



TRAB ' SSAHL

ABDESSAMAD EL MONTASSIR

Exhibition from May 10th to July 13th, 2023.

From Wednesday to Friday, from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Saturday from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. Free Entrance
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BÉTONSALON
CENTRE FOR ART
& RESEARCH

 Presentation

Trab'ssahl means «The Land of the West» in Hassanya and refers to a large part of Sahrawi territory. It is on this land, in this language, in the largely ignored history of an uninterrupted conflict for nearly 50 years, between sovereignty and autonomy, that Abdessamad El Montassir's work is anchored. "All that we have experienced, we cannot say. Ask the ruins, ask the desert and its thorny plants. They have seen and experienced everything, they have remained in place. We no longer have the words." These are the words of Khadija who left her nomadic life for the city in 1975. Powerful though idle, they set out for Abdessamad El Montassir a programme he has been carrying out since 2015 : how to show what cannot be seen, how to listen to what cannot be said ? What happens to prevented and confiscated memories ? What form should oblivion take ? In response to the collective amnesia that haunts the Sahara in South Morocco, Abdessamad El Montassir proposes to listen to the silent voices, the resistant poetry, the winds and the sand, the toponymy, to observe resilient plants and to detect everywhere the signs of a traumatic memory. Whether they are human or non-human voices, they become witnesses, even if only partially, to those who are able to listen.

Originally from Boujdour, in the Sahara in southern Morocco, Abdessamad El Montassir anchors in this territory an investigative work that he has been developing since 2015, opening up spaces of negotiation between unfathomable wounds and a univocal conflictual History. Taking the Sahara as the main site of investigation, this long-term research is articulated around three axes - the right to forget, fictional and visceral narratives and anticipatory trauma. In a writing that is both poetic and documentary, El Montassir evokes the invisibility of the history of the Sahara, its traumas and their transmissions. Engaged in an interdisciplinary practice, he brings together multiple visions through testimonies and meetings with historians, scientists, activists and citizens, and relatives. Alongside them, he collects muffled words, sketched gestures, incomplete poems as snippets of a narrative with multiple voices that had not been transmitted until then. He draws trajectories of individual and collective identities in response to a lack of narratives. He seeks to measure the amnesia that haunts this territory through its echoes in living organisms, to perceive its traces on a microscopic scale as well as on a landscape scale. Thus, his projects do not freeze a single narrative but, on the contrary, invite the necessary and continuous emergence of new questions and new ways of seeing.

With the support this year of the ADAGP / Bétonsalon research and production grant, of which he is a laureate, he has extended his research based on the publication «Necessità dei volti», a copy of which is in the Kandinsky Library collection. Composed by the Informal Collective, this «involuntary archive», in their words, is made up of 483 images chosen from a collection of photographs collected by the Polisario Front on Moroccan soldiers taken prisoner or fallen in combat, which make up the collection of the Sahrawi War Museum in Tindouf, Algeria.

Partners

↘ The exhibition is supported by the ADAGP - French visual artists' rights managements organisation, within the frame of the ADAGP / Bétonsalon research grant of which the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou is a partner ; the international residency programme at the Centre d'accueil et d'échanges des Récollets of the City of Paris ; the Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart and the Maison Salvan, Labège.

Biography

Born in 1989 in Boujdour, Morocco.
Lives and works between Boujdour and Rabat.

Abdessamad El Montassir's research focuses on a trilogy that the artist has been forging since 2015: the right to forget, fictional and visceral narratives, and anticipatory trauma.

Abdessamad El Montassir is a graduate of the National Institute of Fine Arts in Tetouan, as well as of the master's degree in Artistic Production and Aesthetic Education at the École Normale Supérieure de Meknès.

He has participated in several national and international exhibitions, including *Ce qui s'oublie et ce qui reste* curated by Meriem Berrada and Isabelle Renard at the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration in Paris, *The Promise of Grass* curated by Adwait Singh for the 5th Mardin Biennial, *Quand je n'aurai plus de feuille* curatée by Gabrielle Camuset at La Villa du Parc in Annemasse, *Demain c'est seulement dans un jour* curatée en ligne by Taous R. Dahamni for Le Jeu de Paume Lab, *About Now* at the Cécile Fakhoury gallery in Dakar, *Surgir des cendres* as part of Chroniques - biennale des imaginaires numériques in Aix-Marseille, *Invisible* curated by Alya Sebti for the 13th Biennale of Contemporary African Art in Dakar and the ifa-Galerie in Berlin, *Leave No Stone Unturned* curated by Clelia Coussonnet at the Cube - independent art room in Rabat, *De liens et d'exils* at La Villa Empain - Fondation Boghossian in Brussels, *Al Amakine* as part of the 11th Rencontres de Bamako, *Saout Africa(s)*, as part of documenta 14 at SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin, *Home* for the Mediterraena 18 Young Artists Biennale in Tirana and Durrës, *Don't Agonize, Organize* at Poppositions in Brussels, *Dissolving your ear plugs / Retirez vos bouchons d'oreilles*, at Musée d'Art de Joliette, Québec, curated by Maud Jacquin and Anne-Marie St-Jean Aubre .

