



Title

Tarek Lakhrissi

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Article DOI

Not applicable

Url

<https://www.contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/tarek-lakhrissi>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Theo Gordon: 'Tarek Lakhrissi', *Burlington Contemporary* (22nd July 2021),
<https://www.contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/tarek-lakhrissi>

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Cover image: **Fig. 1** Still from *The Art of Losing (Love scene)*, by Tarek Lakhrissi. 2021. HD video, duration 1 minute 20 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and VITRINE, London; exh. MOSTYN, Llandudno).

Tarek Lakhrissi

by Theo Gordon • 22.07.2021

Tarek Lakhrissi's art addresses contemporary states of entrapment, strategies of survival and world-making for queers and people of colour in a capitalist hegemony of naked white supremacy and accelerating climate disaster.¹ In two parallel shows, *My Immortal* at MOSTYN, Llandudno, and *Perfume of Traitors* at VITRINE, London, Lakhrissi stages environments that undo simplistic notions of queer community, foreground the confinement of queers of colour in systems of oppression and pose the condition of melancholy as a political resource. Lakhrissi's works look to the creation of alternative languages and modes of communication; his forms are humorous, arch and ambiguous, pointing (literally in many cases) multiple ways at once. *My Immortal* comprises three sections, which work progressively to deconstruct queer relationality, culminating in a sculptural installation, the forms and themes of which resonate with the display in *Perfume of Traitors*.

The first work in *My Immortal* is a short single-channel CGI video installation, *The Art of Losing (Love Scene)* **FIG. 1**. Two humanoid figures with the heads of velociraptors stand and embrace at the centre of a spiralling liquid vortex. The translucent fluid, viscous as oil, shimmers as it drains away, as the couple lightly move together in their mutual touch of bodies. Poetry is the essence of Lakhrissi's practice; he was already an established writer and performer in Paris before he started making visual art in 2017, and a broad range of literary and cultural references suffuse his work, from Audre Lorde to Stéphane Mallarmé and Tavia Nyong'o to Kai Cheng Thom. Here, Lakhrissi's title gestures toward Elizabeth Bishop's masterful and mournful villanelle 'One Art' (1976), which famously opens with the line 'the art of losing isn't hard to master'.² 'One Art' is as much a meditation on Bishop's lost lesbian relationships as on the paradoxical ability of the villanelle, as a tight poetic form, to express ambivalence, mess and loss. *The Art of Losing* holds a similar tension, the two figures embracing in an ever-changing environment of draining liquid. The video is a singular presence in *My Immortal* as the only representation of coupling, an immortalisation of a transitory queer embrace.

The exhibition continues with a room of nine aluminium

tablets, each engraved with a poem and irregularly spaced on the gallery walls **FIG. 2**. The hypnotic, electronic soundtrack to *The Art of Losing*, composed by Fatma Pneumonia, spills into this space, emphasising a shift in tone; instead of couples in fusion, each of Lakhrissi's poems (written over the course of the COVID-19 lockdowns) details a single narrator recalling attempts to sustain queer life and moments of (dis)connection and betrayal. In *Home* **FIG. 3**, in an ambivalent tone, the narrator repeatedly insists on his proximity and distance to feeling settled:

I feel almost at home
when I read your texts [...]
i feel almost at home
when i hug you [...]
i feel almost at home
even when
 i am feeling
lost in
 rivers.

As the viewer stands to read these verses, the lustrous aluminium plates reflect blurred visions of the surrounding gallery space; the works reveal our world and we in it as out of focus, confused.

Lakhrissi's tablets are reminiscent of memorial plaques, even gravestones, compounding poetry's already vexed relationship with temporality and death by inscribing each poem into metal. The brief encounters, pleasures and moments of discontent that comprise queer experience are fixed in the cool surfaces of the aluminium, this permanence offsetting the surprise and mobility of desire depicted in the poems. *Possibly Maybe* is paired with *Trahi Trahi*, the only panel presented in French; in the former, the narrator admits to a lover that he might have stolen his heart, but that he was caught off guard:

and I didn't expect
being in love with
 blue Grass
your pretty butthole
 and a cold sun
this tastes like
 eternity
where have you been
 all this
 time?

