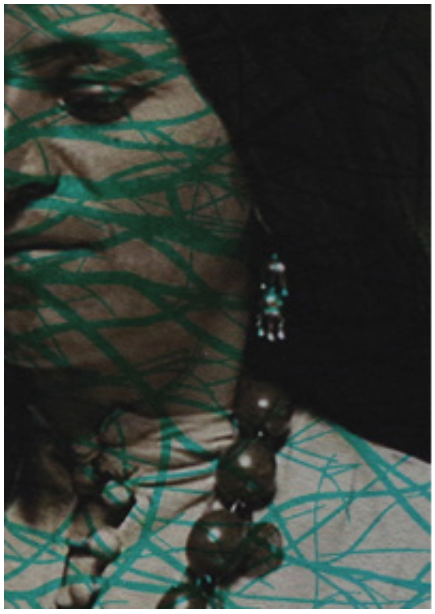
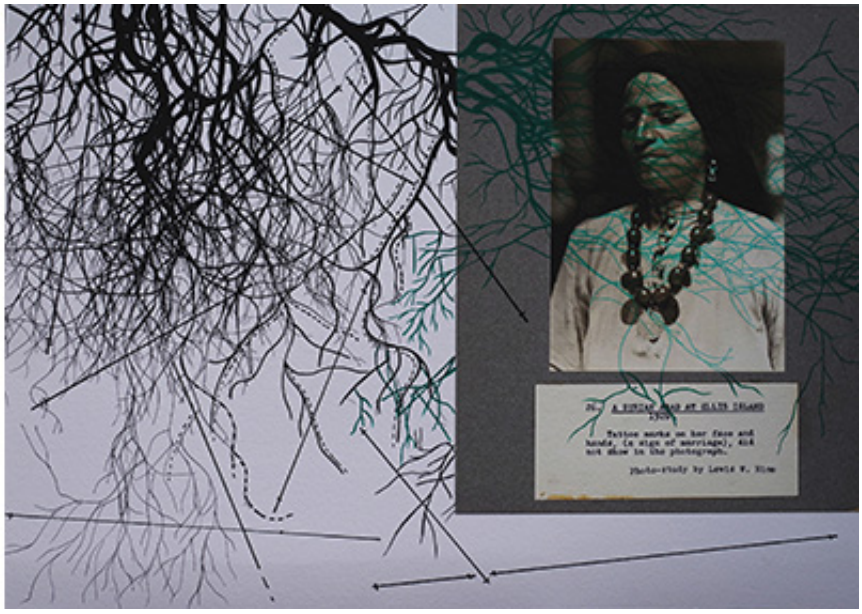
11. | The island of the roots





2016-2017, crayon, acrylique et encre de Chine sur papier, 35cm x 50cm
Exhibition view from Drawing Now, Analix Forever, 2017, Paris.
Courtesy of the artist and Analix Forever, Geneva.

L'interculturalité et ses richesses, son potentiel de réparation, sont l'un des fils rouges essentiels du travail de mounir fatmi, un fil rouge qui inclut la migration, l'exil, l'identité, le corps. Mais c'est aussi la volonté constante de nous surprendre, de nous faire reconsidérer nos points de vue, de nous donner à penser à l'envers.

La série The Island of the Roots s'inscrit parfaitement dans cette double logique. À un moment de l'histoire où les États-Unis d'Amérique se ferment, refusent certains migrants, en chassent d'autres, mounir fatmi nous rappelle qu'au début du siècle dernier, et pendant longtemps, ces mêmes États-Unis furent une formidable terre d'accueil. Ellis Island fut ce passage obligé, cette porte d'entrée mythique où se scellaient tant d'espoirs de vie nouvelle. mounir fatmi alors se saisit de cette histoire et, selon une habitude qui lui est chère et qui constamment enrichit son travail et la portée de celui-ci, se réfère à un autre artiste qu'Ellis Island a inspiré, à savoir le célèbre photographe documentaire Lewis Hine, qui photographia, sur place, au début du 20ème siècle, tant d'immigrants différents, de la famille italienne au juif arménien, du jeune homme finlandais à la migrante syrienne – déjà – et tant d'autres. Partant de ces portraits, mounir fatmi leur dessine des racines. Ces racines qu'on arrache, et qui reviennent, complexifiées ; des racines végétales, dendritiques, sanguines parfois, transperçantes ; des racines qui vont d'un dessin à l'autre, qui s'embrassent et s'enlacent, comme Philémon et Baucis. Des racines d'échange et de partage. Des racines d'inclusion. De ces racines que l'on fait en marchant.

