

The Suburbs as Visual Object

by Magali Jauffret

"We ask too little of an image when we reduce it to its mere appearance. We ask too much of it when we seek actual reality in it. What we need is to discover in it a capacity to make us rethink all these things."

Georges Didi-Huberman¹

"What I am after is that very fleeting tenth of a second when the tension is at its most extreme. We have all known those imperceptible moments when the tension seems more violent than the confrontation with the other. At that extreme point, anything could happen, or nothing" observes French photographer Mohamed Bourouissa, who, in his series entitled *Périphérique*, shows that conflict need not be conducive to tension, which is already there in the simple play of gazes and even in situations of vacuity.

A burnt-out car, a playing field, a cafeteria, a housing project, a concrete slab – all become, in the images by this young artist of 29 who has chosen to work on France's ghetto-like suburbs, the theatre of group scenes in which the eruption of a figure provokes mixed feelings: where a meeting brings forth an ambiguity, disquiet, a latent, dormant violence which comes with no actual sign of violence, but just sometimes a blurriness that at first was simply tolerated but soon became a practice.

Mohamed Bourouissa is interested in the territories and issues of the suburbs (la banlieue) where he grew up. But what makes him particular is that he places these suburbs in the field of art and treats them as a visual, conceptual object. Florence Paradeis, who, along with Christian Courrèges, was his teacher at the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, uses the term "emotional geometry" to describe his fine work of placing his subject in space, which elicits an emotion fairly similar to the one we feel in front of certain large format works by Jeff Wall.

This feeling comes no doubt from a mixture of harmony and very slight illusion which, in both cases, arises from banal, familiar, anti-spectacular, 'almost' documentary scenes. Another thing the two artists have in common is a deep connection to painting, not to mention their way of compelling our attention and forcing us to think about the kind of society we have and want.

Seeing him at work in the field, however, one might think that this young man, who has learned that every image is false, was a photojournalist. Assisted by a fixer who helps him gain access to a neighbourhood or estate, he scouts for locations, assembles his cast and explains to these youngsters, who are starting to gain assurance, what he wants from them.

At this point the work bifurcates, leaves the field of reportage and identifies with art. In fact, Bourouissa draws the mise-en-scènes of his ideas in his notebooks and records what is required to make them. What he is premeditating here are the lines of force, the diagonals, the distance between figures, their integration into the elements of the surroundings, the interplay of gazes, the rhythm of the image, the gesture that, radically reframed or not, must provoke two kinds of tension, one in the image, the other one between documentary and fiction.

On his desk, Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* features prominently, acting on his own work, analysed and coloured in terms of its level, its points of tension and its construction; like *Flagellation of Christ* by Piero della Francesca which inscribes in his work representations that are definitely Judeo-Christian. Also very important, that bloodied head by Caravaggio, whom Bourouissa claims was "the first photographer" because he invented, in painting, the photographic moment, and who knows, perhaps, even that decisive moment championed by Henri Cartier-Bresson.

The need to go back in the field alone, to change places. Aulnay. Cergy. Argenteuil. Clichy-sous-Bois. Ecouen. Courbevoie. Bobigny. Pantin... And recently Toulouse. Estates, stairways, roundabouts, the roofs of tower blocks... The place hardly matters, providing it is handsome and frequented, apprehended, sized up, worked. It is impossible to capture the functioning of a place in space, the way people there move, without spending a lot of time soaking it in, without getting a physical sense of it all. Experience precedes idea. Is not photography two-dimensional?

There is a need, as well, to think through a certain complexity in the world. As Bourouissa explains, "When I press the shutter button, I always hope that some totally unexpected event will enter the photo, without warning, because of someone who will have made it happen. This keeps me from enclosing the image in a construction; it allows the fiction to maintain a documentary aspect." The artist also works in video and has just made *The Blood Love*, four stagings of murders, with line drawings done directly on the wall.

Consequently, Mohamed Bourouissa likes to remember a chance occurrence when he was making the photograph of *The boxers*, the first, extremely allusive image in the *Périphérique* series. He gave his instructions to two people in the boxing room. He had prepared the scene. He wanted to make them move in a static duality. The fighter on the left was to place his hand behind, so that the other, with a very slight blur of movement, froze on this gesture. At this point one of the boxers took off his tee shirt and revealed a sublime back with a magnificent phoenix tattoo. This way the real has of inviting itself into the work, unanticipated by the photographer's gaze or thoughts, is a wonderful gift!

This history of chance brings to mind the words of critic Michael Fried about the images of Jeff Wall: "All the things that are prepared, constructed or organised are there in order to enable something unexpected to appear and, in appearing, to create the true beauty of the image, of all images."²

Later, as Jeff Wall did for *The Destroyed Room*, taking his inspiration from a painting by Eugène Delacroix, "Liberty Leading the People", which he hung on the ceiling over his bed so he could fall asleep to the sight of this revolutionary image, the young artist staged *La République* (inside front cover). This work was based on the principle that since the Republic draws its legitimacy from justice, a society that is not just makes the Republic fragile and causes it to lose its credibility.

It took the photographer some time to accept this image which he had sublimated so much that, on arrival, it was ultimately more pared down and more exact than he had imagined. Time passed. One day, he decided to paste it, in 4 x 3 metre poster format, on the walls of the République metro station in Paris. Who would say that Mohamed Bourouissa is not an engaged artist?

Indeed, when the movement of revolt swept through the French suburbs in the winter of 2005, it merely confirmed his own convictions. For, in his attacks on the logic of dominant and dominated, Bourouissa works to deconstruct media clichés about the suburbs, to question the stereotypes of their representation. As he sums up, "I deal with the problematic of power relations and I raise the question of the mechanics of power." Then, he indulges in stopping the flow of images which overwhelm us by proposing a plastic elaboration focused on a pile of defeated blown up television screens.

In his studio, Bourouissa hangs two kinds of images. On one side, formal ideas, references that he tries to develop in his own works: two American soldiers in Iraq; a Chinese man being arrested in a Paris sweatshop. Two journalistic images. On the other side, his own images, as if in Purgatory, pending the cropping or retouching that will save some of them. And for others, the bin.

We are a long way here from the studio-made portraits against a white ground of his early days, when he was influenced by Richard Avedon; or even before that, after the revelation of those photographs of Black urban culture in the streets of Brooklyn by the American Jamel Shabazz. "Me and my mates were totally into that in the late 1990s," he recalls. "We loved to dress in Lacoste. And yet no one talked about those times in photographs, nobody captured our youth and its identity. That's why I took up the camera."

Magali Jauffret
Translation by Charles Penwarden

1. "L'image suivante" de Georges Didi-Huberman, éditions de Minuit, 2002.

2. "Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein et le quotidien" de Michael Fried, Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne, n° 92, July 2005.