



SIMON NJAMI
describes

Dalila Dalléas Bouzar

Princesses, 2018

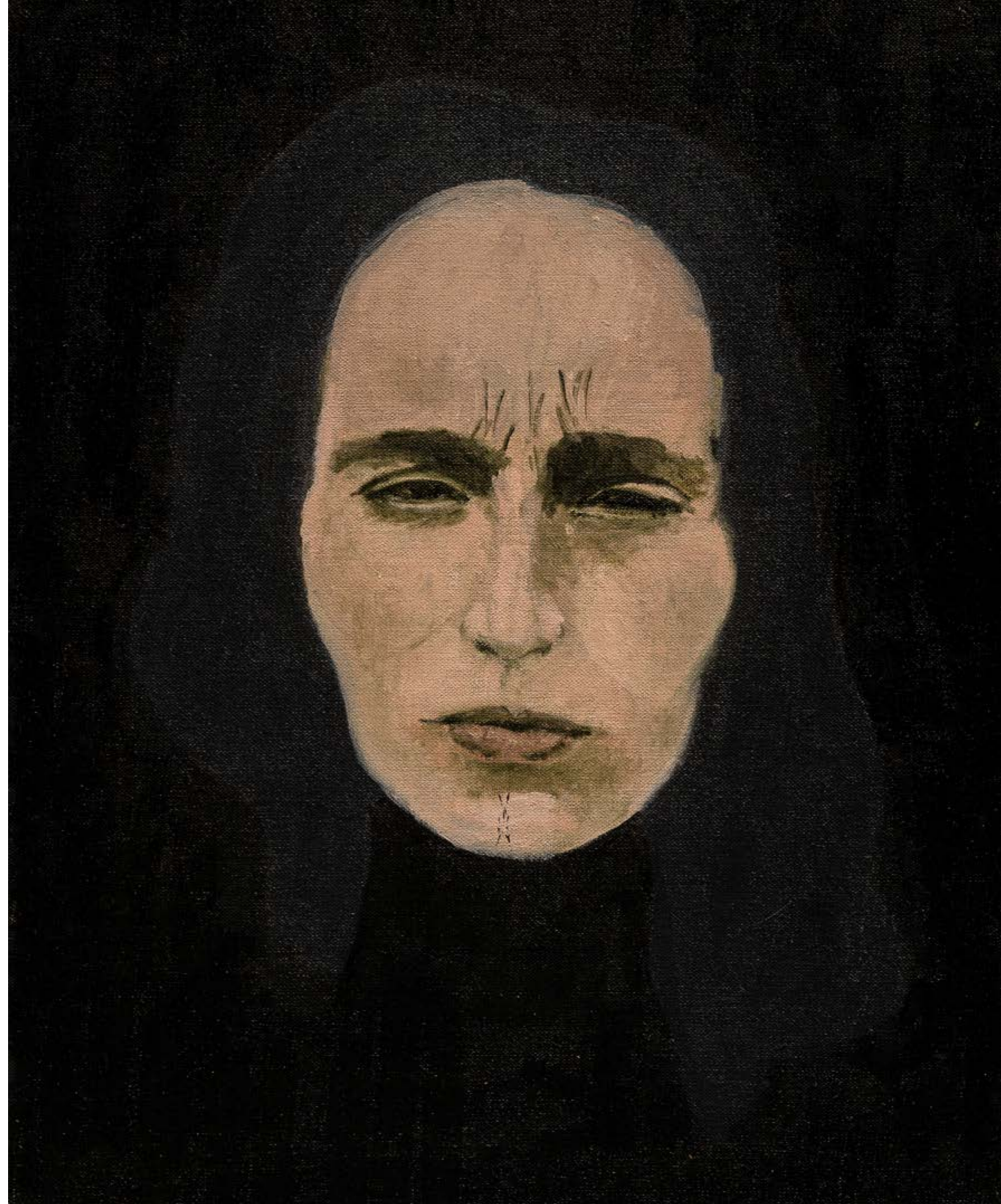
Oil on canvas

50 x 40 cm each (12 in total)