In *Trahi Trahi*, the narrator describes a different dynamic of discovery, as he and his lover mutually betray each other, resulting in his triumphant rebirth.³ Lakhrissi's interest in

duplicity and alternative ethics draws on Jean Genet, most notably in his novel *The Thief's Journal* (1949), in which Genet repudiates shallow bourgeois morality – 'I thus resolutely rejected a world which had rejected me' – and explores how art offers resistance to such corrupt systems by enabling the creation of an aesthetic environment in which to reimagine betrayal as an ethics and eroticism of freedom.⁴

In a recent interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Lakhri described *My Immortal* as an investigation of 'what kind of heterotopia the queer community is', wanting to 'pay tribute' to his experiences of welcome in different queer groups across the world when travelling, by 'conceiving these ephemeral moments as "immortal" ones'.⁵ Lakhri draws from José Esteban Muñoz in his interest in transitional spaces as possible queer utopias, which he also links to growing up in the *banlieues* in Paris, understood by the artist as spaces of potential, 'where the future can actually exist, where utopia can actually happen' – perhaps akin to the forest in Celtic and English literary traditions.⁶ As the viewer faces *Fusion* to read:

And i am
still here
here again
in the middle
of the forest
looking
for love
and
fusion

the shapes of visitors moving through the gallery appear as blurry shades on the aluminium surface. This can be read as a visualisation of Jeremy Atherton Lin's recent rejection of the term 'queer community' as exclusionary, in favour of a conception of 'different people moving in different directions, entropic'.⁷

Unfinished Sentence II FIG. 4, the third section of the exhibition, uses the forest to dramatise the queer experience of tension between entrapment and utopia. Thirty metal 'spears' are suspended from the ceiling in a space suffused with lavender light. A lengthy, trance-like soundtrack by Ndayé Kouagou samples the theme music to *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003). The spears are curved and bent into various twisted parabolas: some end in leaf-like points FIG. 5, reminiscent of spearheads or prehistoric Solutrean flints, while others resemble sharp sickle-shapes and arrowheads.⁸ In previous iterations of this work at Centre rhénan d'art

contemporain, Altkirch (2019), and Palais de Toyko, Paris (2020), the spears were suspended at various heights; here, they have all been pulled upward to form a canopy above the viewer. A new commission comprising two metal angel wings, *Gay Angel 1* and *Gay Angel 2* (2021) FIG. 6, serves as a gateway into the space. Scratched and tarnished to give a feathery texture in the light, the wings ascend upward, even as their reference to the hubris of Icarus also implicates a downward fall and death.

The suspended spears of *Unfinished Sentence II* are threats and weapons and implicate both pleasure and pain. Lakhrissi has connected the work to the French lesbian feminist Monique Wittig's novel *Les Guérillères* (1969), the story of an insurrection against men by a group of warrior women, who attack language itself in their attempt to remake the symbolic order.⁹ The lavender light similarly gestures toward both French and American 'lavender' lesbian movements of the 1970s. Yet there is also a hefty dose of melancholy in this work. The viewer is trapped beneath a host of bent and useless weapons, which resemble leaves and thorns of the forest, barbed wire and astrological signs and stars. Toward the end of Kouagou's soundtrack an emergency services siren breaks in, reaching a fever pitch in the space before fading away. Danger is perpetually present.

Danez Smith's poem 'recklessly' (2017) and its play on the polyvalent meanings of 'sentence' speaks to Lakhrissi's use of the word in *Unfinished Sentence II*. Describing how HIV has become a manageable chronic health condition for those with access to medication, Smith writes:

it's not a death sentence anymore
it's not death anymore
it's more
it's a sentence
a sentence. ¹⁰

Smith shows how being told one is HIV positive also sentences the body to the entrapment of pharmaceutical regimes. Placing the viewer under a threatening canopy, *Unfinished Sentence II* similarly dramatises queerness as constantly trapped within the dangers of a violent, heterosexist world. Yet, crucially, for Lakhrissi such a realisation does not open to a position of despair, but rather of melancholy. He has described melancholy as a 'theoretically and politically important' position, one that marks a threshold of transition and potential.¹¹ The fundamental ambiguity of the sculptural forms is crucial here. The high camp of the twisted spears – recalling

weapons used by Xena or Buffy – invokes the style of self-defence that Lakhrissi envisions as necessary for queers of colour in social systems that sentence them to economic and social precarity, to constant states of emergency, and death. For Lakhrissi, melancholy is important as it offers a moment of choice, between self-defence and destruction, between the world as it is, and as it might be.

