

On the world's affections and illnesses

Animal's Nightmare is, first and foremost, a journey. Split between places, landscapes, words and images, this journey is oriented by an ethical and emotional geography that emerges as an alternative to the political and ideological geography that is robbing the world of its humanity. This exhibition-as-journey begins within a land drawn from the experience of Joana Villaverde, where allegiances, beliefs and the imagination merge, forcing the viewer to acknowledge that to look is a right, but also a universal human responsibility. As such, we look from the Alentejo, where the artist lives, across to Palestine and, along with the similarities in the landscapes, we come to acknowledge the need to show what is invisible and to decolonise the gaze. This is precisely what Joana Villaverde did in Animal's Nightmare in Avis, where her work was exhibited for the first time, and what she is doing now at Appleton Square in Lisbon.

Everyday life in Palestine following the construction of the West Bank barrier is an intermittent, fragmented reality in terms of what is visible, oscillating between sensationalised representations and a total elimination of any discourse. Through different narratives, the story of this wall also reveals the history of walls themselves, and the history of opposition to them; the latter goes back as far as the former. The architectural genealogy of the wall and the political motives and justifications for it are just one element in a broader discussion that, while remaining utterly topical, touches upon human rights and the right to human dignity. The suffering caused by the barrier – isolated communities, confiscated land, long-standing or even untenable displacement – occupies a space that is dim and rarely visited within the imagination of the rest of the world.

The title of the exhibition, Animal's Nightmare, is a reference to one of the chapters of *Nothing to Lose but Your Life* (2010), a book by the Palestinian writer Suad Amiry, who pushes back against this obscurity, describing the everyday life of a worker who is forced to travel illegally in order to cross the wall. In the chapter from which the exhibition takes its name, a group of animals implores Al Gore for justice. Joana Villaverde offers this fable about the dehumanising effects of suffering up to the viewer through a cluster of artistic pieces that, both individually and as a whole,

concur with a certain visual ethics. In her work, a painted gazelle is not stripped of its beauty, but rather denied the very thing that gives its existence meaning – its freedom. The fragmented body of the gazelle, an animal that is traditionally a symbol of Palestine, is used as a reference to a reality that is obscured and altered by geopolitical grandstanding.

The artist has been to Palestine a number of times, where she has collected the tools to create a new visual vocabulary that would allow this invisible land to be imagined by someone who has never visited it. Her aesthetic approach allows this perception to make an impression on the viewer and to set out what we have (or should have) in common – universal human rights – thus dismantling political and ideological status quos that continue to form barriers to the gaze. At the point where art acts as a critique of the image itself, of the way images circulate or absent themselves from the hyper-visible system of today, Joana Villaverde creates cracks in the wall and shows it in order to destroy it.

In this way the wall, as a symbol of division and separation, as well as a concrete structure that masks human reality, makes its own journey, in an attempt to prevent normalisation from becoming the normal state of affairs. This idea of travelling (or of making multiple journeys) and mobility is highlighted by the presence of a vehicle, a sculptural installation within the exhibition space. This vehicle is not, however, a gratuitous visual artifice; rather, it is the result of coincidental discoveries by the artist on her travels: a car abandoned in Avis, the place intended for the exhibition, and an identical car spotted in Bethlehem. Within it, the shovels drawn in minute detail by the artist, with little figures inspired both by Goya and by people that Joana Villaverde met on her travels – gathered affections – appear heaped like ruins. The subject of the work is, like human life in Palestine, devoid of the basic conditions for dignity. Even the video that depicts a small figure is hidden within the architecture of Appleton Square. The sound of the car and of Palestinian songs that the artist recorded during a dinner with friends is the soundtrack to the exhibition: invisible voices that intensify the sense that it is impossible to glimpse the reality.

For all the exhibition's striking multiplicity, *Animal's Nightmare* disturbs the viewer's gaze because the variety of surfaces and visual media (drawings, paintings, sculpture installations, videos) cannot stem the force of the elements of invisibility

that run through the exhibition. These elements allow us to look at the work in a critical way, and dare to show that the invisible is a visual entity that can and should be perceived. This is not an exercise in exposing truths about war, but rather a warrior in the form of an exhibition: it conquers, restores and annexes territories to the possibility of looking, and does so through the very difficulty of seeing such realities. Animal's Nightmare is a journey through the conditions that afflict the world – its affections and illnesses.

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January 2016