OBJECTIVE DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

We see a group of twelve women. Some seem older than others: two of them in particular look much older. Some are veiled, some are dressed like queens with crowns and some wear jewels, but they are all on a black background as if they were coming out of the frame and the canvas. When you look at them there is a difference: some seem to be more classical than others, but they all look as if they are royalty. The way that they are all grouped together could remind us of a portrait gallery, as if they all belong to the same family. Some are paler than others, which makes us think of certain regions of the world, since we always carry preconceptions. And the colour of their hair also varies - some seem to be fair-haired, some have black hair. There is a general feeling of luxury and pride, and that they

are from high society. All the jewellery they are wearing is very expensive and very well crafted. They all have a different expression: some are indifferent, some are smiling, and you wonder when you look at those twelve women, what it is that they are trying to tell us.

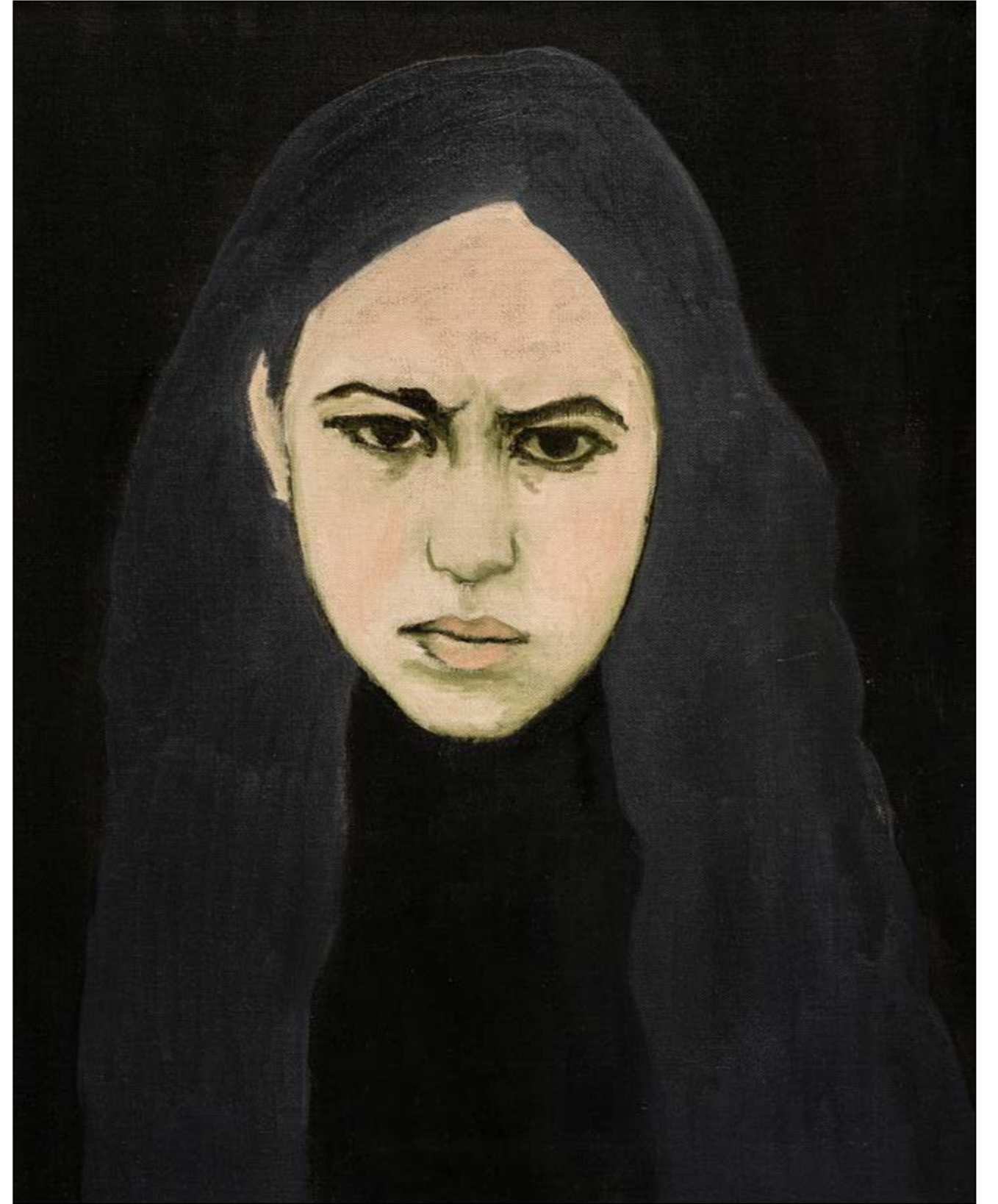




ABOUT THE ARTIST AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CURATOR

One important thing to start with is to say that the artist, Dalila Dalléas Bouzar, is the one who made sense of hair. Dalila is a woman in her early 40s of Algerian origin who studied in France. She was confronted with this double bind - when you have the illusion that you are however you define yourself, and then you move somewhere and you discover that you are not only this, but, as in Lacanian theory, that we also depend on and are defined by the other's gaze. I tend to illustrate this through the fictional character Robinson Crusoe, who started to go mad because he was alone on an island. He could not remember who he really was because we also exist socially. He was saved by the appearance of the character Friday, who symbolises the other, and then he remembered who he was.

Coming back to Dalila, being in Paris and from this Algerian background, she discovered in a sense that she is Algerian. This reminds me of American author James Baldwin when he was talking about skin colour, saying that the black factor happened only when he exited Harlem, because in Harlem no one would call anyone black because everyone was black. So, it is the same thing. I'm not sure she was conscious of the love-hate relationship that exists between Algeria and France. And all of a sudden, she had to enter a history that she didn't necessarily think was hers. As a woman coming from Algeria, she was also trying to show who she is, as a woman and what she liked to do. Those elements are key to her work and are informing her work very strongly.