Abdessamad El Montassir has also taken part in several artistic residencies: *Solitude Fellow* at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Art, Science and Society Programme at IMÉRA in Marseille, *La Cité Internationale des Arts* in Paris, *the summer's lab* at the Cube - independent art room in Rabat, *La Résidence Méditerranée* at La Friche La Belle de Mai in Marseille. As an integral part of his research, Abdessamad El Montassir regularly speaks at conferences and for institutions.

Émilie Renard: Please can you introduce yourself and explain the meaning of Trab'ssahl, which gives the exhibition its title?

Écouter les
pierres (Listen to
the Stones)

Interview between
Abdessamad El
Montassir, Émilie
Renard and Mathilde
Belouali-Dejean

Émilie Renard: *Please can you introduce yourself and explain the meaning of Trab'ssahl, which gives the exhibition its title?*

Abdessamad El Montassir: *Trab'ssahl* means «The Land of the West» in Hassaniya Arabic. This term refers to the Sahrawi territory from which I come. On the one hand, it is called Western Sahara, on the other, Moroccan Sahara. But locally, it's called *Trab'ssahl*. In French, I call it the Sahara south of Morocco, as a geolocation rather than an affiliation.

The projects I'm developing and presenting at Bétonsalon are rooted in this geographical space. They are built on sharing with local residents and poets, around a range of political, cultural and social issues.

Taken as a whole, my projects open a multitude of interpretations and apprehensions rather than fixing a single narrative. The poetry, oral narratives and micro-stories that run through this territory play a major role, both in the research and writing and in the final production. These are living archives that are constantly evolving, that accept that something is missing or forgotten, and this open archive is an immense source of inspiration for me. The oral tradition and its ways of telling and transmitting history are central to my work.

ÉR: *The displacement of nomadic populations, who have settled in urban centres, has resulted in transmission being disrupted and the creation of ruptures between generations. What role do you attribute to this rupture in your work?*

AEM: There has indeed been a rupture between the lifestyles of our parents and those of our generation, but some sediment remains, and it is on this sediment that I am focusing in an attempt to dig deeper into the issues and recreate bridges. As I was saying, poetry plays a central role in all this: it is a real bonding agent, a tool for transmission and historicization. In the desert, we are driven to cross territories, and therefore to bring with us only the lightest and most vital items. In my opinion, the most important elements in this context are words: they are immaterial, and they can travel. But while they may be light in physical terms, they are not light in semantic terms. What's more, oral knowledge is never fixed, either geographically or in terms of content. It is a constantly shifting material that is regenerated, forgotten and recreated. It accepts that it does not possess everything, that it does not understand everything, and that it does not fix everything. This is part of its very essence, and this way of looking at knowledge and our relationship with it is extremely powerful. As part of this dynamic, I am very interested in the way in which Hassaniya Arabic has been able to find poetic ways of telling political or cultural stories that are rarely if ever, told in any other way. This interest in language and the way it manages to create metonymies is at the root of what I'm doing now. Another important thing about the poetry of the Sahara, and a determining factor in my approach to life, is the privileged place held by plants, winds, stones, sand, stars and animals as identities. They are all seen as carriers and transmitters of stories, on the same level as humans. Each of these elements has a different trajectory, but we all live in the same territory, sharing

the same stories and traumas. We all express ourselves but in mutually elusive temporalities. With my projects, I try to include this material that slips away, this lack, like so many existing narratives even if they are not «translated.»

ÉR: *Do you find a method for your work in language, in its uses and changes?*

AEM: In a certain sense, yes. In poetry, for example, the way stories are told is always very subtle: painful or difficult things are told in such a way that they remain open, that they have several levels of meaning. This kind of flexibility is possible in language, and I'm also trying to apply it to images.

Mathilde Belouali-Dejean: *In your films, you are often confronted with silence, the intricacies of speaking out or the desire to say nothing. Several of them begin with characters who say they don't want to talk, Galb'Echaouf (2021) and Trab'ssahal (2022-2023) in particular. In this context, how do you deal with this difficulty of speaking?*

AEM: I'm often faced with the need for humans to remain silent. I take this as something that motivates my research and my work: it's a choice and a right not to pass on one's story. Revealing a story that may have been traumatic also means recounting one's own weakness and humiliation. Throughout my work, I always try to bear in mind the right to oblivion demanded by our elders. But I also convey the younger generation's need to know. So, if our parents don't want to tell the story, I try to find other ways of approaching the issue of possible transmission. With this in mind, I open up the stories and involve other elements that are capable of communicating when humans remain silent.

