

ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 2018

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

THE YEAR IN REVIEW



Makers of unadorned documentary work, Forensic Architecture's members (architects, artists, lawyers, scientists, and others with whom Abu Hamdan has collaborated) have questioned their own identity as artists. In contrast, Abu Hamdan's artistry is unmistakable. He manipulates an arsenal of contemporary media—readymades, installations, moving images, and text, as well as performance (as in the associated piece *After SFX*, 2018, performed at Tate Modern in London), but the overlapping media never detract from the work's primary truth-telling function. Abu Hamdan has skillfully orchestrated a theatrical experience that is both edifying and unnerving, transforming the windowless gallery into a disquieting, suffocating cell.

—Gilda Williams

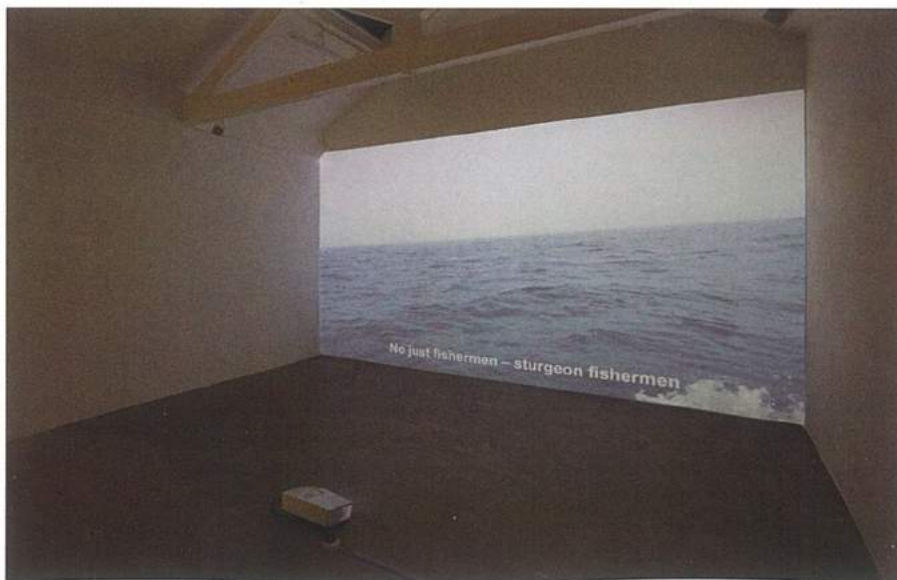
Taus Makhacheva

NARRATIVE PROJECTS

The title of Taus Makhacheva's exhibition "*BaidÀ*" is a pun: Without the accent on the *A*, the word refers to a name for a cheap boat used by poachers fishing in the Caspian Sea for beluga (European sturgeon), but with the accent added, it becomes Russian slang for a nonsensical or unbelievable story. The fish, an endangered species, remains the source of two treasured products: caviar and isinglass. (The latter, made from the fish's swim bladder, is used to consolidate paint and is highly valued by art conservators.) Because of the sturgeon's protected status, fishing for it is not only precarious but at times illegal—yet high unemployment in the region inevitably draws fishermen to poaching. Makhacheva, though, refuses to judge the workers engaged in this trade. Instead, having interviewed some of them in Dagestan, she drew a parallel between the precarity of their labor and her own as an artist—she is likewise the maker of a luxury good.

The video piece exhibited in one room of the gallery, titled *Baida* (note the lack of accent), 2017, shows footage of dark, choppy waters seen from a motorboat. The dialogue among the boatman and three other people whom we cannot see concerns the search for the site of a performance organized by Makhacheva for the Venice Biennale. But the performance is an imaginary event; it never took place. As it turns out, the conversation we hear is fake, too. Makhacheva shot the scene in the Caspian Sea, not the Venetian Lagoon, as is implied,

Taus Makhacheva,
Baida, 2017.
HD video, color,
sound, 15 minutes
31 seconds.
Installation view.
Photo: Judita
Kuniskyte.



and she overdubbed the footage with dialogue recorded in London and scripted by Tim Etchells, a British artist and writer. Still, the video is anchored in reality. The performance may never have happened, but at the most recent Biennale Makhacheva really did announce that something would take place at a certain watery spot whose coordinates she provided.

The video's dialogue includes some chilling asides amid the cynical art-world banter. Somewhere between their complaints about feeling hungry and sleepy, or in need of a drink, the protagonists mention sturgeon poachers strapping themselves to their unstable boats to stay afloat so that they can be found in case they die. The imaginary denizens also exchange judgmental comments about Makhacheva and ask whether her piece is sufficiently realist and elaborate, whether it is close enough to the tragedy. In this dense narrative, dominated by corporeal needs and desires, neither the lives of the fishermen nor Makhacheva's art really matters. The piece radiates an overwhelming sense of disillusionment.

In the gallery's second room, one saw the sturgeon itself—or more precisely the dried flakes of its swim bladder—displayed on a table, next to a scale and some artisanal-looking paper bags, as if ready to be sold. On the same table sat *Caspian Sea—Industrial pressing mold*, 2018: a pair of molds, one iron and one silicone, both in the shape of the titular body of water. While standing in this room, one no longer heard the sound of the waves. Thanks to both the austere minimalism of the table and the silence surrounding it, this quiet corner of the gallery felt solemn and almost sacrosanct. Depicted in the other room as potentially life-threatening, the seas were much safer here; they had been reduced to a shape that could be multiplied and used to make something pleasant, like a cake. The danger had become abstract and aestheticized, so we could think about eating undisturbed.

—Sylwia Serafinowicz

LEEDS, UK

Tai Shani

THE TETLEY

"Dark Continent: SEMIRAMIS," Tai Shani's exhibition at the Glasgow International festival this past spring—a four-day event that included actors performing the artist's scripts within a sculptural installation—was roundly praised by critics, so it was interesting to see her subsequent exhibition in Leeds, which expanded on some of the ideas deployed in that project. "Semiramis" envisioned a kind of city of women with twelve key characters that Shani has developed over the past four years. Occupying the entire building, the show extended from the downstairs foyer—where literary sources such as *The Book of the City of Ladies* by Christine de Pizan (ca. 1405), *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy (1976), and *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler (1990) provided a sharp radical view of history—to the second floor, where she presented the installation she showed in Glasgow, an arrangement of objects ironically pastiching architectural forms and materials and providing a stylish occult fetishism. Video works spread across nine small rooms around the building's atrium presented portraits of the twelve characters alongside archival displays, including footage of the performance in Scotland, poster designs for each persona, paintings, and an oversize book in a glass cabinet. These elements developed a contemporary adaptation of de Pizan's proto-feminist text.

Through multiple references to Beyoncé and *Terminator 2*'s Sarah Connor, as well as a soundtrack by the pop group Let's Eat Grandma,