



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

Bourouissa's Method

By Carlos Basualdo

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Though this be madness, yet there is method in 't.
—William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

In his book *Camera Lucida* (1980), French cultural theorist Roland Barthes expounds on his concept of *punctum* (the sometimes hidden element in a photographic image that, once perceived, illuminates it in its entirety), that miraculous articulation between a whole and its parts in which the absolutely singular stands out, beyond and above generalizations, as a cipher of the spectator's entire worldview. Paris-based artist Mohamed Bourouissa has always been fundamentally concerned with the production of complex and enigmatic images. This can be seen in his early photographic series such as "Périphérique" (2005–09), documenting disaffected youth in Parisian suburbs, through to his celebrated videos *Temps mort* (2009) and *Legend* (2010), which follow the lives of prison inmates and black-market cigarette vendors, respectively. In 2015, Bourouissa completed his ambitious film project *Horse Day*, centered on the Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club in the predominantly African-American community of Strawberry Mansion in North Philadelphia. Displayed as a multimedia installation comprising a film and accompanying sketches, storyboards, collages and other preparatory materials, *Horse Day* nonetheless captures a cohesive image of resilience. This is an important fact to underline, because Bourouissa's artistic process involves such an evident protagonist role. There is a conspicuous tension between the process—always expansive, time-consuming and crucial to the display and reception of Bourouissa's work—and the strange, magnetic power of the image that is ultimately offered; one that often remains with us, even against our will. In this sense, Bourouissa's method is to reveal the image itself as "punctum" within a certain specific and evolving situation.

Bourouissa's 2018 installation *Pas le temps pour les regrets* ("No Time to Regret")—presented at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in the 18th Marcel Duchamp Prize finalists' exhibition—is a prime example of this method,

offering a complex image of mental illness and decolonized medicine that is both precise and poignant. In this work, a wooden scaffold based on a floor plan stands in for a section of the Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital in Algiers—the first institution of its kind in the country. Nestled within this structure are six rotating screens that, like a tragic carousel, present us with the contrasting faces of two men from different eras: Bourlem Mohamed, a living, long-time patient of the Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital; and the French doctor Antoine Porot (1876–1965), who founded that medical establishment and worked there from 1938 until 1953.

Resilience, Bourouissa declared in our conversation, is what his new work is concerned with. In the case of *Pas le temps pour les regrets*, the primary focus is Bourlem Mohamed's resilience, literally written in indelible ink all over his body, expressed by his insistent work in a derelict garden at the hospital, an institution founded within the context of the French colonial project in Algeria and thus inherently associated with its oppressive value system. That is, until 1953, with the arrival of a young doctor from Martinique, Frantz Fanon, who wrote extensively on the psychological trauma of colonialism and introduced occupational and music therapy to treat the patients of the Blida-Joinville Hospital. Bourlem Mohamed's continued, stoic gardening in accordance with Fanon's pioneering therapy is testimony to the success of the doctor's clinical reforms, the embodied echo of an emancipatory gesture.

The film element of *Pas le temps*, entitled *Le murmure des fantômes* ("The Whispering of Ghosts"), had originally been commissioned for the tenth edition of the Liverpool Biennial, where Bourouissa presented an earlier version of the film along with his public work *Resilience Garden*, planted on-site in collaboration with the local community. (For Bourouissa, exhibitions have become deliberate tools for the development of his projects, so it is not unusual for several versions of a work to be presented at different venues over the same period of time.) In *Le murmure*, Bourlem Mohamed, interviewed by Bourouissa, recalls being tortured by the