ÉR: *You refer to the «right to forget» as a reaction to traumatic events that are not acknowledged. Is this right being asserted by the local population?*

AEM: This notion of the «right to forget» needs to be set against what I call «fictional and visceral narratives.» I think these two things are complementary because there are two generations: a generation that has seen and experienced everything but doesn't want to talk about it. I respect this right to forget, to remain opaque. And a generation that wants to know what happened, that wants to know its history and its past. What's important to me in this context of forgetting is to observe how these stories can be passed on, despite everything.

MB-D: *So, you're contrasting «visceral narratives» with something that's learned, acquired, or external?*

AEM: I use the term visceral in the sense of stories that we feel deep inside, even if they haven't been told to us. They are there, present in us, latent, and they have an impact on our daily lives and our expectations. At one point, I was very interested in examining the influence of the environment on an individual's ability to express themselves. What interests me in this context is to see how stories that are not told can nevertheless be passed on from generation to generation. And consequently, how, in the relationship and emotional rapport that we have with our loved ones, we manage to reconstruct and create narratives, despite their silence and despite forgetting. These narratives have something imaginary or fictional about them, they are open-ended; they are not based directly on events that have been experienced or narrated, but for me, they are an important tool.

MB-D: *As far as your ethics and methodology are concerned, I'd like to talk about the practical conditions under which you make your films. What do the trips you make back*

and forth between your current place of residence and the Sahara involve? How do you go about it, and how long do you stay each time? Who do you know in the region? How did you meet them?

AEM: First, I think it's important to say that I grew up in the Sahara. I never left the region until I was 18 when I left to study Fine Art in the north of Morocco. I've been going back there regularly ever since. My deepest roots are in the Sahara: my mother tongue is Hassaniya Arabic, and I grew up surrounded by its culture, landscapes and context. The bond has never been broken, and I've never been disconnected from the background that defines me. Since I left, I've been working with three childhood friends. We've known each other all our lives and that makes it easier for us to get on with our work. So, most of our projects involve very in-depth discussions between us. One of them is a poet.

Each project stems from local encounters. The ideas are not pre-written; they emerge from informal, everyday exchanges. The idea is always to leave the floor (and the silences) to the individual experiences that I come across in the Sahara. Then comes the writing: a stage to get our bearings, to determine what might emerge. I write when I'm not in the South because distance enables perspectives to evolve and to take a step back. Then I return to continue the project, but I'm always extremely flexible. I never force things; I never try to capture what I thought I'd find. On the contrary, I leave plenty of room for the unexpected, for what I couldn't anticipate: these are the very elements that I systematically keep in my productions. In the film *Galb'Echaouf*, Dah, the elderly person who we see at the start of the film, is someone I've known since childhood. For over five years, I went to see him on each of my trips, and we just chatted. And life went on. Until one day he asked me if I had my camera with me. I said «Yes,» and he said, «You can film.» It was important to me because it came from him, and he sensed something. And the result is that he remains silent, in his way, relating his refusal. For me, this brings us back to the idea of the «right to forget,» as well as to silence as a tangible response to trauma.

ÉR: *Recently you found an important source which has proved impossible to use. It's called *Necessità Dei Volti*, and it was compiled in the early 2000s by a group of Italian, French and Lebanese artists and activists who collected 400 images from thousands of photographs held by the Tindouf War Museum in Algeria of Moroccan soldiers and civilians killed or taken prisoner in the 1970s. You were able to look at the copy kept in the Bibliothèque Kandinsky - studying it was the starting point for your research for the ADAGP/ Bétonsalon grant - but the collective that created the archive refused to let you use it. How do these obstacles to narrative and portrayal play out in your work?*

AEM: Refusal is something I often have to deal with either because people tell me stories they don't want to pass on, or because I work from archive collections whose access and use are forbidden or unwelcome. I have the impression that these complexities and silences are at the heart of my work. The challenge is to tell the story silently, to give form to the silence, and above all to avoid using an overly assertive voice that would set, stereotype or simplify the narrative. My projects remain fluid and offer an opportunity to explore. So, for me, the publication *Necessità Dei Volti* is simply a research tool that I approach very carefully. I always try to be very thorough, to make sure that I know and understand the stories, photos and images that I use. Every word has its own weight and importance in this context. Archives are rare and those that do exist are always elements of my work rather than historical documents. My projects will give rise to narratives made up of the sediment left by all the elements I have encountered throughout their creation. In this process, I also try to leave room for the obstacles I face.

