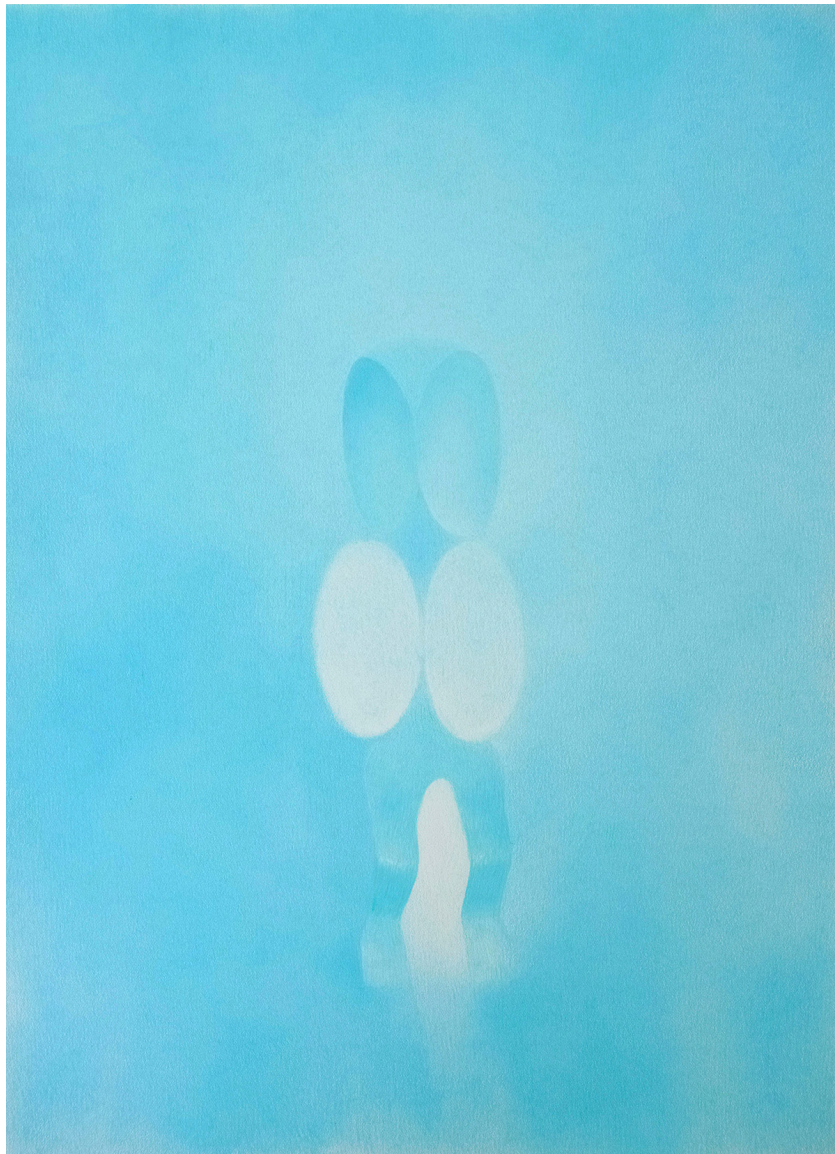


Le pas suspendu

YOUNES BABA-ALI
LUCILE BERTRAND
RUI CALÇADA BASTOS
EIRENE EFSTATHIOU
MICHÈLE MAGEMA
PEDRO A.H. PAIXÃO

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Pedro A.H. Paixão, *The Passage*, 2020, Colored pencil on paper, 30 x 50 cm

If natural borders defy the horizon, other borders whose lines have been drawn by human hands, however, only separate fellow people. And when one crosses those boundaries, when one merely steps on the other side, do people and landscapes really seem different?

Poetry also nestles in the smallest gaps and crevices, lines and borders. This is what the six artists brought together by Irène Laub Gallery are trying to show through this group exhibition. They question the border as a horizon line and a suspended moment in time. For some of them, this work evokes space, for others, cultures and time. The title of the exhibition is a tribute to the beautiful 1991 film *The Suspended Step of the Stork* by Theo d'Angelopoulos (and to the suspended step of Alexandre, a young reporter on a mission to a border which refugees are waiting to cross).

What if we dreamed of crossing borders?

