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## Lost and Found: The Well-Traveled Objects of Alex Ayed by Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

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Somewhere along the way—in the process, during the journey from one place to another, on a trip to a destination that seems all but impossible to reach, while driving in a car or looking at the sky and dreaming up the idea of building a boat—the artist Alex Ayed makes his work in a series of elegant and playful gestures. He calls them simple, and they are. But their simplicity is deceptive and decidedly formal, the result of careful, deliberate moves coming at the end of a process that is, on occasion, so unpredictable as to verge upon chaotic. When finished, Ayed's works appear lightly, almost accidentally, in an exhibition space. Their ease and flow mask what is often effectively their central point, which is to illuminate the complexities of a world shaped by empire and trade, exploration and endless migration, meticulous navigation and the overwhelming, regenerative forces of nature.

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Whether poetic or irreverent, Ayed's gestures lure you in to consider a seemingly commonplace or incongruous object, or maybe a few objects wound together into an assemblage with rope, copper wire, or fishing line. At the same time, they give you a chance to unravel the wildly complicated histories, associations, and affiliations that might begin to explain how a given object was made, why it has been placed before you, where it came from, and the route it traveled to reach you. This is the magic of Ayed's subtle transformations. Almost without realizing it, a random object—like something you might have found on the street, at a flea market, or in an old abandoned house—can suddenly plunge you through centuries of political entanglements into the realm of metaphysical thinking, contemplating the stars in the nighttime sky, the high seas, animals and insects, your place and purpose in the universe.

Ayed leaves the majority of his works untitled, with spare parenthetical descriptions serving to distinguish one from the next. Although he started out, years ago and well before he went to art school, taking black-and-white photographs and developing his own prints, he now makes very few two-dimensional images that can be framed and hung flat on a wall. He has fashioned a number of found textiles into drape-like sculptures evoking statuary. He has shown paintings made from pieces of heavily weathered sails smoothed over canvas. He has built a few dwellings, such as a pigeon dovecote and a scaled-down water tank. And he has made exactly one life-size, vaguely humanoid sculpture, which happened to be the first work of Ayed's I saw.

Standing inside a bathroom in an old church in Tunis that had been converted into a police station and then a boxing gym, *Untitled (Kercha)* (2018) was an enormous lump of green olive oil soap, shaped into a man's sturdy legs morphing into a kind of gently twisting giant reaching for the heavens, or perhaps for the low-slung ceiling. The work, which Ayed had constructed for the annual arts festival Jaou Tunis, was later moved into storage and eventually broken down and used by a caretaker to bathe, all of which seemed like an utterly utilitarian and thus entirely fitting end for a work that was, like so many of Ayed's pieces, inherently made to last for a little while and then disappear.

Ayed's practice these days consists of mostly small, often ruminative objects, which can be variously construed as clues to solve a mystery, souvenirs by which to remember an adventure, or prompts to tell a story. The curator Myriam Ben Salah has described them memorably as "the physical incarnations of an oral tradition."<sup>1</sup> Ayed usually picks them up along some kind of route, packs them into a suitcase, carries them around, and then takes them out and puts them together in relation to one another and with a space. He rarely considers his works individually. There's an element of assemblage that always happens on site. In that sense, each exhibition is itself a single work.

Such objects and assemblages, taken from Ayed's oeuvre as well as his collaborations, include a dried grasshopper, a dead fly, a stuffed fox, and a desiccated pipefish; many rectangular slabs of white marble and squared-off chunks of soap; pools of olive oil and piles of sand; random bits of aluminum, Styrofoam, rubber, steel, and wood; a dried-out sea cucumber from a shop in Chinatown, a dinosaur tooth, a raccoon bone, and the artist's old high school gym bag, his name delicately embroidered in yellow thread against a dark green background.

