

P R A Z
D E L A V A L L A D E

Praz-Delavallade is pleased to present Bunch of Queequeg, an exhibition of new drawings by Soufiane Ababri and his first solo presentation in the US. The exhibition will be on view 10 July through 26 August, 2021.

“Eroticism opens the way to death. Death opens the way to the denial of our individual lives. Without doing violence to our inner selves, are we able to bear a negation that carries us to the farthest bounds of possibility?”

Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1957)

It's well past midnight at a salty New England inn when Ishmael, the narrator of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), is awoken by a strange bedfellow. Queequeg, a Polynesian harpooner, is looking for a place to sleep. He's introduced as an object of horror: candlelight reveals his “tropical tanning” to be a “purplish yellow” coat of Maori tattoos. “This wild cannibal, tomahawk between his teeth, sprang into bed with me,” Ishmael recalls. “I sang out, I could not help it now; and giving a sudden grunt of astonishment he began feeling me.” Melville never tells us what was felt – or indeed, eaten – but, by morning, Ishmael confesses, “You had almost thought I had been his wife.” The two men learn to love each other, in a story that has often been read as a coded tale of gay miscegenation.

Melville took his liberties. The Maori were known to cook their enemies but had long ceased that practice by the time *Moby Dick* was published. Rather, “cannibal” is invoked as a catch-all for savage, barbarian, uncivilized. For the demonized and desired Other. In the central work of Soufiane Ababri's exhibition “Bunch of Queequeg”, the artist has depicted himself as the harpooner, asleep while Ishmael observes him with a mixture of suspicion and lust. Melville's novel lies face-down on the bed, its back cover bearing the title of Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile* (2000). Said recognized Queequeg as exiled in a foreign land, not unlike Ababri, who was born in Rabat, Morocco and has lived in France for the past 17 years. Ababri's drawings confront the fetishization of men from the North African diaspora – and men of color throughout Europe and North America – as both destructive and fundamentally constitutive of the colonial psyche.

These latest drawings all belong to Ababri's “Bedwork” series, which the artist completes in repose. It's therefore fitting that they all engage with sexual politics. Here we see a white man riding atop an Arab man's shoulders, holding his support's severed head in his hand. Both men are turned away, so only the face of the undead Arab is visible, gazing back at his murderer with disappointment. The drawing recalls the Front Homosexuelle d'Action Révolutionnaire (Homosexual Revolutionary Action Front), founded in 1971 by Guy Hocquenghem and Françoise d'Eaubonne. A union between lesbians and gay men, FHAR was radical for its time in terms of gender, but men and women of color were still marginalized, when they were welcomed at all. As the group declared (in reference to the “Manifeste des 343 salopes”): “Nous sommes plus de 343 salopes / Nous nous sommes faits enculer par des Arabes / Nous sommes fiers et nous recommencerons”. The subversive charge of their claim is inseparable from its presumption of racial superiority. For what could be more transgressive than the colonizer being fucked by the colonized? While French troops were ravaging Algeria, white French gays were looking to get ravaged in the banlieues. The Arabs of their “revolutionary manifesto” were just a means to an end. The violation of a racial taboo is only thrilling when that taboo is simultaneously reinforced. *Qui se couche avec les chiens se lève avec des puces*. (Little has changed since 1971: Citebeur, whose name incorporates a racial slur, is still one of the most popular gay porn sites in France.)

Several works depict white killers who ate Black and Brown male flesh. The failed gay porn actor Luka Rocco Magnotta is shown drenched in the blood of Jun Lin, a Chinese university student he dismembered during

a casual hookup in Montreal in 2012. Magnotta was caught after posting a snuff film of the murder online, which showed Lin strapped to a bed beneath a poster for *Casablanca*. Ababri has also rendered the notorious American serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer with his bloody lips on a severed Black ass. Dahmer preyed on younger Black men, slaying at least twelve and consuming them, as if imitating America. Black bodies have always been chewed up and swallowed here.

Consensual cannibals abound in “Bunch of Queequeg”, too: see the couple nestled on a tile floor, blushing coquettishly, as one eats from his lover’s chest, peeled open like a fig. A scalped man is consoled by a disembodied white hand, while a telephone number – Ababri’s childhood home line – floats above his exposed brain. These are scenes of tender vulnerability, of the body exposing its most intimate parts. The heart and the head are, after all, the seat of creativity, and so a rending of the flesh there is also a kind of artistic exhibitionism. Ababri is baring it all.

In his 1928 “Anthropophagic Manifesto”, Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade argued that culture is inherently cannibalistic – an agglomeration of different sources metabolized into a single body. Only by devouring European and indigenous cultures alike could Brazilian artists shatter the hierarchical distinctions that kept them apart and, in the process, create a truly new art. Cannibalism, therefore, can be a kind of creative destruction. An act of devotion, also. For to eat something is to love it to death.

– Evan Moffitt

Soufiane Ababri (b. 1985 Rabat) lives and works between Paris and Tangier. His work has been included in institutional exhibitions such as Attention, Glasgow International Festival for Contemporary Art, Glasgow (2021); *Welcome Home Vol. II*, Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden, Marrakech (2020); *Lignes des Vies - Une Exposition de Légendes*, MAC/VAL, Vitry (2019); *Humez L’odeur Des Fleurs Pendant Qu’il En Est Encore Temps*, Marathon des Mots, Toulouse (2018). Recent solo exhibitions include *YES! Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï Aï ... AM!*, Mendes Wood DM, Brussels (2021); *A Circus Act Behind Bars of Lilac And Blood*, Kulte Gallery, Rabat (2020); *Something New Under The Little Prince’s Body*, Dittrich & Schlechtriem, Berlin (2020); *Tropical Concrete Gym Park*, Glassbox, Paris (2019); *Call Me By Their Names*, Ravnika Gallery Space, Ljubljana (2019); *Memories of a Solitary Cruise*, The Pill, Istanbul (2019); *Here Is a Strange and Bitter Crop*, Space, London (2018); *Haunted Lives*, Praz-Delavallade, Paris (2018). His work has most recently been acquired by the collections of FRAC Poitou-Charentes; Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden, Marrakech; MAC/VAL Musée d’art contemporain du Val-de-Marne, Vitry; and the X Museum, Beijing.