

Cherchez La Femme

Quarantaine. Forty young men stare at me from the wall on which their painted portraits are pinned up in a regular formation. The physiognomy of those portrayed suggests an Arab background. The wall itself has been treated with a blood-red pigment. The presenting method confuses me. I find that I'm disturbed by the primary associations these pictures evoke in my mind, associations with the way the media often depicts the portraits of both perpetrators and victims. The painful realization of how my views are conditioned sets the tone: a tone of ambiguity and psychological complexity that is characteristic of the work of Aline Thomassen. I need to clear my mind and try to look without prejudice.

The artist painted the forty portraits in forty days in Morocco, usually in the relative seclusion of a roof terrace and sometimes just on the street. Every day, she approached a new young man, requesting him to sit for a portrait. Before the painting sessions, she tried to find out through asking questions what dreams the young men had and what ideals they cherished. Forty men (une quarantaine) in forty days. The explicit choice for the magic number forty suggests that all sorts of associative considerations played a role in the creation of this series of portraits. In the medical world, quarantine stands for a period (originally of forty days) in which a human or animal is isolated to prevent infection. The number of forty has a special, ritual significance in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. The number forty has a special, ritual meaning. The flood lasted forty days. Moses stayed on the mountain of Sinai for forty days and crossed the desert with the people of Israel for forty years. Jesus fasted forty days in the desert, Muhammad fasted forty days in a cave, and today the annual Christian period of fasting is still forty days. It is clear that the number forty is linked to a period of isolation, reflection, penance and purification.

In the light of the aforementioned, Thomassen's *Quarantaine* project can be seen as a ritual attempt to briefly break free -along with her subject- of the daily expectations and to penetrate the psychological world of the young Moroccan men she portrayed. By asking them prior to the sitting about the high ideals reverberating through their heads and hearts, her brush was then steered, as it were, by the men's revelations in that respect. Both Thomassen's questions and the men's answers must be understood against the backdrop of an everyday reality that for the great majority of them offers few social prospects. The limited freedom of movement experienced by the men in their daily lives means that their world is a sort of quarantine in itself, from escape appears impossible. Surprisingly, however, the answers Thomassen finally received mainly concerned very rudimentary, universal human needs, such as the desire for a wife (cherchez la femme) or their own living space, rather than world-shattering ambitions in the area of careers, politics or religion. Bearing in mind this amazing story of the painter's creation, the

confrontation with the portraits immediately changes from a distant, anonymous experience into an almost moving, penetrating, personal encounter.

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