There have been pigeons, rabbits, a snake, and two dogs. The first dog, a German shepherd named Rumi, was stolen. The second, a Tunisian stray called Sergio, acquired a full set of official paperwork and emigrated from North Africa to Europe. The two of them traveled to Genoa by boat, drove through snowy mountains, and then visited, of all possible tourist traps, the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Sergio, especially, haunts much of the work Ayed has been making over the past few years. On a cold gray day in early March 2021, Ayed was sitting in a car parked next to a towering 4G antenna, trying to catch a signal strong enough to make a video call from a remote location in rural France. A year ago, he thought he was heading back to Tunisia, but when borders in Europe started to close due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he ended up spending long stretches of time in an old stone farmhouse where a relative had once lived. He was clearing out the house and preparing for a show at ZERO... gallery in Milan. The two tasks were occasionally bleeding into each other. He had discovered the curled-up body of an animal, a ferret, that had died in its sleep. It was creepy but also somehow magical. Ayed thought the ferret might become a part of his work, but he wasn't sure, which is characteristic of the uncertainty that plays such a large part in his process. Sergio was around, of course, wandering off, causing no small amount of trouble, and he may very well figure into Ayed's forthcoming exhibition, too. From the weather, as from the calendar, the season around him was still quite stubbornly winter. But Ayed was excited for the coming spring. He had planted tomatoes earlier in the year. He was eager for the emergence of insects, which he loves. Like birds and chameleons, flies, bees, wasps, and crickets—insects of all kinds—recur frequently in his work. And he was thinking about the need for a greenhouse, about the perfection of living in a glass house filled with plants.

Ayed was born in 1989 and raised in Europe and the United States. He has the kind of biography that a less compelling artist might have milked for decades, telling the same story over and over, treating it as both personal and epochal. But Ayed is a much more interesting, sinuous, and far-reaching thinker. His objects are stripped down to spare forms, shorn of personal details. None of them are neat enough to represent a canned narrative.

Ayed landed back in Tunisia a few years before Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali was forced out of the presidency and fled the country. At that point, it was clear to Ayed—as it was to others, including his friends and family members—that the disconnect between the ruling regime and ordinary people, and between power and powerlessness more generally, was serious and untenable and might just break apart. Of course, it did. But the kind of opportunistic artistic bandwagon that followed was just as problematic. Ayed made a clear decision not to try and do politics through art, not to harbor any illusions of changing the world through art, not to hinge his work to any kind of fixed identity, and to keep everything in his works blissfully and inextricably mixed.



Sitting in the car next to the 4G tower, recalling that moment, he tells me: “What was exciting was the chaos. All of a sudden everything seemed possible. This is something I tried to keep in my practice. For every new exhibition I try to provoke something.”<sup>2</sup> “I’m just questioning everything,” he added. Ayed typically gathers objects together and packs them into a suitcase. Then he brings the suitcase into a space and unpacks the objects, making certain arrangements and associations in response to the site. Two of the suitcases are works in their own right: *Untitled (Suitcase)* (2020), a debonair, goatskin affair, and *Untitled (Soap Suitcase)* (2014–18), a more rustic, vintage valise accompanied by a large green lamp.

But all of that happens at the very end. In a sense, the real work is everything that comes before.

The objects are often just an excuse to go somewhere—to drive through the desert, to cross from Tunisia to Algeria and back again, to reach the end of Europe or some other continent, to learn how to fish in the East River or read the names of stars in Arabic. “I’m trying things,” he says. “I don’t like to stop at ideas. Usually I’m very free when I work on an exhibition. I don’t want to stop at borders. I don’t see borders. But right now, it’s very difficult to move. I have to question a lot what I’m doing.”

To listen to the rush of stories that come from Ayed’s objects is to catch fragments of his adventures, like the time he tried to cross the desert on a camel with a guide who didn’t want to go, they got lost, he could have died, and the show was nearly a failure; like the time he was looking for a sorcerer and working on magic every day and found a snake in his car; like the time his studio was broken into four times and a guy sold him a dog and then pigeons and then more; like the time he got stuck in the countryside for nearly a year and now he’s trying to catch a signal on his phone.

All of it sounds pretty wild and can make you forget that Ayed isn’t naive or self-taught. His training in Paris was disciplined and formal, and he’s incredibly well read on the subjects of contemporary and conceptual art, very aware of what his peers and predecessors have done and are doing. In that sense, Ayed isn’t the total renegade that his process might otherwise suggest. Although he leaves a great deal to chance, he has the habits of a calibrated and practiced mind, of an artist who took inspiration for the works in the exhibition *Soap Opera*, at B7L9 art space in Tunis in 2019, from the story (and strategy) of a chess prodigy.

