

Morgan, Hayley, *A Single Body, Suppressed*,
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A SINGLE BODY, SUPPRESSED

Words Hayley Morgan

Mouna Karray did not consider herself an artist until she moved from Tunisia to Tokyo in 1997. From this point on, her work has been an outpouring of personal experience and intellectual concerns. An upbringing in a Tunisia—suffocated by Ben Ali's regime—has its obvious influence on Karray's artistic dialogue and her impossible resolve. In her photographs we see oppression, secrecy, struggle and protection. We also see (the idea of) invisibility.

Geography has had a role in Karray's practice, but it has never assumed the lead. 'Place' is just one of the concepts that backdrop

her work, waving a rose back and forth for the principal forces: tension and suggestion, and the friction that emerges from their combination.

HAYLEY MORGAN Tell me about your childhood and some of your clearest, earliest memories growing up in Sfax.

MOUNA KARRAY I spent most of my childhood

dreaming, and playing alone or with my animals. My first memories are by the seaside with my family, where I spent most of my time in the water.

MORGAN You moved to Japan with an interest in questioning identity, specifically, your own identity within a new society. Did this affect your practice? Does the act of self-observation come naturally to you?

KARRAY I travelled to Tokyo to study photography, with the particular ambition to discover another country, another culture, a world other than my own. The question of identity came later, after the initial months of studying Japanese and trying to understand Japanese society and the new city I lived in. It is only in an effort to understand the 'other' that we actually begin to ask questions about ourselves. Sometimes

you have to travel the furthest to discover that which is the most intimate or familiar. In my first year I photographed the streets and the people in Tokyo, however many of these pictures seemed irrelevant to me. I was aware of the disparity between the Japanese culture and my own, and the difficulties this presented. I asked myself,

again and again: how can I create more intense photos? How can I reduce the gap that separates me from my subject? Do I have the right distance to approach my subjects? Gradually the answers led

me to a level of introspection ... The subject was no longer Tokyo, but myself framed within the city of Tokyo, where I spent the vast majority of my time. This was how I gave birth to the first series of self-portraits in the city, *Tokyo Mon amour et self in Circumstances*.

MORGAN Did the 'Japan period' alter the way you viewed yourself as an artist, the way you perceived your output? What were your observations of the artistic—and even the expat artistic—community in Tokyo?

KARRAY I had not considered myself an artist before living in Tokyo. Japan affected me like a chemical developer on a black and white image, resulting in varying shades of grey. Japan has been instrumental to my career—it was the nodal point that triggered a personal approach to my work that I continue today in various forms.

MORGAN Can you tell me about the obstructions (for instance, periods of isolation and forced introspection) that have pushed you to produce work? How important is tension or conflict in generating new images?

KARRAY More so than my childhood in Tunisia, Japan was an intense period of isolation and remoteness that led me to reflect on the idea of 'otherness' and to pose existential questions. My first series was born from [these experiences]. However, these feelings of isolation and remoteness were not necessarily a result of place or geography. These states of being, which compel me to create, are feelings I've also experienced in other circumstances, in other places, in different times.

The detention and exclusion [of Tunisians], the deprivation of our freedom of movement and expression by the repressive forces of a violent dictatorship led me to create the *Noir* series. This body of work comprises eight pictures in black-and-white square format, whereby my body is imprisoned in a white cloth, with one hand escaping to operate the shutter release cable. It is in these instances of confinement and tension that one feels the impulse to resist, to move and to create.

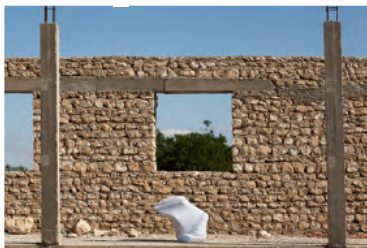
MORGAN Some works in your coming solo show at Tyburn are newly produced. Tell me about them.

KARRAY The series *Nobody Will Talk About Us* will be exhibited for the first time in its entirety at Tyburn Gallery. Some of these photos—taken in 2012—were shown as part of an urban outdoor exhibition in Tunisia. However my final choice of images, which have been reformatted and edited, were completed over the final months of 2015.

MORGAN Where are you based now? Has this setting contributed to the development of *Nobody Will Talk About Us*?

KARRAY My base fluctuates depending on where I am working ... My studio is in Paris but I carry out projects in Paris and Sfax, among other places. Much of my work has been photographed in Tunisia, however, my post-capture work is realised in my Paris studio. I am familiar with southern Tunisia, which borders Sfax—my hometown beside the sea—and stretches to the desert. The first images of

Mouna Karray,
Nobody Will Talk About Us, 2012–2015, photograph, dimensions variable



Mouna Karray,
Nobody Will Talk About Us, 2012–2015, photograph, dimensions variable



Nobody Will Talk About Us were taken about 30 kilometres from Sfax, where a mineral and barren world begins. From there, I then went down several hundred kilometres to the southwest.