mounir fatmi, pour exprimer les multiples facettes de ses concepts et de ses visions, utilise volontiers le collage, notamment dans ses vidéos et ses photographies, et les superpositions. Dans la série The Island of the Roots

Interculturality and its treasures along with the potential it holds for reparation are some of the fundamental themes of Mounir fatmi's work, themes that include migration, exile, identity and the body. But this also conveys the constant desire to surprise us, make us reconsider our points of view and think in reverse.

The series The Island of the Roots fits perfectly this double logic. At a point in their history where the United States are closing up, refusing certain immigrants, kicking out others, mounir fatmi reminds us that at the beginning of the previous century, and for a long time, these same United States were a formidable land of refuge. Ellis Island was like a mythical port of entry where so many hopes of a new life crystallized. mounir fatmi decided to seize this history and, following an enduring habit of his that constantly enriches his work as well as its impact, refers to another artist who was also inspired by Ellis Island, the famous documentary photographer Lewis Hine, who was there in the early 20th century, taking pictures of so many different immigrants, from Italian families to Armenian Jews, from a young Finnish man to a Syrian migrant – back then already – and so many others. From these portraits, mounir fatmi traced roots for these people. These roots that are torn away and then return, more complex than before; vegetal, dendritic roots, sometimes bloody and piercing. Roots that go from one drawing to the next, that embrace and entangle each other, like Baucis and Philemon. Roots for exchanging and sharing, roots for inclusion, and roots that grow as we walk.

mounir fatmi, in order to express the multiple facets of his concepts and visions, often uses collage, particularly in his videos and photographs, as well as superimpositions. Likewise, in the series The Island of the Roots, the technique of collage allows him to address the past and the present,

également, le collage lui permet de parler du passé comme du présent, des racines comme des branches, de la photographie et du dessin, des visages et du monde. Car comme l'écrit Jean-Marc Lachaud : « Les œuvres de collage et de montage mêlent la réalité concrète et le merveilleux, l'ici et l'ailleurs, le non-contemporain et l'actuel, l'identifiable et le bizarre. Elles tracent et détracent les contours de territoires inédits à fouiller. Elles bâtissent des passages éphémères au sein desquels des figures de l'inconnu restent à décrypter. Elles dépaysent, perturbent, déstabilisent et provoquent. » Émeuvent aussi – et c'est là encore l'une des beautés rémanente du travail de fatmi : l'émotion qu'il génère. Une (é)motion au sens propre du terme : mise en mouvement de celui qui regarde, forte, profonde, inéluctable et productive de sens.

Et l'artiste, selon ses propres termes, « Confronté à cette machine de l'histoire qui se répète inlassablement » voit « les racines et leur liberté de pousser d'une manière aléatoire, sauvage et libre. »

Barbara Polla, mars 2017.

roots and branches, photography and drawing, faces and the world. As the art theoretician Jean-Marc Lachaud wrote: "Works of collage and montage combine concrete reality with magic, the here and the elsewhere, the non-contemporary and the current, the identifiable and the bizarre. They trace and untrace the contours of unexplored territories to rummage through. They build ephemeral passages in which unknown figures remain to be deciphered. They disorient, trouble, destabilize and provoke." They are also moving – and that's yet another of the beauties of fatmi's work: the emotions it generates. An (e)motion in the primal sense: the setting in motion of the viewer in a way that is strong, profound, ineluctable and meaningful.

As for the artist, he is in his own words "confronted with this machine of history that tirelessly repeats itself", and sees "the roots and their freedom to grow randomly, wildly and freely."

Barbara Polla, March 2017.