ÉR: *As far as the publication Necessità Dei Volti is concerned, there are two different kinds of impediments: on the one hand, a state, Morocco, has already refused the public presentation of this archive despite the Centre Pompidou showing it in 2018. On the other hand, there is the collective's general suspicion of art that operated a form of manipulation or derealisation of the political situation represented by the archive. In addition to these rejections, there are those addressed to you by the witnesses you have met. It is difficult, if not often impossible, for you to show these sources directly in your work. What diversions do you take in your research in the face of these obstacles?*

AEM: This is an important issue. The Sahara is such a sensitive issue that talking about it is always complex. The only people who talk about it are highly polarised and tend to perpetuate a discourse and entrenched positions. In the end, the lives, knowledge and stories of the men and women who live there - and what their destiny should be - are always told by others. Others who don't live there and who have often never even been there. Their position, however well-meaning it may be, further reduces the inhabitants of the Sahara to silence; they speak for themselves. For my part, I'm trying to open a forum for expression for the people who live there, even if that forum often becomes a forum for silence. Despite this silence, many things emerge and are passed on: the role of language, the relationship with non-human elements, poetry, but also geography, topography and vegetation. My projects do not seek to fix a single discourse or to take a simplistic stance. On the contrary, they open a dialogue with all the possibilities that entails. The obstacles are infinite because even this postulate, which tries to take a sideways step, is immediately taken as «lacking identity,» whatever the point of view. That's what the informal collective reproached me for, for example. So today, I'm no longer trying to get around the barriers but to integrate them into my process.

MB-D: *Could you talk about the sound piece you produced with Matthieu Guillin to accompany the Al Amakine installation (2016-2020)? What sounds did you collect? How did you mix them? Some sounds seem to come from nature, wind, sand, and percussion and then there are voices, but everything is combined in such a way that nothing is recognisable. There's a kind of abstraction based on things that are nonetheless very real.*

AEM: We wanted to work on the idea of breathlessness. Matthieu Guillin and I started by listening to the conversations I had recorded, in which the person being interviewed always gasps for breath and stops talking. This sensation of breathlessness is also present in Hassaniya Arabic poetry when it is spoken. These are the kind of passages that interest me very much in what they convey without saying, in what they say about the powerlessness of language. So that's what we focused on, on those breaths that are cut off, on those moments when language feels like a frog in the throat. These breaths and inhalations form the basis of the piece. Then we opened this idea to the sounds of other recorded elements, particularly the wind. At the same time, we worked with a plant that comes up a lot in my work: *daghmous*. The *daghmous* is one of the protagonists in the film *Galb'Echaouf*. In Hassaniya Arabic poetry, this euphorbia was open and flowering, then it developed its current cactus-like form, as a response to the harsh external environment. Using special non-invasive microphones, we recorded the sounds made by the *daghmous*. These recordings also form an important part of the *Al Amakine* sound piece. In a nutshell, this sound piece is made up of muffled breaths, voiceless words and the sounds of the *daghmous*, the wind and the stones.

ÉR: *Faced with the inability of language to provide the facts, you turned to the cellular memory of the daghmous as another means of accessing history. Can you describe how the daghmous also acts as a witness to history and its traumas, and what stories it tells?*

AEM: As far as I'm concerned, the *daghmous* is a plant that has lived through everything that has happened on this land and has stayed put. In this sense, it is a witness to be reckoned with. Khadija, one of the characters in the film *Galb'Echaouf*, encourages me to look for thorny plants and ruins, to listen to them and reconstruct specific events. Poetry tells us a great deal about these non-human identities, considered to be individuals in their own right in the Sahara, bearers and conveyors of narratives. All of this means that this plant plays a very important role. Like all the other plants I work with, they tell stories, they perceive their environments, but they express themselves in ways that escape us as humans.

About Bétonsalon

Bétonsalon develops activities in collaborative ways, with local, national and international organisations. Our program includes solo or collective exhibitions, with emerging, reemerging, confirmed or forgotten artists, multidisciplinary events with the best exchange quality, actions and research focused on mediation and experimental pedagogy, research and creation residencies, outdoor projects engaged with local visitors and structures, and other actions which are yet to be defined.

Bétonsalon is a nonprofit organisation established in 2003. Inserted within the Université de Paris campus, 13th arrondissement since 2007, Bétonsalon is the only Centre of art certified to be located inside a French University.

Practical informations

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Free entrance
from Wednesday to Friday,
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All events are free of charge.
The entire space is wheelchair-accessible. Group visits are free of charge with advanced booking.

Please check our program on social media. Twitter · Facebook · Instagram: [@betonsalon](https://www.instagram.com/betonsalon)

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With the support of

Bétonsalon – Centre for Art and Research is supported by the City of Paris, the Île-de-France Regional Board of Cultural Affairs – Ministry of Culture, and the Île-de-France Region, with the collaboration of Université Paris Cité.

Bétonsalon – Centre for Art and Research is a cultural institution of the City of Paris, certified institution of national interest by the Ministry of Culture.

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Bétonsalon is also partner of Paris Gallery Weekend, which takes place on May 26, 27 and 28, 2023.