MORGAN There are themes of secrecy, protection or concealment in your images—particularly series such as *Murmurer* and *Nobody Will Talk About Us*—but also a distinct curiosity in the dialogue. Where do these contemplations stem from? Can you expand on their origins?

KARRAY Secrecy and concealment are inherent in the way I tell stories and convey my thoughts. I do not seek to reproduce the invisible, but instead to render it visible. In *Murmurer*, walls [appear as] abandoned open borders. These are enigmatic walls with unique features, appearing as though they are torn between a tragic past and an uncertain future. Such structures have always fascinated me. In some of the works in *Nobody Will Talk About Us* we also find these anomalies: almost absent structures whose disturbing presence arouses curiosity. Similarly, the captive body—the restricted subject of the series—seems to call out to us, depicted [as it is] along roadsides, paths and among local people. We do not understand its presence. I refuse to provide a direct message or explicit purpose to the image. I prefer quiet and suggestive questioning.

MORGAN The confronting idea of 'reality' is also percolating in your work. Given your upbringing in Tunisia, could this be suggestive of the anticipation of collapsing walls/systems or the exposing of truths?

KARRAY My creative work is born out of an inner tension, as well as a tension apparent between those around me. Collapsing walls and systems do not really soothe any of these tensions; the realities may change but other walls, new systems, fresh lies rise up to replace the previous ones. The illusion remains, along with the suffering.

MORGAN Can you talk a little about the relationship between the unidentified, anonymous body and the revealed 'truth' of the south Tunisian landscape?

KARRAY The captive body in a white bag is a metaphor for the disinherited Tunisian south, a south forgotten by authorities since independence and overlooked up to the present day. The figure embodies the solitude, confinement and restrictions placed on these people in their difficult conditions. They exist in a silent poverty, on arid soils whose foundations were rich with minerals, which have been confiscated and stripped from these oppressed—but not submissive—souls. I took the road that crosses these dusty lands, an area that is lifeless yet inhabited, where the captive figure moves. The body is moving within this universe as its matrix; it extracts itself with a gesture that breaks its confinement. This body, in its struggle, in its encounters, in its wanderings, is a figure of resistance, a figure pushing for freedom and the re-enchantment of an abandoned land.

MORGAN I was reading about your previous use of the square as a format, which [apparently] refers to the Islamic architectural concept of aesthetics where the square is a basic element ...

KARRAY Yes that's correct, the square is a fundamental element of Islamic architecture. The sleek style of North African mosques has been as much of an influence on me as Japanese minimalism. However, in *Nobody Will Talk About Us* the landscape format

became an obvious choice as it allowed me to capture the vastness of the landscape; it left me with more freedom. As this series [offers up] a journey and a quest, I wanted the frame to be open, so the landscape and the body are not enclosed in a square format.

MORGAN The symbolism of the body confined sack seems representative of oppression or struggle—is this directly linked to that of Ben Ali's regime?

KARRAY Yes, absolutely, imprisonment and oppression are subjects that have always haunted me and continue to because, through Ben Ali's party and their repressive system, he is still there. I started to express and explore enslavement and suffocation with my series *Noir*, which showed my body trapped in a white cloth. The series represented a struggle and resistance against repression, deprivation of movement and lack of freedom of expression.

MORGAN I read the idea of using a sack was sparked by something you witnessed in real life: a live cockerel held in a bag on a bus. For me, this sight would be unusual but perhaps it's commonplace almost unnoticed in the environment you were in. This divergence kind of lends itself to the way we see, or don't see, things going on around us. Is invisibility still an issue in south Tunisia?

KARRAY [The cockerel] was a distant memory from my adolescence. It was perhaps a common sight for people around me, but to me it

seemed unusual and that's why it stuck in my unconscious, only to be revealed later on. What is visible for me may be invisible to another, what is strange may appear familiar, the absurd, common. How do we attract the other to what they do not see? The *Murmurer* series explicates that which is invisible within the country: before that, who was concerned about the existence of these walls, of their previous vocation or their possible future? By photographing them, I made them visible.

MORGAN On a very practical level, it difficult to make the work that you do? Is it a really hard thing to go out and take photographs of someone in a sack in these very particular landscapes? Do people care?

KARRAY During the dictatorship it was difficult to walk down the street and take photos, there was always a police officer that would appear and want to know what I was photographing and why I was photographing it—if I had a permit to do so. Luckily I had my tricks to avoid them destroying the negatives. After the revolution, it became relatively easy; shooting someone in a bag obviously aroused curiosity, but people would let me photograph in their environment without any problems.

MORGAN Finally, who is inside the sack? I wonder so much if it is you.

KARRAY For *Noir*, it was me: a prisoner photographer whose hand frees creation. For *Nobody Will Talk About Us*, I used a model because I wanted to distance myself from the captive subject, the symbol of southern resistance.

All images courtesy the artist and Tyburn Gallery.

Nobody Will Talk About Us is showing at Tyburn Gallery, London, from 8 April to 21 May. tyburngallery.com

Mouna Karray, *Nobody Will Talk About Us*, 2012–2010, photograph, dimensions variable



Hayley Morgan is a Berlin-based writer.