

SOMERSET
HOUSE

LEILA ALAOUI: RITE OF PASSAGE

PRESS RELEASE

11 October 2020 – 28 February 2021

FREE



This October, Somerset House and 1-54 Contemporary African Art fair are proud to present **Leila Alaoui: Rite of Passage**, the **first major UK retrospective** of works from the celebrated French-Moroccan photographer, video artist and activist Leila Alaoui.

Acclaimed for capturing and preserving the unseen stories of individuals and communities displaced by conflict and unrest, *Rite of Passage* offers an intimate portrait into the rich cultural identities and resilience of societies facing difficult and uncertain realities. The subjects of Alaoui's works are pictured across the contemporary Mediterranean-landscape and beyond, from Syrian refugees fleeing civil war in Lebanon to young North Africans seeking an alternative future in Europe.

Tragically, Alaoui was killed whilst working on a photography project for a women's rights campaign for Amnesty International in Burkina Faso in 2016. She was critically wounded during a terrorist attack in Ouagadougou, passing away from her injuries shortly afterwards at the age of 33.

Rite of Passage showcases three of Alaoui's defining series of photographic works created between 2008 and 2014 - *Les Marocains* (2010-14), *No Pasara* (2008) and *Natreen* (2013). Throughout each series, Alaoui seeks to challenge the often clichéd portrayals and exoticisation of North Africa and the Arab world to present a nuanced narrative of the region, its inhabitants and immigration. The exhibition also presents Alaoui's final unfinished video work *L'Île du Diable* (Devil's Island) (2015), which explores the lives of a 1960's generation of dispossessed migrant workers in France. Showing great sensitivity towards her subjects, Alaoui's images are both informed yet artistic, giving a human face to the people who often become lost and misrepresented behind waves of news coverage and statistics.

Upon entering the exhibition, visitors are greeted with a striking series of life-sized portraits from Alaoui's celebrated series *Les Marocains*. Taken during the artist's extensive travels across her home country of Morocco, Alaoui drew inspiration from influential 20th century photographers Richard

Image credits: (L) *Natreen* by Leila Alaoui, 2013. (C) *Tamesloht*, 2011 from the series *Les Marocains* by Leila Alaoui (R) *No Pasara* by Leila Alaoui, 2008. All images courtesy of Foundation Leila Alaoui & GALLERIA CONTINUA

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Avedon and Robert Frank, whose seminal works captured the overlooked margins of American life, as well as her own heritage as a native Moroccan, to create a collection of portraits which capture a rich survey of the diverse cultures and ethnicities of the region. Using a mobile studio, Alaoui invited men, women, and children of different communities within busy cities and secluded settlements, with whom she spent time getting to know, as her sitters. Framed against a simple black background, Alaoui captures the innate pride and dignity of her subjects, allowing both the presence of her subjects and the vibrant aesthetic of their traditional dress, adorned with products of a rich artistic culture, to shine. With each portrait, Alaoui creates new transcultural and inclusive social imagery in an attempt to undo the historically misunderstood representation of the region and its communities.

The exhibition continues with works from Alaoui's first photographic series created in 2008, *No Pasara (Entry Denied)*. The series, commissioned by the European Union, sees Alaoui use her camera to document the often-unseen perspectives of those living on the challenging margins of society. The series follows groups of young Moroccans who have become stuck in their journeys, seeking passage to Europe from the Moroccan port cities of Nador and Tangier. After spending time getting to know her subjects, hearing stories of the homes, and the lives and relationships sacrificed in the hope of finding a better life on the other side of the Mediterranean, Alaoui brings the realities and voices of those whose lives have been halted into focus of the frame. Here in black and white, young men are pictured waiting pensively at the waterfront and amongst the ruins of buildings, dreaming of starting a new life across the barrier of the sea.

Echoing the stories of the lives on hold in *No Pasara*, the 2013 series *Natreen (We Wait)*, commissioned by the Danish Refugee Council, sees Alaoui travel to Lebanon to document and raise awareness for the humanitarian crisis faced by Syrian refugees fleeing chaos and war. Acting further to dispel the stereotypical representations of refugees as shown within modern day media, Alaoui captures the strength, beauty and relatability of her subjects, with each subject holding the viewers gaze to create an instant connection.

