

Kader Attia, Christian Nagel, by Gregory Volk, In : Art in America, International Review, 2/23/2010

BERLIN Kader Attia is a French artist of Algerian descent who grew up in the immigrant banlieues of Paris, sites of poverty, crime and, in 2005, massive rioting. Attia's excellent exhibition included five lush C- print photographs of Algerians sitting on huge, jumbled concrete blocks at a beach in Algiers that locals call "Rochers Carrés" (Square Rocks). In each photograph, you see one or two young men or teenagers gazing pensively at the Mediterranean and beyond, presumably toward Europe and its questionable promise of a better life. One man, viewed from behind, sits on a block's sharp edge watching as two freighters pass by on the distant horizon. Two shirtless boys standing in slightly awkward teenage postures look half ready to do the impossible: dive into the sea and swim to Paris, spurred by fantasies of money, opportunities and glamour.

Attia's "Rochers Carrés" (all 2009) are gorgeous and sublime: cobalt sea, bright blue sky tinged with white vapors, vivid shadows nestled among concrete blocks, human figures framed by vastness. They are also hard-hitting. You think of unemployed young men with smoldering ambitions and a lot of time on their hands. You think of Algeria punished by war with France and ravaged by civil war in the 1990s. All of these heaped-up concrete blocks begin to resemble the aftermath of a bombing or battle. They also suggest the chunky, menacing geometries of those massive apartment complexes in the banlieues where immigrants' dreams of a better life are undermined by racism and economic limitations. Attia coupled his sea-themed photographs with sculptures consisting of what look at first like plastic-wrapped six-packs of Algerian-brand water placed atop six white pedestals. In fact, the sculptures are merely the bulging plastic forms with no bottles inside, conjuring both aridity and a melancholic sense of absence or loss.

A projector at one end of a long table in what was made to look like a conference room generated a real-time surveillance image of the room and table on the opposite wall. Rather than conjuring some fabulous cinematic elsewhere, this installation delivers a dreary, claustrophobic, closed system. In another room was *Couscous Aftermaths* (3000 years old movements), 2009, a video of Attia's mother, clad in traditional Algerian garb, feigning the preparation of couscous from shards of broken mirrors. A routine, nutritive activity has been made precarious and dangerous, as if she is cooking with the remnants of shattered visions and ambition. In all mediums, Attia's works are visually striking, revealing a convincing, very personal and urgent engagement with issues of migration and cultural collision. They also demonstrate how hope, though ever-present, frequently abuts anger and despair.

Photo: Kader Attia: *Rochers Carrés*, 2009, C-print, 30 by 383/4 inches; at Christian Nagel.