



Alia Ali, Constellation, 2019, Archival Pigment Print, kaschieret, gerahmt, 122 x 91,5 cm, Ed. 5 + 1 AP + 1 EP

# Galerie—Peter—Sillem

Presents

## *FLUX*

by Alia Ali

Friday, November 1st, 2019 // 18h00

Textile unites and divides us, both physically and symbolically. While its functional purposes are evident, its indexical capacities are not. Textile constitutes a nexus in which politics, economics, and histories collide. In her series *FLUX*, artist Alia Ali draws the viewer's attention to the textile as a document in which politics, economics and histories collide. Focusing specifically on wax print, Ali asks, how did these textiles obtain their names? Wax print—a wax-resistant dyeing technique—exists under various monikers, including African wax print, Dutch wax prints, Ankara and batik. These names reveal that colonial histories and economic reactions are woven into the processes and patterns that define the print. A vibrant aesthetic obscures an iniquitous past and embodies a dynamic narrative which accentuates the complex conditions by which these textiles have come into existence.

*FLUX* is a series of shifting photographic artworks that embody silhouettes that are warped by textile, saturated in colors and a medley of motifs. Each frame is uniquely upholstered with wax print sourced from Cote d'Ivoire. While some of the images distort visibility, others create hypervisibility almost negating themselves into animated forms of camouflage. The outburst of saturated colors and hyperoptic motifs in these images, lend themselves to vibrating results obscuring the complex and sometimes iniquitous conditions by which these textiles came into fruition and destabilizing the source(s) from where they came from. The multiple dimensionality creates a kaleidoscope of perspectives, horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, in that this material has come into existence across borders over land and water, and vertically in that they draw from and evoke cosmic, mythical and religious inspirations. Furthermore, these particular wax prints are a key to mapping the colonial trade routes. While they certainly can be seen as escapist dreamscapes, they are also objects of oppression and capitalism.

In most cases the fabric is defined by its maker, but these fabrics in flux are an exception. Who names them? Is it the entity who produces the cloth, or the entity who consumes it? Or is it, perhaps, the one who ensures their passage into a new geographic coordinate? Just like denim raises the question of being French or American, or because of its use of indigo, is it Japanese, Indian or Ghanaen? One could follow a similar line of questioning with wax print: is it Indian, Chinese, Javanese, Dutch or West African, and if so, then what part of West Africa, exactly? What *is* clear is that these particular wax prints present a literal and conceptual space with hidden stories and promised potentiality. They conjure pride and pity, celebration and rejection, power and greed.

While the classification of this cloth is complex, its origins are not. Wax prints have come into existence by a variety of cultures. Batik was first seen in India, China and Java. With the colonial trading that took place within the region, between the British and the Dutch, objects, ideas, and humans were consistently being traded, and it was by water that this passage would occur. Fabric requires water, not only for the growth and harvesting of the fibers and dyeing techniques, but for their migration, as well. The trans-global trade routes networked across the oceans and seas from Europe, around Africa, along the Arabian coast, through South Asia reaching East Asia, and back.



effect would occur, causing the pigment to seep into the fabric in unintended places. While these batiks were rejected in Java, markets on other parts of the trade routes, particularly along the African coastline, embraced them. An alternative narrative suggests that in the late 19th century, several thousand Ghanaian soldiers served in the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army. These individuals would bring back the rejected batiks to Ghana and gift them to their families. The fabric fever caught on and today these fabrics are widely found in Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire and Namibia, and yet, to this day, the majority of the production takes place in the Netherlands, China and India.

These fabrics in flux are a commodity once considered as precious and as commonplace as gold, frankincense, myrrh, jewelry and, as previously mentioned, humans. *FLUX* questions the very nature of how things get named, how they are translated, and how, eventually, are reinterpreted. Furthermore, it questions the intention of their production. If it is not for the preservation of heritage, then is it for the propagation of economic wealth? And for that matter, whose wealth?



*Orange Palms & Radio (left to right), FLUX Series, by Alia Ali 2019*

IN DIALOGUE WITH VENETIA PORTER // Saturday, November 2nd // 11h

Venetia Porter is a curator of Islamic and Contemporary Middle East art at the British Museum where she has been since 1989. She has a BA in Arabic and Persian and an MPhil in Islamic Art from the University of Oxford. Her PhD from the University of Durham is on the history and architecture of Medieval Yemen. She has curated two major exhibitions at the British Museum, *Word into Art* (2006) and *Hajj: journey to the heart of Islam* (2012)

and was the lead curator for the Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World which opened in October 2018.

Her research and publications range from Arabic inscriptions to contemporary art and include *Islamic Tiles* (1995), *Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum* (2011). She is also a contributor to *The Islamic World: A history through objects* (2018) and recently edited her mother's autobiography *Thea Porter's scrapbook* (2019). Her current project is a book on the British Museum's collection of works on paper by artists of the Middle East.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Alia Ali is a Yemeni-Bosnian-US multi-media artist. Having traveled to sixty-seven countries, lived in seven and grown up among five languages, her most comfortable mode of communication is through image and multi-sensory mediums. Her extensive travels have led her to process the world through interactive experiences and the belief that the interpretation of verbal and written language has dis-served particular communities and presents more of a threat than a means of understanding.

Alia's aesthetic interests stem from people, place, and the processes which unite and divide us, all at once. Her work reflects on the politics and poetics of contested notions surrounding the topics of identity, physical borders, universality, mental/physical spaces of confinement, and the inherent dualism that exists in everything. Her work blurs the lines between what we claim to be objective and subjective, illusion and reality, truth and interpretation.

Alia's work has been featured in publications including the *Financial Times*, *Le Monde*, *Elle*, *Vogue*, *Hyperallergic*, and *Harper's Bazaar Arabia*. She has won numerous awards including the LensCulture Emerging Artists Award, the Allan Sekula Social Documentary Grant, the Magenta Foundation's Emerging Talent Award, and Gold in the Fine Art Category of the Tokyo International Foto Awards. She has exhibited internationally and has most recently exhibited in museums, fairs and festivals including PhotoLondon 2019 in the UK, 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair in Morocco, Karlsruhe in Germany, the Lianzhou Photo Festival in China, the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam in the Netherlands, the Katzen Museum of Art in Washington DC, The Contemporary Art Center in New Orleans, and the Kuala Lumpur Photo Festival in Malaysia. Alia has presented lectures and workshops at Harvard University, the LACMA, the Middle East Institute, Gulf Photo Plus and the Arab American Museum.

Alia Ali lives and works in Los Angeles.

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