THE EXPERIMENTAL CATALOGUE: *Art in a digital time*

IN CONTEXT

Dalila Dalléas Bouzar studied classical painting, meaning there is a notion of always enhancing the nobility, the pose, the seriousness, the importance of the background. The piece is called 'Princesses', hence all the adornments, the crowns, the different jewels and elements that are included. She started this series by making a self-portrait and then she started to modify it.

What it could tell us is that she is all these women, even if they don't all carry her features. And, of course, we are not talking about being a woman: the take on this work is we only look at a 'lady' or 'princess'; we don't look at regular people. She wanted, through the power of art, to transform any woman into a princess. Of course, the decorum is not what she meant, it is just metaphorical, it has nothing to do with jewellery or luxury, it has to do with something that is inside. All the adornments are just there to reflect what is inside.

This piece is talking about female power, a power that women are not always informed of and, of course, it is dealing directly with the region the artist comes from. But then this is what I like about a work of art: anyone, any woman, could be in that series of portraits. And any man could remember that any woman is a princess. So, coming from a very particular experience, she is sending a message that goes beyond the particularity of her background. At times, artists are using the word mixed media and could go in diverse directions. If someone just adds some golden leaf to an acrylic or an oil artwork for example, then they define it as mixed media, when it's not that mixed in the media. There is a kind of three-dimensionality that one cannot grasp through the flat screen of a computer or mobile phone. When you look at an artwork there is matter, things that you can touch and smell, and you have this illusion of those features popping out of the work and this is the physicality of the gaze that you would have when you are confronted with the artwork.

The way they are grouped is as if it is one painting; it is like a story made of many sentences - you cannot take one word out of the sentence, otherwise the sentence wouldn't make any sense.