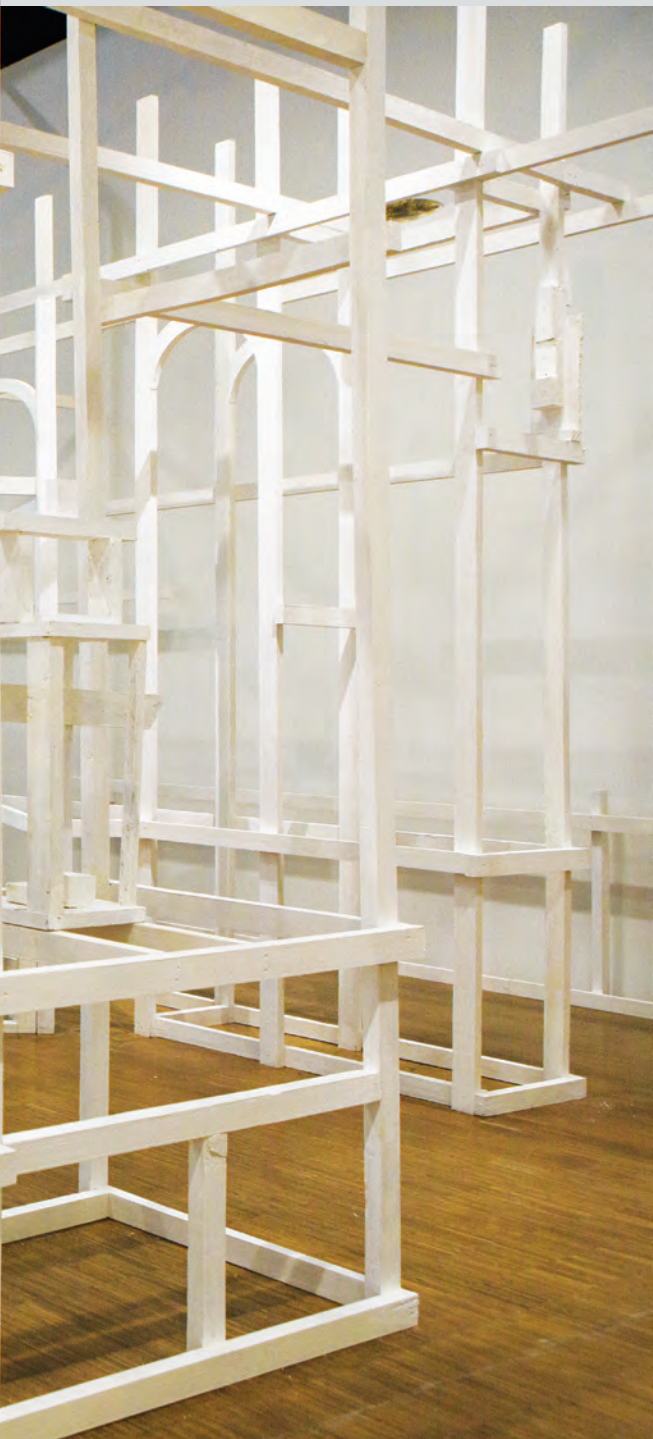
(Opening page)
LE MIROIR, 2006, from the
 “Périphérique” series (2005–09),
 C-print, 120 × 90 cm. Copyright the
 artist; courtesy the artist and Kamel
 Mennour, Paris/London.

(Opposite page)
PÉRIPHÉRIQUE, 2007, from the
 “Périphérique” series (2005–09),
 C-print, 78.5 × 134.5 cm. Copyright
 the artist; courtesy the artist and
 Kamel Mennour, Paris/London.

(This page, top to bottom)
 Stills from **HORSE DAY**, 2014–15,
 video dyptic with color and sound:
 13 min 32 sec. Copyright the artist;
 courtesy the artist and Kamel
 Mennour, Paris/London.



Installation view of **PAS LE TEMPS POUR LES REGRETS**, 2018, painted wood, six television screens, turning table, engine, HD video with color and sound: 13 min 37 sec, dimensions variable, at the Marcel Duchamp Prize exhibition, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2018. Photo by Archives Kamel Mennour. Courtesy Kamel Mennour, Paris/London and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/ New York/Tokyo.



French colonial police, discusses his illness and his garden in the hospital, questions the artist on leaving his homeland to work abroad, and helps him design the garden that was subsequently created in Liverpool. This film comes together to form a composite image, an arrangement of seemingly irreconcilable fragments, the fissures between them made even deeper by the episodic inclusion of Fanon's inimitable, heavily accented voice, describing the psychological damage that domination inescapably inflicts on the colonial subject.