" From these portraits, mounir fatmi traced roots for these people. These roots that are torn away and then return, more complex than before; vegetal, dendritic roots, sometimes bloody and piercing. Roots that go from one drawing to the next, that embrace and entangle each other, like Baucis and Philemon.
Roots for exchanging and sharing, roots for inclusion, and

roots that grow as we walk. "

Barbara Polla, March 2017

exhibitions:

2018

Art on Paper - Analix Forever - Art fair

2017

Le Pavillon de l’exil - Galerie Delacroix - Solo show

The Eye of LEBANON - OUROUBA - Expo collective

Drawing Now - Galerie Analix Forever - Art fair

BEIRUT Art Fair - Analix Forever - Art fair

press articles:

Art on Paper (Armory Week - NYC), Canvas and Crumpets, March 10th, 2018

CANVAS and CRUMPETS

Art on Paper (Armory Week- NYC)

10 / 03 / 18

Art on Paper appealed to me because I am extremely sick of pop art. Not the original Liechtensteins or Warhols, of course, but the contemporary artists who pop a plastic emoji atop another plastic emoji and say "Voila." I've seen a million Marilyn Monroes and Daffy Ducks with dollar bills for eyes. We get it, consumerism will eventually kill us all. But let's enjoy some innovative art before the apocalypse.

Art on Paper is one of nine art fairs (and one book fair!) that make up Armory Week 2018. The show is located on Pier 36 by the East River, a neighborhood that is apparently called "Two Bridges." (I attended with a few fellow New Yorkers who had never heard this term before- we are convinced it is a real estate scheme.) The opening featured an oyster bar and an eclectic music duo- the combination of midi-keyboard and live drums was oddly soothing.

Gallerists brought a lot of aesthetic work- dreamy photographs and mesmerizingly-detailed pen drawings. As an art-lover, my senses were stimulated and I felt very happy. However, as a critic, I noticed few works that made me stop, focus, and think. Two in particular stood out.

These works came from Gallery Toki-No-Wasuremono and Analix Forever. The select pieces, by Yusuke Koshima and mounir fatmi, challenge the physical limits of paper and the medium's emotional capacity.

Gallery Toki-No-Wasuremono exhibited the fantasy landscapes of Japanese artist Yusuke Koshima, whom I had the pleasure of meeting at Art on Paper. Koshima's training as an architect reveals itself in his magnificent work, Urban Landscape Fantasia 2017-01. The painting is almost 6.5 feet tall, towering over the head of the viewer. It is notable that the work stands so tall but is only 3 feet wide. Perhaps Koshima chose these proportions to emulate the appearance of a traditional Japanese scroll. Regardless, the effect is astounding. Choosing to emphasize height over width, the artist implies something about his world's geography. Does it cover mountains? Or does it rest on clouds, rising into the heavens?

I'll make a strong case for the latter. Billowing masses of misty grey beneath Koshima's buildings resemble clouds. These pools of frothing vapor are the result of a unique paper-dying technique. Most techniques involve the manipulation of an existing sheet of paper, but Koshima starts at the beginning. He explained that he spends several days at an old paper factory, pouring ink directly into the paper pulp. The resulting sheets are marbled black and white. Varying degrees of saturation across the surface create many hues of grey. This adds a delightful element of chance to the artist's work. It reminds me of the actions the surrealists took to eliminate the editing quality of their conscious brains. Like Hans Arp and Marcel Duchamp, Koshima allows natural forces to guide certain aspects of his work; in this case, the nature of the paper itself.

The paper's unpredictable patterns inspire the artist's architectural plans. Koshima imagines bridges spanning between clouds. Atop these whimsical bridges he builds detailed structures. Many look like towers with flared turrets. Some are are circular, resembling pinwheels or ferris wheels. And yet others defy categorization. A brain-like blob perches atop a rectangular prism. A pair of antlers distend from a wall of bubbles. A seemingly sturdy square contains a circle that contains… nothing. Can such a structure be three-dimensional at all? The individual buildings defy the laws of physics, but together they create a seemingly possible universe.

Like a popular fantasy novel, Urban Landscape Fantasia 2017-01 compels its audience through its world-building. It's difficult to look at Koshima's work without desperately craving an adventure of your own- into the cavernous clouds and atop the most precarious of towers.

Check out Koshima's art and architecture online to learn more.

Analix Forever, a Genevan Gallery, presented several works by the celebrated Moroccan artist, mounir fatmi. His work has been shown in museums around the world as well as at three Venice Biennales. He works in a myriad of mediums, from installation art to painting, collage, and photography. Art On Paper restricts artists as multidisciplinary as fatmi in a fascinating way. Forcing him to work within the boundaries of paper is like pouring his concepts into a funnel; what comes out is narrow in content and purified in emotional strength.

