

TR AC E

OF A



Untitled
From the series
Blida, 2008.
Colour photograph
© ADAGP
Mohamed
Bourouissa
Courtesy of the
artist and kamel
mennour Paris/
London and
Blum & Poe Los
Angeles/ New
York/ Tokyo

GE NE RA TI ON

*Algerian-born Paris-based artist **Mohamed Bourouissa** speaks to Katrina Kufer about his people-led photography that shows authentic facets of under-exposed society*

Mohamed Bourouissa's photography reads from the street. His edgy images are in the form of seamlessly assimilated captures of people at 'home'. But the candid aesthetic belies a complex layering of intent and artistic positions, wherein his socio-political subjects resonate authenticity, but are presented through the scope of interpretation. "When I started taking pictures I wanted to represent my experiences, and the world I grew up in, in the art world, putting it into the long history of art," says the artist, who was short-listed for the Prix Marcel Duchamp 2018 and has widely exhibited across key arts institutions such as Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris and MMK, Frankfurt, as well as numerous foundations, biennales and fairs including Art Basel. Inspired by a broad range of artists, thinkers and writers, he explains that Caravaggio was the first real photographer given his ability to demonstrate a living moment—reality as it was at a specific time—as well as Frantz Fanon, who proved instrumental in his outlook.

By using personal experience, such as with his first series *Périphériques* (2005-8) featuring friends and those he grew up with in the Parisian suburbs, Bourouissa sidesteps voyeuristic or exploitative concerns that may otherwise burden the works: he functions as an outsider amongst outsiders. "I chose photography because it gave me the opportunity to represent my community and where I come from, and it was very important to represent 'the others', to communicate and speak to and of the people," he explains. "In the late 90s and 2000, the representation of people from the suburbs wasn't common, you didn't see it in art, and my friend and I had the idea to represent where we came from because we didn't have images of our culture and identity."

While his immediate social environment—populated by Senegalese, Moroccans, Tunisians and Algerians—informed his imagery, Bourouissa admits hip-hop played an equally foundational role. "For some time I was a rapper, and it was important to show the identity formed between where I came from, where others were from, how we interacted," he remarks. "It's about the relationship between humans, society and how they retain their own and new culture, and I used a lot of hip-hop references for this." Bourouissa adds that while his initial motivations were creative, it has since become clear that providing a voice—and face—for underrepresented communities has had an empowering effect. "It gives the younger generation an opportunity to feel comfortable with what they do and what they want to do, no matter where they come from."

Bourouissa's snapshots may read candid, but he admits infusing symbolism and existential context to induce questioning of the image and what we see, or think we see. "At first I would ask people to pose, but I would spend time in the location, trying to understand the area and the people," he explains. "Sometimes I felt on the outside, but I tried to find a dialogue between me, the people and the place." It is a fine line, mixing spontaneous, organic inspiration with artistic intent. "It depends on the subject and series, but for sure the photographs are more posed. That's why I recreate images, I don't try to make it 'real' because I really want to question how we see things." Part of the impetus to choreograph realistic scenarios includes a desire to expose the innate violence of society, not just its façade, and to show this is it imperative to get the subject's firsthand perspective, even if this includes handing them the camera at times. "You



Above: *Le cercle imaginaire* (The Imaginary Circle). 2006. From the series *Périphérique*. Colour photograph © ADAGP Mohamed Bourouissa. Courtesy of the artist and Kamel mennour Paris/London

Below: *Temps Mort* (Time Out). 2009. Video still (colour and sound) 18 minutes © ADAGP

can see the inner violence and feel something strong, which isn't very easy to get," he says. "The audience sees nice colours and compositions, but the pictures are sharp, cutting, you can hurt yourself. I want to show society's violence against people."