But resilience is also the sign under which the staged compositions of "Périphérique" were predicated, the quality that made Bourouissa's *Horse Day* such a powerful symbol of the struggles and the victories of the African-American community in Strawberry Mansion. Resilience is a mark of agency. Looking at his focus on marginalized communities throughout his oeuvre, one could say that resilience, the capacity to resist the most adverse conditions and to persevere along a certain path, is what his work has always been about. Bourouissa trains his lens on situations that are always related to the emergence of a configuration of economical and political forces at specific moments in contemporary history, when certain subjects are threatened and their agency is under attack. Although explicitly critical of humanism in its Western, colonial version, Bourouissa's work is always an attempt to reconstitute agency to those resilient subjects, to provide them with a sense of dignity.

Bourouissa pursues that line of thinking by engaging as deeply as possible with his chosen contexts during the development of his projects. His position in this regard is not that of a disinterested viewer, a witness uninvolved with what he sees. Either already part of the situation that his work addresses—as was the case with "Périphérique"—or embracing his role as a willful and fearless initiate—for example, in his work with the horse breeders and riders for *Horse Day*—the form of participation that he chooses is always active. Bourouissa's commitment is the necessary tool that he requires, as an artist, for the production of form. In his work, the process of engagement results in the making of forms of staging. Bourouissa acknowledged in our conversation his intention to work with artistic forms that are fundamentally inclusive. That might explain why a pluralistic, intersubjective stage—either literally, in the form of a riding arena in *Horse Day*, or metaphorically, such as the platform of exchange between the artist and a prison inmate in *Temps mort*—appears so insistently in his work. Perhaps this is also the way his installation at the Centre Pompidou needs to be understood, as a stage that encompasses the personal history of Bourlem Mohamed, the institutional history of the Blida-Joinville Hospital, the intellectual history of Frantz Fanon, and the tragic, broader history of the conflicted relations between France and its former colonies. The viewers, too, are actors on that stage, which both includes and questions us



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inasmuch as those histories are not merely an external, but also intimate—if willfully forgotten or suppressed—part of our lives.

At the same time, what Bourouissa stages, in *Pas le temps* as much as in his past projects, is an allegory, understood in the sense that Walter Benjamin referred to it in his 1925 study, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: a collection of fragments that stands for the ruinous result of that long siege which is our recent history, the history of our times. Fanon's voice, the skeletal armature of an institution of oppression, the endless loop of a disjointed and painful narrative, the weathered physiognomy of Bourlem Mohamed, all irredeemable fragments that engulf us in their pull toward a center of pure devastation. It is in that inaccessible center that the garden of resilience, nonetheless, continues to grow.

Paris-based artist **MOHAMED BOUROUISSA** was born in 1978 in Blida, Algeria. He has staged numerous solo exhibitions at major international institutions, including the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2018); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2018); the Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia (2017); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2016); and Haus der Kunst, Munich (2014). He has participated in Sharjah Biennial 14 (2019); the 10th Liverpool Biennial (2018); the 12th Havana Biennial (2015); the 13th Lyon Biennale (2015); and the 54th Venice Biennale (2011). He was nominated for the Marcel Duchamp Prize in 2018, and the Prix Pictet photography prize in 2017.

CARLOS BASUALDO has been the Keith L. and Katherine Sachs senior curator of contemporary art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art since 2005. He was the lead organizer of "Bruce Nauman: Topological Gardens" at the United States Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale, where it was awarded the Golden Lion for Best National Participation. He has also served on the curatorial teams for Documenta 11 and the 50th Venice Biennale. From 2010 to 2013, he was curator at large for the National Museum of 21st Century Arts (MAXXI) in Rome.

This text was originally written for the catalog of the Marcel Duchamp Prize. It is now published in an extensive version for *ArtAsiaPacific*.