For this particular show, fatmi exhibits a series of collages centered around Ellis Island, entitled The Island of Roots.

For this series, fatmi used the works of documentary photographer Lewis Hine, whose images of emigres at Ellis Island are now part of public record. The series includes several mixed-media collages, though Armenian Jew is by far my favorite.

Each work includes a photograph and a descriptive excerpt. In Armenian Jew, fatmi suggests that the subject of Hines' photograph fled Turkey due to religious persecution. The format feels formal, as if fatmi is re-performing the process of identifying and labeling immigrants to the United States.



The artist layers red ink over the surface of the photograph. Pigment on the figure's hat and beard contrast subtly with the cool grey of his skin and the bright whites of his eyes. Feathered red lines continue down the figure's torso and off the borders of the photograph. They extend left and right, branching off from each other like roots.

fatmi is inspired by all sorts of roots- "vegetal roots, organic, horizontal, floating, dendritic (as our central nervous system's cells), sometimes sanguineous… the type of roots that one makes when walking." I can imagine vines growing out this man's shoes as he walks, with every step exploring his relationship to a new land. I am also quite taken by fatmi's use of the term sanguineous, meaning 'related to blood.' The color red is emblematic of that. The artist could be referring to family blood- having children in a new land is a means of putting down roots. He may also be suggesting that putting down roots is a dangerous business- a process fraught with xenophobia, religious intolerance, racism, classism, and possibly, bloodshed. These roots run deep, but they are soaked in blood.

fatmi says collage allows him to consider the past and the present simultaneously. By layering images, text, and ink, he brings historical references to the subject of immigration politics. The artist sees himself firstly as an immigrant worker. "Since I voluntarily left Morocco," fatmi says, "I have lived with the acute awareness of separation, displacement, and the weight of identity." The connection to the present grounds Armenian Jew. It colors the beautiful, liberated roots in blood.

The work's dual temporality also reveals itself in fatmi's use of red circles. These perfect spheres are meant to evoke circles of fire. "It is a circle that warns us of the danger of certain decisions we took in the past," fatmi warns, speaking of deportation throughout the 20th century. He is also aware of the circles' aesthetic effects. They disrupt the harmony of the work, adding hardness and precision to an otherwise soft surface.

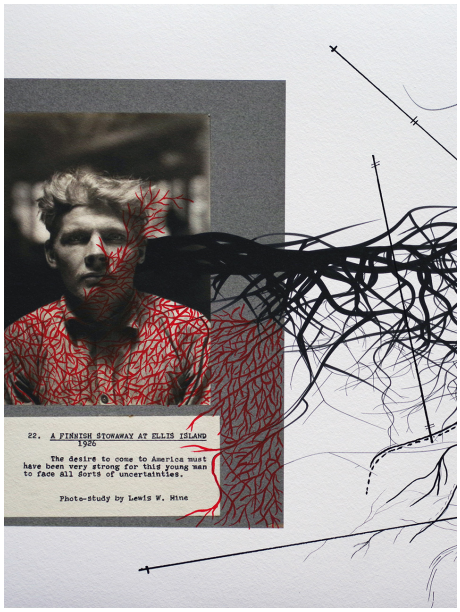
Read more about mounir fatmi's incredible work on his website.

I hope you've enjoyed reading my thoughts on these works. I highly encourage you to seek out these artists and their respective galleries. You still have two more days to race madly around the city- this Armory Week Guide may come in handy if you don't know where to start! If you do make it to Art On Paper, be sure to swing by Gallery Toki-No-Wasuremono and Analix Forever, as well as the galleries highlighted at the end of this article.

Until next time!

