thus run into one another, illustrating the duality of our lives, torn between the facts (the *faits* of the title) of the world and the gestures (*gestes*, the second element of the title) of daily existence, between private space and the events of history.

Ombres portées...

This series is the most recent one in the show and was created during the lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. The world at the time indeed shrank to the space of the household. From inside, we observed an outside that seemed filled with threats and uncertainties. The pieces making up *Ombres portées...* ([Cast Shadows ...], since 2020) offer viewers the chance to come back to the roots of fears and anxieties, taking the curtain as their subject matter, that interface that separates the inside from the outside, that conceals while also offering a glimpse. The series reworks the principle of layers that is dear to the artist. A partly transparent curtain features a shadow theater made up of disturbing plants and animals projected on the cloth. These are archetypes of fear that have come down to us through the centuries. The images are in fact taken from 16th-century drawings and engravings, including works by Albrecht Dürer. They illustrate ancient fears and remind us that our keenest emotions possess a history and iconography that remain steady through the ages.

Screening Room

From the 1970s on, at first with Chérif Defraoui and later on her own, Silvie Defraoui has been interested in the moving image in its capacity for *projection* – in the literal sense of the term (the projection of an image) but also figuratively (the projection of an idea, thoughts, stories, memory). The videos brought together in this room work out this idea in several ways.

Bruits de surface ([Surface Noises], 1995) focuses on breaches and break-ups, when images are lost, forgotten, or substituted for others. Photographs are projected on glasses that little by little are filled with milk, making them gradually appear. The images are borrowed from the artist's personal albums. These memories are swept away by a hand, thus breaking the glasses, which are immediately replaced by others.

Résonnances et courants d'air ([Resonances and Drafts], 2009) likewise resurrects stories of the past. The camera explores an empty house, although it is inhabited by the memory and fabulations of the people who have lived there. It stops on the threshold of the rooms, where each time the artist's voice tells a new story inspired by Scheherazade's tales in the *Thousand and One Nights* – a vast narrative that strives to be endless and in which each story calls for the next.

Aphrodite Ping Pong (2005) touches on, though back to front as it were, the fascination that images of destruction stir within us. In ten sequences, geometrical objects drop onto plates one after the other and brake them. The moment of impact is never revealed. On the contrary, the artist uses the potential of video, screened here in reverse, to show only images of reconstruction. The shards of each plate seem to implode and reassemble in slow motion.

Screening on the floor

Silvie Defraoui has often varied the surfaces on which she projects her images, exploring the possibilities of video installation. In this gallery, she transforms the space by screening videos on the floor. These moving images are animated by constant movement that is endlessly renewed. Rose petals are stirred by a gust of wind (*Vor deiner Tür* [Before Your Door], 2000-2001). Other projections in the shape of circles reveal words and images which in turn summon stories without ever offering a conclusion. At the center of *Tide* (1994), for instance, images play out in a crystal ball. A sentence in English forms a circle around them like an omen, "The thing you secretly dread the most always happens." Excerpted from the diary of the Italian poet Cesare Pavese, this verse reflects the worry and expectation of the worst which haunt us still. Finally, *Tell This Story* (2004) is an invitation to stories and fiction. Projected in a circle on crumpled paper, incomplete sentences announce the premises of unfinished stories. Their conclusion are left to viewers' imaginations.

Organisation and Publication

Head of Exhibitions:
Juri Steiner
Exhibition curators:
Laurence Schmidlin,
Elisabeth Jobin

Publication:
Laurence Schmidlin (ed.),
*Silvie Defraoui. Le tremblement
des certitudes*, with an essay
by Laurence Schmidlin and a
preface by Juri Steiner
Co-published by Musée cantonal
des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne and
Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich,
2023 (Fr./Eng./Ger.), 120 p., 76 ill.
CHF 35.- in bookstores / CHF 30.-
at the MCBA Book-and Gift Shop
during the show's run
→ shop.mcba@plateforme10.ch

Events

Reservations required
for all events
→ mcba.ch/agenda

Guided tours (in French)

Sunday 12 and 26 March,
9 and 23 April at 11am
Thursday 16 March, 20 April,
and 4 May at 6:30pm: Visit of
the exhibitions *Silvie Defraoui*
and *Jardin d'Hiver #2*

Final guided tour with the exhibition curator (in French)

Sunday 21 May at 3pm
With Elisabeth Jobin

Guided tour (in English)

Sunday, 7 May at 2pm
Visit of the exhibitions *Silvie
Defraoui* and *Jardin d'Hiver #2*

Guided tours for Les Ami·e·s du Musée

Tuesday 21 March at 12:30pm
Thursday 4 May at 6pm
With Juri Steiner

Talk and screening

Thursday 11 May at 6.30pm
Silvie Defraoui invites the
filmmaker Alexia Walther to talk
about video art, film and the
transmission of knowledge.
The filmmaker will screen ex-
cerpts from a range of her films.
A discussion moderated by
Juri Steiner.
Free admission

Adult workshop (in French)

Saturday, 13 May, 2 – 5pm
*Producing realities, deciphering
the world*
Through the practice of assem-
bling objects and collage,
multiply the points of view to
read the world around us. The
workshop is punctuated by
moments of exchange
and individual and collective
productions.
By Roxane Bovet, curator,
author and publisher
CHF 50.– + entrance ticket

Kids activity booklet (in French)

Free, available at the
reception desk

Program for schools and
private tours
→ mcba.ch

Information

Hours:
Tuesday – Sunday 10 am – 6 pm
Thursday 10 am – 8 pm
Monday closed
Good Friday (7.4) 10 am – 6 pm
Easter Monday (10.4) 10 am – 6 pm
Ascension Day (18.5) 10 am – 6 pm

Admission and Online Tickets:
→ mcba.ch/billetterie
First Saturday of the month: free

Access:
SBB Lausanne train station,
3 minutes on foot
Bus: 1, 3, 20, 21, 60,
Gare stop
Bus: 6, Cecil stop
Metro: m2, Gare stop
Car: Montbenon parking,
Reduced fee

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Generous support for the
exhibition was provided by:

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Kanton St.Gallen
Kulturförderung

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Champoud 

Other shows on view
this spring at MCBA:

Jardin d'Hiver #2
Poems of Change
10.3 – 21.05.2023

Espace Projet
Sarah Margnetti.
Supportive Structures
(Manor art Prize 2022 Vaud)
Until 23.4.2023
Free admission

Espace Focus
Balthus the Draftsman
3.2 – 23.4.2023
Free admission

The Collection
Free admission

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