

## ATLANTIC AND MEDITERRANEAN | RAPHAEL FONSECA

The Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea are the two water-bodies addressed by the recent research activities of artist Leila Danziger. Her interest in these poetic and tragic areas is expressed in the title selected for this exhibition: *Emigrant Ship (Navio de emigrantes)*.

This is a tip of the hat to one of the most important works of Modern Art in Brazil, painted between 1939 and 1941 by Lithuanian-born Brazilian artist Lasar Segall (1891–1957). A Jewish immigrant who settled in São Paulo in 1923, Segall is an artist who experienced and portrayed the XX century diaspora, from exhausted refugees in ships sailing to unknown destinations through to glimpses of communities – particularly Jewish and African-Brazilian – that were viewed until then as the outskirts of Brazilian society. In his drawings, engravings and paintings, bodies tend to coil inwards, melancholy and inert, seemingly burdened by the weight of displacement, time, nostalgia and prejudice.

One of the mainsprings of this exhibition openly jousts with the works of Lasar Segall. This is handled not only through the inclusion of nine of his engravings that are part of a larger series linked to his *Emigrant Ship* painting, but also due to the massive amounts of research conducted in the National Archives by the artist, seeking documentation on transatlantic liners sailing between Europe and Brazil. The daughter of a German Jewish family forced to flee by surging Nazism, the autobiographical narrative of the artist is entwined with the biography of Segall.

Some of the photographic works displayed there are based on the passenger lists of these ships. The artist explores the fragmentation of proper names in the paper, as well as the apparent silence offered by gaps in several documents. Other works feature photographs taken from the digital collection at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust victims memorial in Jerusalem, Israel that holds one of the world's largest photo-archives of the Shoah. With these images, the artist proposes deletions and juxtapositions with rubberstamp. The word 'celestial' (*celestes*) is seen in one of the photographs, taken from a verse by another Holocaust survivor, poet Paul Celan: "*the sky-wrecks drive*".

With the verbal time of the phrase, the research conducted by Leila Danziger addresses the present of these images, meaning that historical documents and facts are recoded as wrecks that continue to act in the contemporary world. Although the Holocaust has ended, anti-Semitism has not: a quick look at the statistics is enough, although still latent at a historical moment when heat is driving so many actions

Flows of migrants, often triggered by the need to flee, become the master of vessels in this historical arc of almost a century, the replaced by aircraft wings. However, as recently headlined and exploited cruelly by the mass communications media, the Mediterranean is experiencing a new diaspora from parts of Africa and Asia, seeking to enter Western Europe.

These recent episodes underscore the second mainspring of the exhibition, which is based on this printed matter and audiovisual items shared over the Internet. It is interesting to note the different materialities with which the artist works – from government archives to digital files, exploring the possibility of opening up to the public the many layers contained by the images. The services of photographs and newspapers are raped and scratched, recalling the physicality of the images, while the pixels in the video frames offer latent hints of digital files.

The bodytext of newspapers is a better obliterated, while our gaze hovers over the photographs. Shelters, boats full of people, fires and ruins are displayed side by side in this kind of history book that is not guided only by words. In another series, the photographs used are still frames taken from amateur movies recording people being rescued in the Mediterranean. Split into other images in a grid format, the artist creates a fictitious legend for each part in this jigsaw that composes the frame. These texts offer hyperlinks, glued and sequenced in several languages. But what if the avalanche of textual information surrounding our Internet experiences were to be a poem? How to measure the way in which these human rights tragedies and all the discussions they prompt on contemporary phobias were to be turned into codes? How can a crossroads be established between those lists of passengers dating back to the early XX century and these almost random lists of words that offer access to a newspaper article?

With experience as a visual artist, a poet and a lecturer, it seems as though Leila Danziger is telling us through this exhibition that there is not just one crossroads, but rather several crossings. The histories are to some extent the guidelines of daily experience, while on the other hand, any action undertaken in the present has its space reserved in a temple of memory. Regardless of the selected path, fascination with images must always be imbued with an ethical stance in terms of their use.

Time and space may separate the ships and boats, but of fleeing and arriving is nevertheless latent, in addition to dance about the vitality of the body during the trip – and no, this may not be forgotten

**Raphael Fonseca** - Curator