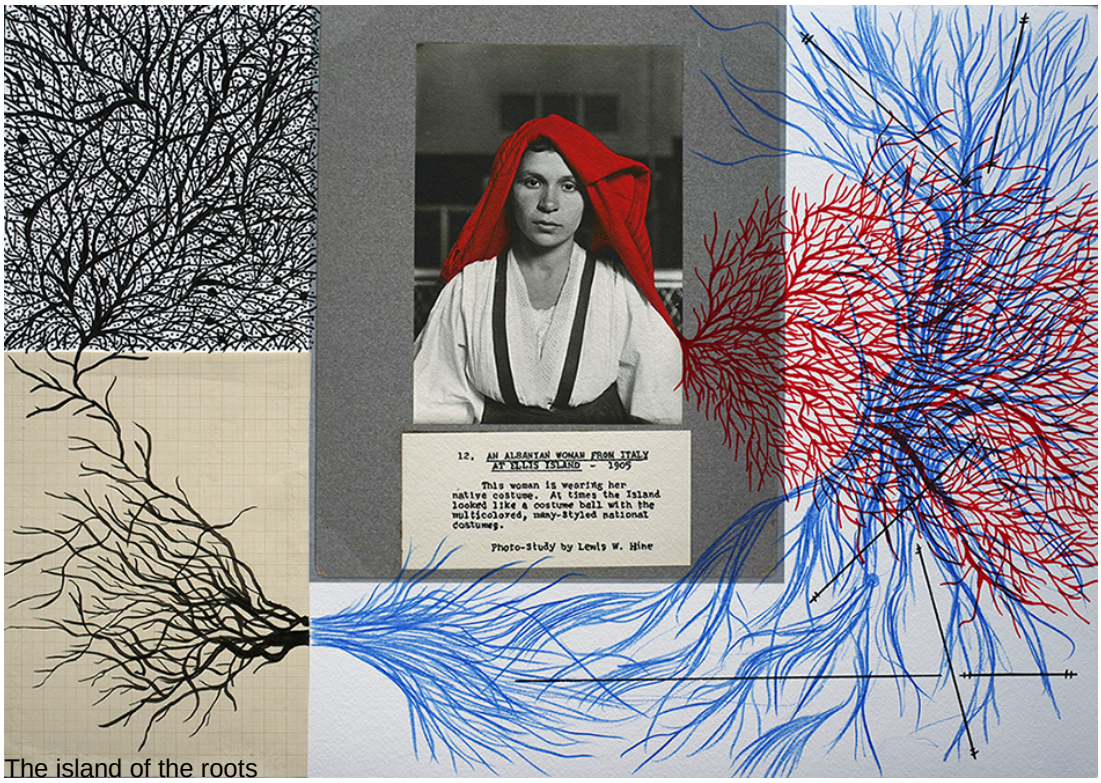
xoxo,

Chloe



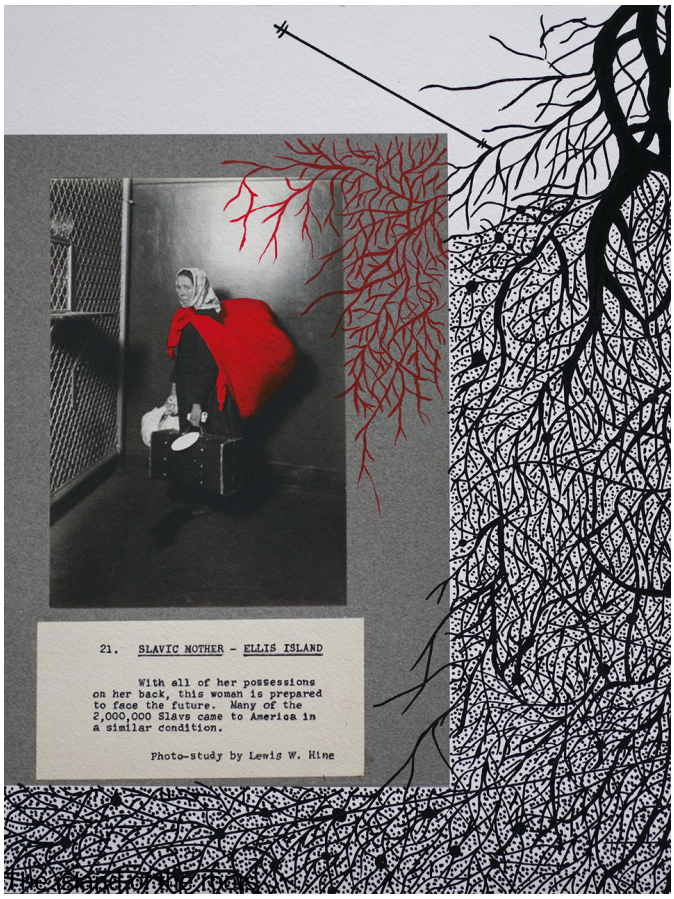
The island of the roots

As for the artist, he is in his own words "confronted with this machine of history that tirelessly repeats itself", and sees "the roots and their freedom to grow randomly, wildly and freely."