A sense of otherness and looking outside-in and inside-out resonates throughout his photography and film, as well as his recent foray into performance, sculpture and poetry. Bourouissa asserts that a singular image is as complex and powerful as any other medium, which is merely another means of developing ideas, concepts and theories. "It's all about how you choose to show the complexity of thought," he says. "Experiences change your practice—it isn't only about production; it changes you. I like to experiment, and depending on my experiences with people, it changes the way I want to present it."

Time Out (2009) marked a turning point in Bourouissa's oeuvre. "I wouldn't say it's the most important piece, but it made me understand



La République (e
republic), 2006
From the series
"Périphérique"
Color photograph
© ADAGP
Mohamed
Bourouissa
Courtesy of the
artist and kamel
mennour Paris/
London

what I as trying to do with my work," he recalls. The film showcased a dialogue and image exchange between the artist and a prisoner. Focusing in on the element of collaboration that rooted the project, it reveals Bourouissa's process, approaches, position and propositions. "I knew what I wanted because in 2007, one of my best friends was imprisoned and for months I had no news about him," he explains of the project's origins. "One day he sent me pictures and I thought we should represent this, so we started and then exhibited a series of his photographs from prison. It was a collaboration—I split the money with him—and it made me think that I had just been presenting pictures. The most interesting parts are how we collaborate, how we make things. That's why I decided to make the film." *Time Out* forged a connection of inside to outside, a thematic that connects all of his work, and is particularly outlined in the photography produced for his Luma Arles residency. "I thought, 'How to explain the idea of collaboration?' I invited a musician I had done a project with in Beirut, along with a DJ, and for an hour we mixed song, music and poetry," he says. "I also asked friends who had been at the Beirut performance to record their feelings about the experience, and this was presented to the new audience. I wasn't speaking for them; I used their voices to explain collaboration."

Another partnership took the form of urban cowboys in Philadelphia, who along with local artists and writers, provided the foundation for his film *Horse Day* (2015), which will be exhibited again in September at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, alongside photographs and sculptures. Initially moved by photographs by Martha Camarillo, Bourouissa adapted this influence for the African-American riders over nine-months as they cared for abandoned horses, took up riding as a refuge from their neigh-

bourhood's disadvantaged circumstances, and created a makeshift contest. While a marked visual and cultural shift from series such as *Nous sommes Halles* (2003-5), which focused on suburban youths as they tackled reality vs external stereotypes in Paris's Chatelet neighbourhood, or *Free Trade* (2019), an exhibition held at Monoprix which confronts economic and social dynamics of those on society's margins, *Horse Day* segues cleanly into the documentary-cum-creative liberty that characterises Bourouissa's practice.

Grappling with society, power, politics, economics, humanity and the constant discord and dialogue between the realities and perceptions of each, Bourouissa wants to leave an authentic, non-voyeuristic mark. "Two people are very important influences for me, Jamel Shabazz and August Sander," he explains. "Jamel represents his generation and I really like how he documents people, and it's really important for me to leave a trace of my generation." But while he strives, and is garnering fervent international attention, for his efforts at showcasing societal facets from the inside-out, there are still limits and mysteries, recalling that artist's eye that lingers behind each photographic "truth." Bourouissa adopted the camera after realising he preferred to be behind, rather than in front, of the lens—the most effective way of opening channels of communication with others, a notion forged early on as a child when drawing proved the only way to 'speak' with his new foreign counterparts. His first photograph was of his foot. Bourouissa laughs as he begins to explain, but stops short, saying it is a story for another time, revealing that his strategic exposure of fragmented authenticity is always shrouded in the intentional veiling of his artistic choices. ■

mohamedbourouissa.com

“IT WAS VERY IMPORTANT TO REPRESENT ‘THE OTHERS’, TO COMMUNICATE AND SPEAK TO AND OF THE PEOPLE”



Untitled
From the series
*Nous sommes
Halles (We are
Halles)*-2002. In
collaboration with
Anoush Kashoot.
2003. Colour
photograph
© ADAGP
Mohamed
Bourouissa
Courtesy of the
artist and kamel
mennour Paris/
London