

# MASSINISSA SELMANI | NOTHING FIXED, THE COMPLEX FOLDS OF HISTORY

VIA ISSUE 195, WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Written by Naima Morelli



Massinissa Selmani. "Uncertain Rules," (2024). Graphite And Colored Pencil On Paper. 33 1/2'' X 25 5/8''. Courtesy Of The Artist And Jane Lombard Gallery. © Adagg, Paris.

We really don't want to hear yet another mouth uttering the old and weary truism: "In order to know where we are going, we need to know where we come from." But can we even look at Massinissa Selmani's videos, drawings, and photos in his exhibition *1000 VILLAGES*—dedicated to the story of his own country Algeria and currently on exhibition at Index Foundation in Stockholm—without having this truism resounding in our ears like blaring evidence? We might as well cover our mouths.

Too utopian to be actualized, the original 1000 villages project was a 1970s-era grand socialist experiment that endeavored to transform Algeria's rural landscape into a new model for society. The project never became a reality—not completely, at least.

Only a small number of the 1000 villages were actually built, but the ambitious project as a whole somehow just disappeared from the collective memory. It is precisely this interplay between reality and what remained stuck in the nation's collective imagination that interests Selmani, who focused his exhibition around a relatively prosperous time of optimistic construction and nationalist unity for North Africa. These national interactions between the imagined and the real,

the present and the absent, have become the hallmark of Selmani's approach.

Like the subject of his work, Selmani's path has not been a straightforward one. "As a child, I drew a lot and dreamt of attending the School of Fine Art, but in the context I grew up in, my parents preferred I'd study for a real job, so I did computer science in school, studying how to code databases," he shares. He's speaking to me from his studio in Tours, France, where he moved to attend the *École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* after studying coding in Algeria.

Despite his tenure in Tours, Selmani has never severed the ties with his motherland Algeria. Quite the contrary. Like many artists who find themselves living abroad, his connection with his motherland grew stronger than ever, drawing him to the exploration of the forgotten histories that shape the present of his country. And more than that—he made Algeria as the symbol par excellence to consider the transient, treacherous nature of memory, like he did for *1000 VILLAGES*.

The artist's initial encounter with the project came during a family holiday in Algeria when he stumbled upon a newspaper article that mentioned the historical 1000 villages project, piquing his curiosity. "I had vaguely known about the project before, and when I spoke to my father, he was almost laughing," recalls the artist. "I realized that the project was a huge thing when it was first announced. My father told me it was on TV and in the newspapers every day." Selmani notes that many people talk about the Agrarian Revolution of the 70s, but never specifically about this project.



Massinissa Selmani "Silent Balance," (2023). Mixed Media On Paper And Tracing Paper. 13 5/8" X 10 1/4". Courtesy Of The Artist And Jane Lombard Gallery. © Adagg, Paris.

"It's strange," Selmani reflects, "that as soon as I inquired about this part of Algerian history, my parents couldn't stop talking about it." Selmani was particularly fascinated by the nature of the utopian project being almost a "rumor," something simultaneously real and elusive.

Selmani began *1000 VILLAGES* with an archive of press clippings about the Agrarian Revolution, which he initially created toiling on his own. Soon he started collaborating with curator Natacha

which he initially started tackling on his own. Soon he started collaborating with curator (natasha Marie Llorens, who was doing a PhD on Algerian history, and with whom he presented the first iteration of the project at the Venice Biennale in 2015.

Between 2021 and 2023, Selmani and Llorens immersed themselves in the archival materials, including pictures of the cities in construction in old books. They visited some of these villages, and spoke with a number of architects, filmmakers, writers, artists, sociologists, academics, journalists, and regular Algerians who had either lived through the period during which the 1000 socialist villages were being built.

“Sometimes I don’t know what comes from me and what comes from Natasha,” says the artist, referring to his collaborator. “There’s a kind of porosity between us. And I really like that, especially for the show at the Index Foundation, where we had plenty of room for experimentation.”

As the artist delved deeper into the project, the work evolved, taking on new layers of complexity and nuance. The result is that the Algiers and Stockholm iterations of *1000 VILLAGES* are an evolution of Venice, with new material and presentation. It is as if one is looking at the elephant in the room—of Algerian history, that is—from different angles.

This March, Selmani debuted his first solo show in the US— *A fault in the mirage* at Jane Lombard Gallery, which presented him to an American public through a summation of his drawings, collages, short, animations, and objects. “The idea of the show was really simple,” explains Selmani. “It was based on the idea of the absurd. Namely, the relation between comedy and tragedy, which I have been developing in my work since the beginning, and non linear narrative.” The exhibition had no overarching theme, but rather a “guiding thread” of exploring different approaches to drawing: “In the show, I tried to create connections between elements that you see from one work to another.”



That Which Dwells In Us (2023-2024). Detail. Mixed Media Installation. Original Slides: Images Courtesy Of Djaffar Lesbet, An Algerian Urbanist And Sociologist Who Wrote A Thesis On The 1000 Villages. Exhibition View, Rizhome, Algiers, 2023. Photo: Khadija Markemal. © Adagp, Paris.

For his upcoming solo show at FRAC Nouvelle-Aquitaine Méca Bordeaux in France, Selmani will go back to a long-term project with a similar historical underpinning to *1000 VILLAGES*, but this time based on the celebrations of the independence of Algeria from France.

The works will draw from some pictures his father took on that day, when he happened to be in a small town called Tizi Ouzou to visit his family. “My father took four pictures of the celebration and wrote a comment on the back of each photo,” explains Selmani. “It’s a precious testimony from an archival point of view, as we have plenty of pictures of the celebration in the big cities like Algiers, but there are very few images of what happened in small towns.”

The FRAC Bordeaux project is not specifically about Algerian independence, but to answer the question of how an ordinary person captures an extraordinary event. With this idea in mind, Selmani asked his father to write for him a text about the day that he took the images. “He wrote that he walked 13 kilometres from his village to the center of the city, and described what he saw, rather than focusing on the historical importance of the event. It felt like a very warm, personal account.”

Soon after, he started involving all other members of his family into the work—from his parents, brothers, sister, and niece—asking them to contribute additional text, describing the four images from a more objective point of view. The result: a series of write-ups that again question memory,

the objectivity of the photographic medium, the sense of history, and how it is seen across different generations.

“This is an ongoing project, and I don’t know what the final form will be,” concludes the artist. “I don’t want to have something totally fixed. Just like *1000 VILLAGES*, what I want to look at is not about whether these moments of history represented a failure or not—it’s about understanding how these folds in history became forgotten, and what remains.”