In this new group exhibition at Galerie Irène Laub, six artists, three women, three men, vow to play with limits, to cross them with a suspended step, hovering exactly over the line. They invite us to shift our perspective, to change the way we look at words, things and borders, but also at landscapes, rocks, cities, paving stones and limits. It is an opportunity to take a step back from these dividing lines, which can sometimes also become bridges.

What do borders represent for each and every one of them?

From the outset and through the door, Lucile Bertrand's (Belgium, France) work unfolds into space. Her work regularly raises questions about borders and of limits. In the installation *Here and There*, 2022, Bertrand invites us to walk through lengths of openwork linen, with an obsessive desire to reach the other side. On both sides of the fabric, several impermanent borders are traced in transparent patterns. Although the fabric and transparency lend a poetic quality to the borders, they are nonetheless the result of acute struggles and violent conflicts. These shifting borders set Belgium in time, in history, and on the edges of the Belgian Luxembourg. The most legible are the present-day borders; the 1830-39; the 1801; and the 1786 ones (including the independent county of Liège) are more tenuous; and at last, the Frankish empire borders dating from 481 are the most subtle and nearly erased. As the story progresses, the artist asks questions, adding words that convey the notion of (W)HERE? Where are we? NoWHERE, SomeWHERE, ElseWHERE... This work echoes Lucile Bertrand's research-residency at the CACLB (Centre d'Art Contemporain du Luxembourg Belge) and the ensuing exhibition « Traversées »; on view in Montauban (Buzenol), Province of Luxembourg, from September 10 to October 23, 2022.

Michèle Magma (France, DRC) carries on her research about the colonial past, investing (and commenting on) the artificial outline of Congolese borders. After a solo exhibition at Irène Laub gallery this past June entitled *Garden Paths* around the theme of collective memory, which she sees as a vast garden, a living space, endowed with resilience, the artist continues to work on the idea of resilience, in search of - as she puts it - adjoined spaces, those common spaces that must always be negotiated. *Cradling the Line*, 2022 belongs to the same poetic realm. She invites us to watch history emerge from maps, the outlines of colonial towns in the DRC with names that have been changed from Belgian heroes' names to the names of local ones, in the local language. Leopoldville has thereby been renamed Kinshasa, Elisabethville / Lubumbashi, Stanleyville / Kisangani and Baudouinville / Moba, In keeping with the idea of repair, the line, the layout of the city is considered to be a space of conciliation, a place of circulation and exchange. Magma plays with words, lines, fragmentation and matter. The brass used for the drawing is more than just a simple support as this



Michèle Magma, «Sonographies L'Acte de Respirer», 2022, engraved messing plates, 60 x 20 cm x 30 cm (photo Eline Willaert)

yellow, ductile, malleable alloy results from combining copper and zinc, which are both minerals mined in the DRC. The smooth and polished alloy reflects light and our reflection. It questions us. As it is often the case in Michèle Magma's work, the drawings and the words respond to one another in several different languages (French, Swahili, Lingala, Kikongo).

Instead of focusing on the limits of various countries, Pedro A.H. Paixão (Portugal, Angola)'s work rather focuses on natural borders. The artist turns the border into a tunnel which in turn leads into the world of symbols and magic. For the artist, the border is a tenuous space and his work creates a passage. As it is often the case in his work, this limit invites us on an inner journey. Many things escape us as much as they escape him. For the artist, drawing is a way of creating from imagination, gateways and spaces that are safe enough for people and things to move freely in time and space. He reminds us that in moments of turbulence, magic can paradoxically offer calm, stability and balance; qualities which can be found in drawings part of the 'turquoise' group: *The passage*, 2020, *The Space Between the Hands*, 2021 and the older work, *Mufumbiro Mountains at the National Museum*, 2017 and *21.40-21.43*, 2017. The artist associates the turquoise color with the DRC as it is also associated with the waters that once held the bodies lost at sea of those deported to the Americas. *The passage* depicts a statuette that has been lost. The second drawing, as its name suggests, is a close-up of two hands. The focus is on the in-between, that third space that sucks in the viewer. It is a portal, an invitation to travel. This aspiration, this luminous halo, is repeated in the two other drawings, along with the tenuous border between what remains in our world and what belongs elsewhere.

In *Mufumbiro*, someone is looking at a painting and the thin line in the lower part of the drawing hints at the limit between the painting's space and that of the viewer. 21.40-21.43 is a snapshot that refers to the moment Patrice Lumumba was assassinated. In the glow of headlights, a figure turns his attention towards the viewer, the rest is already being drawn into the light. For the exhibition, the drawings are placed on an old photograph of a landscape, gleaned from the archives of the Tervuren Museum: The river (Congo) between Boma and Matadi in 1898. A. van Iseghem.