I saw this piece last year and I selected it because I have seen it physically. From a practical manner for the fair, I have avoided all three-dimensional works because I don't think they are rendered well; it might be my mistrust of the digital representation. I remember one of my biggest emotions as a kid. I used to see *Les Femmes d'Alger* by Pablo Picasso in books. One day, my parents took me to New York and I saw the artwork in real life and it was quite a revelation because no matter how precise the images in a book could be, it couldn't be as big as the painting. And no matter how good the photograph, it could not render the matter. I could see the surface, I could see the traces, I could feel it physically. It is important when we are going digital for me to be as fair as possible to the work. And this is one of the reasons why I need to see the works I select.



THE EXPERIMENTAL CATALOGUE:

Art in a digital time

ABOUT THE TITLE OF THE SHOW THIS WORK IS EXHIBITED IN:

There is a French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who said that today is an ancient future and a future past. He played with the notions of yesterday and tomorrow, which meant that actually everything is viewed for today. He also said that we don't have the same notion of time according to the gaze we are putting on it.

The day after for me is the day that comes after today - it's not tomorrow. This means there is a definition of today. When we say today, there is a slight element that people tend to forget, that we are only focusing on today, but people tend to forget that today is made out of yesterday. We are what we are today because of what happened the day before. And what is going to happen the day after depends on what we are today and the choices we made and on the experiences we had.

We are living in a very interesting time when all the governments and leaders are spending their time projecting, but they have been proven wrong this time. In France, for instance, they tell us something this week and the week after they tell us something different, which I think is a global case. This means that if we were focusing on today, maybe we would just think about the day instead of thinking about the day after, the week after, knowing that we can only inform tomorrow or the day after from the knowledge we have of today. So, this is why I called the show The Day After.

This brings us to the theme of your issue: how are we going to fare in the art world the day after this? There was a before and there is an after. It doesn't mean that museums are not going to open again. But as far as I'm concerned, I encountered a couple of reflections I wasn't expecting because I was busy with setting up within a space with walls... then all of a sudden, I was confronted with the idea of curating a show online. The Kampala Art Biennale in Uganda had been due to open in August. It went digital and I had to rethink the whole thing. For me, the digital times aren't there to replicate the physical times. For instance, in Kampala, I decided it would take place in a mountain, and within the mountain I made a space so the viewer would not have the illusion of visiting a gallery, because he wouldn't be visiting a gallery, no matter how well I could reproduce it, so I thought let's do something else.

That's exactly what I did at Abu Dhabi Art. There is a booth for people who need a booth but what I thought of was a show in the desert where works would be floating in the air and people would feel time passing. We start at dawn and end at twilight. So, while they are visiting, they see the shift of light. It is something I wouldn't have come up with because I never needed to. So, today we find ourselves forced into the day after. But what would the day after look like compared to the today we are already living as a day after? This is basically why I called the show The Day After; there was always a great illusion there.



CAN WE CHANGE OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE FASTNESS OF THE DIGITAL ERA?

I was much slower before the pandemic and before I was forced to deal with these tools. Before people would call me because I was travelling all the time. Nowadays I am doing so many conferences and debates online that usually never happens. A friend of mine put together an exhibition and he said it was the most expensive exhibition ever made and the least attended. It stemmed from an experiment that began when he was coming from the Prado museum in Madrid, Spain and he bumped into a couple coming from Australia. He asked them why they were there, and they said they wanted to see some Velasquez. It is a long trip from Australia to Spain, and those people came just to see Velasquez. So, for his show he created a house with works in it, but in order to see the show you had to spend 24 hours locked inside. Only 10 people accepted to be locked in for 24 hours and were able to attend the show. I would like people to accept to be locked up because then you give a price to your time and it is not just about picking and paying. I love going back to a show when I feel I need to go back because there are always things you haven't seen or a juxtaposition you haven't picked. I love flipping pages, to feel the book, to feel the matter. I enjoy my old-fashionedness.