In *My Immortal* Lakhrissi presents a staged meditation on the nature of queer relationality and community that finishes on an acerbic note. The final work that the viewer encounters when exiting the show is another aluminium tablet, *Whisper Secrets*, engraved with a poem that bites at respectability politics and the commodification of otherness:

Use your trauma
Make it fashionable
Tell whatever stories
Leave the room
Whisper secrets in
Arabic language
Find a garden with
 flowers
and cry in
 silence.

Lakhrissi's exhibition *Perfume of Traitors* in London continues his humorous play with the form of weapons, in a more direct response to Jean Genet's work. Eight steel sculptures are suspended in VITRINE's window space in Bermondsey Square, bathed in fluorescent green light **FIG. 7**. Each piece is pointed, sharp, capable of inflicting damage, but misshapen and bent, hanging harmlessly from chains behind the glass. The works reference betrayal in their titles, including *BETRAYING NORMS* **FIG. 8**, *BETRAYING COMMUNITY* and *BETRAYING THE MOON* **FIG. 9**. For the Genet of *The Thief's Journal*, 'treachery is beautiful if it makes us sing'.¹² Here Lakhrissi celebrates betrayal through objects that, like jewellery, refuse to capitulate to any particular design or functional use, objects that sing of the power of frustration of formal expectations.



Fig. 6 *Gay Angel 1* and *Gay Angel 2*, by Tarek Lakhri. 2021. Metal, each 180 by 80 by 80 cm. (Courtesy the artist and VITRINE, London; exh. MOSTYN, Llandudno; photograph Mark Blower).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Perfume of Traitors* at VITRINE, London, 2021. (Courtesy Tarek Lakhri and VITRINE, London; photograph Jonathan Bassett).



Fig. 8 **BETRAYING NORMS**, by Tarek Lakhri. 2021. Steel and steel chains, 69 by 42 by 42 cm. (Courtesy the artist and VITRINE, London; photograph Jonathan Bassett).



Fig. 9 *BETRAYING THE MOON*, by Tarek Lakhri. 2021. Steel and steel chains, 69 by 42 by 42 cm. (Courtesy the artist and VITRINE, London; photograph Jonathan Bassett).

Exhibition details

Tarek Lakhriissi: My Immortal
MOSTYN, Llandudno
3rd July–19th September 2021

Tarek Lakhriissi: Perfume of Traitors
VIRTINE, London
2nd May–22nd August 2021

Footnotes

- 1 Lakhriissi's film *Out of the Blue* (2019) satirically rewrites the French right-wing anxiety of *Grand Replacement* – the conspiracy theory popularised by Renaud Camus that the white population of France will be overrun by people of colour – from the perspective of a young queer, non-binary person of colour.
- 2 E. Bishop: 'One Art', in *The Collected Poems of Elizabeth Bishop 1926–1979*, New York 1983, p.178.
- 3 'you were there, near the block, / waiting for another me / I have betrayed, betrayed, / i have given you as good back / and I left, left, / triumphant'. [*'tu étais là, près du bloc, / à attendre un autre moi / j'ai trahi, trahi, / je te l'ai faite à l'envers, / et je m'en suis sorti, sorti, / triomphant.'*]
- 4 J. Genet: *The Thief's Journal*, transl. Bernard Frechtman, London 2019, p.77.
- 5 'A heart pierced an angel's spear: Tarek Lakhriissi in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist', *Mousse Magazine* (76), available at <http://moussemagazine.it/tarek-lakhriissi-hans-ulrich-obrist-2021/>, accessed 21st July 2021. See also M. Foucault: 'Of other spaces', transl. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no.1 (Spring 1986), pp.22–27.
- 6 T. Lakhriissi: 'Planets and stars and time travel...', *Third Text* 35, no.1 (2021), pp.109–16; J.E. Muñoz: *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York 2009; S. McSpedden, 'In conversation with Tarek Lakhriissi at the 22nd Biennale of Sydney', available at <https://www.acmi.net.au/stories-and-ideas/interview-tarek-lakhriissi-biennale-of-sydney-nirin/>, accessed 21st July 2021.
- 7 J.A. Lin: *Gay Bar: Why We Went Out*, London 2021, p.240.
- 8 See T.J. Clark: 'More theses on Feuerbach', *Representations* 104, no.1 (2008), pp.4–7.

- 9** This was a particularly piquant reference in Altkirch, as Wittig was born in nearby Dannemarie.
- 10** D. Smith: 'recklessly', in *Don't Call Us Dead*, London 2017, p.45.
- 11** Lakhrissi, *op. cit.* (note 5).
- 12** Genet, *op. cit.* (note 4) p. 18.

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BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

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ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