Eirene Efstathiou (Athens, Greece) has created new works specifically for this group exhibition. These works address the boundaries within the city, the limits of familiar space, based on lived experience and the liminal space between public and domestic, private space. *Domestic Stratigraphy*, 2022, is a series in two parts that draws on the artist's personal history. Like many houses built in Athens before 1960, the artist's family home was built directly on bedrock. The city is very hilly, and builders did not want to incur the additional cost of excavation. For the artist, rock is where nature resists, unintentionally but powerfully against urban planners. The landscape's natural geology (inevitably) appears in man-made environments. In her drawings, the artist depicts these rocks as witnesses of this kind of resistance. Although most houses built directly on bedrocks have now been replaced by buildings, Efstathiou has documented and drawn some of the remaining ones. Her rock drawings are done on a patterned paper which was designed and printed by the artist. These repetitive patterns create a familiar background as they recall the Formica tabletops, very popular in Greece in the 1970s and 80s. Their domestic quality constitutes another transgression of the border between the public and private realms.



Rui Calçada Bastos, «I have not yet forgot myself to stone», 2021, pavements and vintage postcards, 160 x 69,5 x 4,5 cm (detail)

Although the house she grew up in was destroyed by a developer in 2003, the artist has collected archives, notes and documents in relation to it over the span of fifteen years. These are presented alongside the drawings. In Eirene's words, the archive is a psychogeographical investigation of her childhood home which no longer exists. This meticulous and archival work looks for traces, and traces of lines, as proof of the presence of this house in the current urban landscape and in the new building's volume.

This connection between urban landscape and memory is also echoed in Rui Calçada Bastos' (Portugal) work. In *I Have Not Yet Forget Myself to Stone*, 2022, we find one of the artist's frequent themes - loneliness and the forgetting of both the world and oneself. In a recent exhibition and performance work (*Words Dont Come Easy*), he cut into the gallery wall to place a letter inside of it before carefully closing it up again. The words then remain hidden in this space, which is tenuous, invisible and yet so very close. For Irène Laub's exhibition, he recreates a section of city pavement on the floor of the gallery space, with the ordinary motif of a cement pavement found everywhere in the city. However, two slabs are out of place. They do not completely occupy the gaps intended for them. The artist then places two carefully selected, ultra-coloured vintage postcards - an idyllic view of a natural landscape and a setting sun - inside the grey crevices. These views of an original, cleaner, contemplative landscape escape from the anonymous pavement. Under the pavement, the beach! Like Eirene Efstathiou's rocks, the chromos remind us of this tenuous space of resistance between what one lets slip outside and the memories carried inside one's own walls. It is no coincidence that the verses that give the work its name (*I have not yet forgotten myself in stone*) come from Alexander Pope, the great English poet (1688-1744), confined by illness and born into a family of recusants, Catholic refractors to the Church of England, living as semi-clandestines. The poet's frail health and the religion he practised in secrecy contributed to his social isolation but also, at the same time, gave him an inner strength which poetry made both universal and timeless.

Younes Baba Ali (France, Belgium, Morocco)'s work, set up in the window at rue Van Eyck 29, completes this overview and goes beyond the limits without ever closing the borders. On the threshold between the public space and the gallery, the artist is of course blurring the lines. He positions his images and works in relation to this «Other» who is also the «same». The artist summons poetry and is never frontal nor aggressive, but constantly questioning transgression; that infra-thin line between the sacred and the everyday, the spiritual and the profane, tradition and commodification. Where does the object belong and where does the work of art nestle? In *Shebbat*, 2021, a series of mundane pairs of shoes are carefully placed in display cases. These shoes have their own language that may mean nothing to some but speaks volumes to others. The way shoes are placed in Moroccan popular culture is a codified language. In their box and in the window, the shoes cross a line, break the codes and stand on the border between the ordinary object and the art object. Similarly, in the portraits of veiled women of the series *Hands Free Kit*, 2014-2021, a detail stands out: a phone tucked between her ear and her veil. The headscarf is traditionally understood as a separation between the intimate and the social. But diasporic communities have given it new features. Here, the mobile phone tucked under the veil shows how it is possible - even practical and functional - to transgress.

- Christine Bluard, July 2022

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