When I ask him a softball question about Marcel Duchamp, Ayed tells me he relates to him in the ease of the gesture, and in the report of people saying that Duchamp was lazy. “I’m not a lazy person,” Ayed says, “but sculpture-wise I think there’s usually an easier way. I think the most beautiful gestures are simple. Right now, there’s such a long history of art. We have all these tools available to us. We can pick anything we want among all these languages. I’m mixing my objects and making assemblage. I don’t need to choose to be one thing or another. We’re very free of all that. But my inspiration,” he adds, importantly, “is not really in art.”

For a few years, around 2015, Ayed seems to have really wanted to start a business outside of art entirely, taking tourists on trips in and out of the Sahara. One particular work, another anomaly, dates from that era: *You Can Have My Card* (2015), in the shape of a business card totally caked in sand. There are many more piles of sand in his oeuvre, for instance filling his gym bag, as *23 kg* (2015), or stuck to another square of soap, in *Untitled (Sandy soap)* (2018). For a solo show at Balice Hertling in Paris earlier this year, *Roaring Forties*, Ayed threw himself into the history of navigation; the title was a reference to the ten degrees of latitude in the southern hemisphere famous for intense westerly winds and therefore speed as well as danger. In a collaboration with artist Lydia Ourahmane for the exhibition *Risquons-Tout* at WIELS, Brussels (2020–21), the pair had planned to travel from Brussels to sub-Saharan Africa. Unable to get there, they scoured the borders of Europe instead, gathering an incredible inventory of objects (including a dead fox, jars of honey, tinned sardines, glass eyes, and a boat trailer) and burying five paintings in the walls of the art center, never to be seen by visitors.

Ayed tells me he doesn't take himself too seriously. I ask the same question to Ben Salah, who has worked with him several times and recently invited him to collaborate on a new project with Ourahmane, which will be presented at The Renaissance Society in Chicago later this year. "I wouldn't say that he doesn't take himself seriously," she tells me. "It's more that he goes so much into experimentation that he has no idea what the outcome will be. He leaves space for the unknown to appear. And for failure. I'd say the process is more important than the objects. The objects are often an excuse to go somewhere." <sup>3</sup> "He's not a designer who really works on the shape of things," she adds. "He's more of a traveler."

Back in rural France, Ayed is thinking about the countryside and the sea, the stone house where he is staying, which has to be heated by fire, and Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958). His work until now has depended so much on movement, on ambiguity, that he finds himself in a strange place, a little bit stuck, and also wondering, environmentally, if he'll continue to drive a car or if he should really just build a boat. "How I started was always about going to get some object," he says. "The objects give a certain sense of having come from different environments, certain situations. They are like clues. The objects always refer to something. But I like the poetical dimension of an object that no longer has a function. I cannot master this, what the object represents. Sometimes even I lose the meaning."

Of course, Ayed knows that his loss is our gain, and he leaves his objects the way he does—placed in corners, on shelves, inside walls, with only the sparest of descriptions to anchor them—precisely so that viewers can fill in the gaps with their own stories, and make from these bits of soap and metal and sand, from these little pieces of the natural and political and industrial worlds, their own meanings, which are totally unpredictable and entirely up to chance, just as the artist had planned.

Alex Ayed (b. 1989, Strasbourg) lives and works between Brussels, Paris, and Tunis. He studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He has recently had solo exhibitions at Balice Hertling, Paris (2020); B7L9 Art Station Kamel Lazaar Foundation, Tunis (2019); and Institute of Arab and Islamic Art, New York (2019). The artist has recently participated in group exhibitions at WIELS, Brussels (2020); CAN Centre d'art Neuchâtel (2020); and the fifth edition of Jaou Tunis (2019), among others. Ayed is currently preparing for upcoming shows at ZERO..., Milan (2021); Magasins Généraux, Paris (2021); The Renaissance Society, Chicago (2021); and the New Museum Triennial, New York (2021).

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