The island of the roots

From these portraits, mounir fatmi traced roots for these people. These roots that are torn away and then return, more complex than before; vegetal, dendritic roots, sometimes bloody and piercing. Roots that go from one drawing to the next, that embrace and entangle each other, like Baucis and Philemon. Roots for exchanging and sharing, roots for inclusion, and roots that grow as we walk.



The island of the roots

The series The Island of the Roots fits perfectly this double logic. At a point in their history where the United States are closing up, refusing certain immigrants, kicking out others, mounir fatmi reminds us that at the beginning of the previous century, and for a long time, these same United States were a formidable land of refuge.

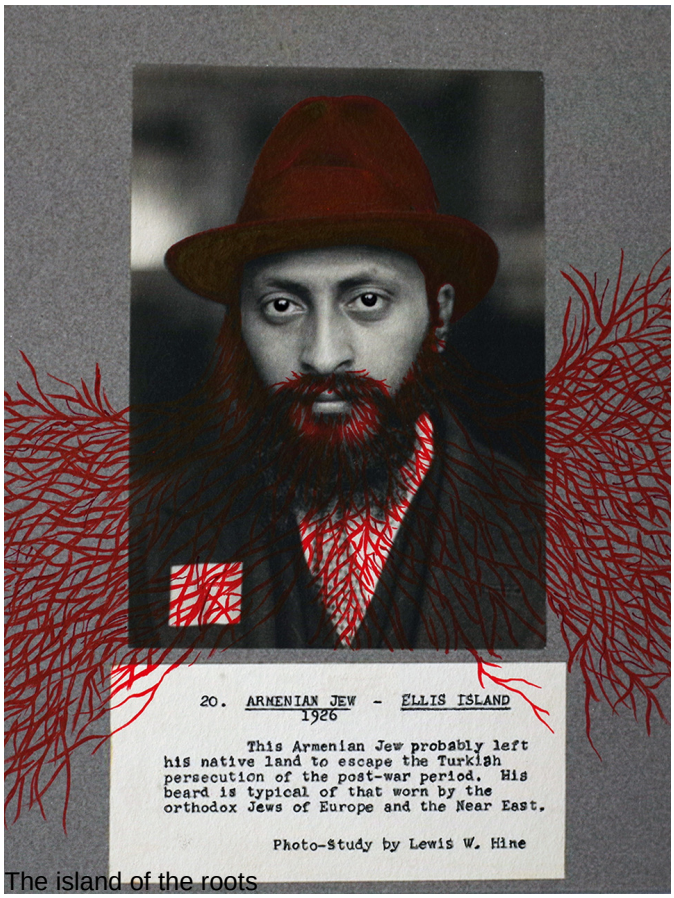


The island of the roots

Ellis Island was like a mythical port of entry where so many hopes of a new life crystallized. mounir fatmi decided to seize this history and, following an enduring habit of his that constantly enriches his work as well as its impact, refers to another artist who was also inspired by Ellis Island, the famous documentary photographer Lewis Hine, who was there in the early 20th century, taking pictures of so many different immigrants, from Italian families to Armenian Jews, from a young Finnish man to a Syrian migrant – back then already – and so many others.

The island of the roots

mounir fatmi, in order to express the multiple facets of his concepts and visions, often uses collage, particularly in his videos and photographs, as well as superimpositions. Likewise, in the series The Island of the Roots, the technique of collage allows him to address the past and the present, roots and branches, photography and drawing, faces and the world.



The island of the roots

As the art theoretician Jean-Marc Lachaud wrote: “Works of collage and montage combine concrete reality with magic, the here and the elsewhere, the non-contemporary and the current, the identifiable and the bizarre. They trace and untrace the contours of unexplored territories to rummage through. They build ephemeral passages in which unknown figures remain to be deciphered. They disorient, trouble, destabilize and provoke.”