Rite of Passage culminates in Alaoui's final unfinished project, *L'Île du Diable (Devil's Island)*. In this single-channel video work, which sees Alaoui moving away from photography to experiment with video and installation, Alaoui explores the experience of a generation of migrant workers who moved to support the huge growth in industry in Europe following World War II. Bringing together photographs, recorded videos, sounds, and testimonies, Alaoui showcases the stories of those who became collectively displaced from their homes whilst working for an automobile factory in France, and its impact on future generations.

The exhibition continues beyond *I-54 Contemporary African Art Fair* as a standalone show throughout Somerset House's winter season. *Rite of Passage* will be the next exhibition in the

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Charles Russell Speechlys Terrace Room Series, an ongoing partnership with the [leading law firm](#) to present a wide range of free exhibitions reflecting the broad interests of both organisations.

FOR PRESS ENQUIRIES, PLEASE CONTACT:

press@somersetshouse.org.uk/0207 845 4624

NOTES TO EDITORS

Dates: 11 October 2020 – 28 February 2021

Opening Hours: 12-6pm, Tuesday – Sunday

Tickets:

- To ensure the safety of visitors and staff, and in accordance with government guidelines, capacity to the exhibition will be limited so visitors must pre-book their timed ticket slot online (with suggested donation) at somersetshouse.org.uk
- Visitors with tickets booked in advance for *1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair* will be able to access the exhibition on Saturday 10 October 2020, 10.00-20.00. To purchase tickets and book your time slot please visit: somersetshouse.org.uk

ADDITIONAL LISTINGS INFORMATION

Address: Somerset House, Strand, London, WC2R 1LA

Transport: Underground: Temple, Embankment / Rail: Charing Cross, Waterloo, Blackfriars

Website: www.somersetshouse.org.uk

Somerset House Facebook:

www.facebook.com/SomersetHouse

Somerset House Twitter: @SomersetHouse

Somerset House Instagram: @SomersetHouse

ABOUT SOMERSET HOUSE

London's working arts centre

Somerset House is London's working arts centre and home to the UK's largest creative community. Built on historic foundations, we are situated in the very heart of the capital.

Dedicated to backing progress, championing openness, nurturing creativity and empowering ideas, our cultural programme is ambitious in scope. We insist on relevance, but aren't afraid of irreverence, and are as keen on entertainment as enrichment. We embrace the biggest issues of our times and are committed to oxygenating new work by emerging artists. Where else can you spend an hour ice-skating while listening to a specially commissioned sound piece by a cutting edge artist?

It is this creative tension – the way we harness our heritage, put the too-often overlooked on our central stage and use our neo-classical backdrop to showcase ground-breaking contemporary culture – that inspires our programme. Old and new, history and disruption, art and entertainment, high-tech and homemade, combined with the fact that we are home to a constantly shape-shifting working creative community: this is our point of difference. It is what we are proud of. And it is what makes the experience of visiting or working in Somerset House inspiring and energizing, urgent and exciting. somersetshouse.org.uk

ABOUT 1-54 CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART FAIR

With annual editions in London, New York and Marrakech, 1-54 is the leading international art fair dedicated to contemporary art from Africa and its diaspora. Drawing reference to the fifty-four countries that constitute the African continent, 1-54 is a sustainable and dynamic platform that is engaged in contemporary dialogue and exchange. Initiated by Touria El Glaoui in 2013, October 2020 will mark its eighth consecutive edition at Somerset House, London.

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ABOUT THE CHARLES RUSSELL SPEECHLYS TERRACE ROOM SERIES

The Charles Russell Speechlys Terrace Room Series of free exhibitions profiles the work of living artists in one of the most accessible spaces at Somerset House, bringing the public into contact with a diverse and engaging range of creative thinkers. The series provides a platform for artists to develop and amplify the messages within their practice and engage openly with Somerset House's visitors. Every exhibition in the Charles Russell Speechlys Terrace Room series is free and contributes to our on-going commitment to public access and engagement with arts and culture.

ABOUT THE LEILA ALAOUI FOUNDATION

The Leila Alaoui Foundation was created to preserve her work, defend her values, and inspire and support artistic engagement.