

Abdelkader Benchamma

The Unbearable Likeness

Curated by Yasmina Reggad

14 March – 5 May

For his second solo show at the gallery, French-Algerian artist Abdelkader Benchamma presents works on paper and sculptural installations, which use the gallery space as a stage to develop new demonstrations and theories. While Benchamma's *Blue Beam Project* from his 2013 show at the gallery meticulously studied the conspiracy theories of a NASA satellite project and the construction of social projections and popular knowledge, *The Unbearable Likeness* draws on this research to address one of the key elements in the formation of the collective unconscious: the rumour.

While the state and secret agencies were plotting in the dark in the *Blue Beam Project*, in this exhibition the human mind becomes the protagonist and individuals witness events as reported accounts are passed through the word of mouth. Actions, time and places are distorted to give birth to multiple narratives that the artist has been collecting with a predilection for fantastical and extraordinary apparitions or visions. Benchamma builds on our abilities to perceive the world the way we do and highlights the unprecedented phenomena that ultimately either sheds light on grey areas or opens new territories in scientific theory.

The artist explores the ways in which irrational and contagious rumours are transmitted and deconstructs the process of proving the accuracy of the events. Nevertheless, with continuous circulation of communication, these events are drawn, printed, filmed or photographed to fit the intentions of the rumourmongers, which is to ultimately convince the people. In several works, Benchamma questions the ontologies of the imagery to illustrate or prove that the extraordinary event did in fact take place. He highlights the direct relationship between the very nature of the reproducibility of images, the manual or mechanical techniques to alter them, and the multiplicity of reported and transmitted stories that they generate.

One such example is a series of ink drawings, entitled *Zeitoun*, which are based on available photographs and accounts from the Marian apparition, in which Christian and Muslim observers in Zeitoun (near Cairo, Egypt) witnessed the luminous silhouette of the Virgin Mary hovering in a cloud of incense above the Coptic Church of Saint Mark. During 1968–70, people are said to have experienced various similar sights such as holy figures, birds, as well as a 'rain of diamonds'. Other instances include works such as *The Battle of L.A.*, named after 'The Great Los Angeles Air Raid', which draws inspiration from the 1940s rumour that alternates between an enemy attack and a case of ufology. In the resulting charcoal and ink works, Benchamma attempts to decompose the techniques used in photo retouching to contrast the black and white in order to recreate the spectacular event.

On the other hand, the *Paréidolie* series is a reminder of the tricks that the mind plays through illusions of familiar patterns when they don't actually exist. Yet rumours, which are based on structures of knowledge and beliefs, reveal the collective expectations, fantasies, needs and anxiety of a society at a certain time. While bearing witness to the troubled periods of history, rumours also provide a fertile ground for scientific studies of the mental functions and processes. Therefore, the large drawings resemble marbles that usually cover the interior of churches and are said to produce hallucinations or enhanced spiritual experiences.

The Unbearable Likeness not only encompasses Benchamma's prolific oeuvre and techniques, but also includes a colossal installation made of torn walls, which defies the gallery's architecture and the traditional model of a 'white cube'. Playing with the design of the exhibition space where the permanent stand-alone white walls and lighting equipment are exposed, the artist produces a *mise en abyme*, an exhibition within the exhibition. Possible artifices used in the fabrication of the rumour are also disclosed in the series of ink, charcoal and collage works such as *Simulacre*, as well as in *Faux paysage de nuit*, which transports the viewers back in a theatrical set.

Artist's Biography

Abdelkader Benchamma (b. 1975, Mazamet, France) lives and works between Paris and Montpellier, and studied Fine art at l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Montpellier and Paris. He imposes constraints upon his process to create delicately executed and dynamic drawings of states of matter. Events explode off the page and are animated by fusing graphic techniques from printing, engraving, landscape and scientific drawing. In his scenes he reveals the purity and intensity of lines to express powerful and ambiguous atmospheres, which probe notions of a stable reality. Benchamma uses these varied techniques and media to explore the constructed aspect of reality, inspired by cosmology, science fiction, existentialist theatre and literature. He has created in-situ wall drawings for The Drawing Centre in New York, *Turbulences II* at the Boghossian Foundation, Brussels and a group show at the Louis Vuitton Foundation. His works were included in *Future of a Promise*, a Pan Arab exhibition during the 54th Venice Biennale, *Told / Untold / Retold* at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, and *Constantine, Capital of Arab Culture* festival in Algeria. Recipient of the Paris-based The Drawing Now Prize, he was also nominated for the Le Meurice Prize in 2015. Benchamma's works are housed in several collections such as the FRAC Languedoc-Roussillon, the Musée de Beaux Arts-Orleans and Artotheque de Pessac in France, among others.