

Ruins

The room is deep, the bed massive. The sheets have been removed and the cushions fluffed. The walls are green and the floor black. A TV set hangs on the wall. This is probably a room in an upscale hotel. Everything seems to float as in a dream. *In bed with Hannibal*; This is the title of one of the works in the *Topography of Terror* series by Dalila Dalléas.

Hannibal himself is off-screen, and yet the room is alive, bearing witness. Who is Hannibal? The perpetrator of a trauma, of anguish. One thinks of the "Colonel's" son known for his taste for drugs, luxury, prostitutes and violence. Perhaps it was "him" who was with "her" in this bed that evokes the bloody mattress on the floor of an empty geometrical room in the diptych entitled *Lucian Freud - the Butcher*.

A bit like an empty theater illustrates the idea of a theater, this empty room expresses the violence that was unleashed in it. Dalila Dalléas paints violence without ever representing it directly. Her paintings express an altered brutality, where the raw colors of abused bodies are veiled. She draws the faces of children traumatized by war, smiling alarmingly in the full sunlight as in a class photo, a clean lifeless face, turbaned in fluorescent fabrics, luxurious purple or green rooms inhabited by motionless, disturbing sitting creatures... Her work portrays the long period that follows a shock. Long ... yes, but how long? When they haunt the ruins, whether abstract or material, when they escape from oblivion, traumas become "places of remembrance" (see Pierre Nora). The ruins left by violence are what Dalila Dalléas explores in her art.

Traces of violence are visible throughout the work of the artist. These traces are indelible, underlying the urban skin in *Time of Massaker* and *Pallastrasse*, or engraved in the suffering lying deep in the heart of the artist herself, as in *Bedroom*, *Room* or *Sheikha Moza*. Dalila Dalléas works can be viewed as a complex pathway through the maze of her own fears and through the barely healed wounds of contemporary history. At the heart of this web, the artist makes visible a thread, by including herself in her paintings in the series of self-portraits entitled *Taboo*. This thread is that of her identity. Pulling on it leads to everything else.

Born in Oran (Algeria), 30 years after the start of the war in Algeria and almost 15 years before the start of the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, Dalila Dalléas lives and works in Berlin. She has not experienced the brunt of the devastating terror of the Algerian or German wars but her work is a constant reference to them. And although nothing she paints looks real everything is always recognizable, as in a dream. In her paintings she creates dreamlike environments and places of reminiscence. The assembly of flat colors with the strong physical presence of the texture of the canvas, the unreal perspectives, the variety of colors and the boldness of contrasts with fluorescent bright pink in particular, plunge the viewer into an atmosphere evocative of some film sets from David Lynch's movies, where the environment itself is alive and a character in its own right. This system of dreamlike apparitions, of recollections and of condensed historical references creates a pleasurable confusion of time and space. While we see the artist physically taking part in the historic events she is scrutinizing, we realize, almost abruptly, that she is in fact scrutinizing her own depths. At that point, a same cold neutrality becomes apparent, revealing a deep melancholy in the ruins of *Time of Massaker* and in the portraits and self-portraits of the *Taboo* series. Thus an analogy involving a background of sexual violence suddenly appears between the work *Room* and the spread out contours of the red flowers.

These allegorical and undefined places painted by Dalila Dalléas are in fact a description of her inner architecture and the very foundations of her psyche. Her works are akin to a descent into the roots of her thinking. A descent that takes her to the ruins of History,

and, in the process, activates collective memories, leading her to engage in a close relationship with the universal.

Johan-Hilel Hamel

Director of Espace d'art Espinoa / 4B

¹ *Les enfants du soleil*, 220cm x 150cm / This work is part of the series entitled *Algérie Année 0* that is not presented here. It can be viewed on the artist's web site: www.daliladalleas.com

² *Lounés Matoub*, 30cm x 40cm / This work is part of the series entitled *Algérie Année 0* that is not presented here. It can be viewed on the artist's web site: www.daliladalleas.com

Interview

Johan-Hilel Hamel & Dalila Dalléas

Johan-Hilel Hamel: Could you describe the creative process and preparatory reflections leading to the *Topography of Terror* series?

Dalila Dalléas / This series is the result of a convergence of a plurality of desires, obsessions, interests. First, there is the presence of dreams I've had for a very long time, dreams of apartments with suites of rooms, with often a room containing sheer terror. Then there is the discovery in Berlin of a place bearing the same name, *Topographie des Terrors*. It is a museum built over the former headquarters of the Nazis, where they interrogated their political enemies. This museum shows how a city or, to a lesser extent, an apartment, can become an instrument of terror, a trap where terror reigns. It is this museum that inspired me to study the buildings of Berlin, in an attempt to understand them. A bit like I did with the faces of the Algerian civil war from some of my previous work, *Algérie Année 0*.

These rooms don't only refer to Nazism. In fact, I consider that this period of history belongs to humanity and I feel the right to make it my own. *Topography of Terror* also exists in Algeria and in every country.

JHH / Your painting is figurative and yet very unrealistic and looking at your work, I have the feeling that you start by painting tragic events that you then cover with a light veil of beauty that hides the shocking effect of the "clammy intimacy" of death and terror. Is this veil the result of the gradual obliteration of past stigmas?

DD / Yes, it's true. Several times I wanted to paint scenes of violence but in the end they were very mild, with beautiful colors ... Either I'm not able to paint violence realistically, or I attenuate it but unconsciously.

JHH / Analyzing your work globally, I detect a relationship between *Taboo* and the other two series. Maybe for you, self-portraits have an introspective dimension, close to psychoanalysis?

DD / A relationship, I agree. As for psychoanalysis, I don't know because I feel far removed from any psychoanalytical process. I do not have the feeling I'm analyzing myself by painting self-portraits. I rather have the sensation of going deep into the workings of the act of painting and of paint as a material. For me portrait-painting is a demanding exercise. It is also a powerful reference to the history of art.

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