

Anna Boghiguan

A Short Long History

E

Anna Boghiguan, an Armenian born in Cairo, has been making art since the early 1970s. She has developed a practice that corresponds with the tradition of the travelling artist and it has already taken her to the farthest corners of the world. Being on the move is a source of inspiration and strengthens her commitment. An extremely well-read and free-spirited thinker, she links meaning to the passage and connection of things. With the utmost fascination, she investigates how flows of ideas, goods, people and capital are shaped, move globally, and can also result in inequalities.

Anna Boghiguan crystallises her experiences, reading of literature and news reports into drawings, collages, books, cut-out figures and installations. Her works are distinctly visual and expressive, yet can also be read as stories. Boghiguan uses them to address global issues, which she interprets in a personal way and links back to people's experiences, especially those who are victims of oppression.

In her exhibition for S.M.A.K., Anna Boghiguan traces the history of the global cotton trade. She focuses on the city of Ghent, which has strong connections to this raw material. After all, cotton in Ghent marks the start of the industrial revolution on the European continent and the strong Belgian textile market of the last century, but also of social injustice, the exploitation of land and forced labour in Congo.



A Short History: How the Industrial Revolution Changed the Pace of Europe, 2020

installation with cut-out figures in pencil, wax, pigment and wood;
drawings in pencil, Chinese ink and watercolour
Courtesy of the artist

Prior to her solo exhibitions, Anna Boghiguiian spends a significant period of time in the city or region where she will present her work. She delves into the local history and culture and will create an installation on the spot. Whether making new work or an entire exhibition, she always departs from the themes that have marked her practice from the outset: wars and revolutions, the history of labour and certain raw materials, and the emergence of modern imperialism.

In 'A Short Long History', her exhibition for S.M.A.K., Anna Boghiguiian digs further into the history of the global cotton trade. Cotton was already cultivated in antiquity and became one of the earliest mass consumer goods. Ghent has a special relationship with this commodity. From the 18th century onwards, the city imported cotton from the East Indies and later also from the United States. Through the mechanisation of its textile production in the 19th century, the city spearheaded the industrial revolution in mainland Europe. Until recently, cotton was spun, woven and printed in Ghent and traded throughout the world. Cotton made the city and its textile magnates rich, but it also led to the unfair treatment of textile workers, the exploitation of land and forced labour on the cotton plantations in Congo.

The installation about Ghent consists of a lively parade of cut-out figures. Using a traditional technique and expressive gestures, Anna Boghiguiian painted the paper figures with wax and pigment and attached them to wooden sticks. In the work, we see Congolese cotton pickers, spinning and weaving machines, ships loaded with bales of cotton, textile workers in their meagre homes and lost Ghent factory buildings. The artist has supplemented the figures with small drawings that capture her personal impressions of scenes from the industrial history of the city.



Promenade dans l'inconscient, 2016

installation with paint, cut-out figures in pencil, wax, pigment and wood; painted denim canvas; supports in wood and metal

Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne-Centre de création industrielle, Parijs

In 'Promenade dans l'inconscient' (A Walk in the Unconscious) Anna Boghiguian endeavours to sketch a portrait of the city of Nîmes' subconscious. In a procession of paper characters, she interweaves the early history of Nîmes with that of her homeland, Egypt. Boghiguian depicts palm trees and crocodiles, two symbols that appear in the city's coat of arms and reference the Battle of Actium (31 BC). In this naval conflict off the Greek coast, the Roman commander, Octavian, who later became Emperor Augustus, defeated the combined fleet of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. On the coat of arms, the crocodile representing Egypt is chained to a palm tree, symbolising Rome's victory. To reward his generals for this triumph, Octavian gave them the land on which they subsequently founded Nîmes.

With a large denim canvas that had been dyed crimson, in the original installation in Nîmes, the artist has referred more explicitly to the role of the city in the international textile industry, including the development of jeans fabric or 'denim', an abbreviation of 'serge de Nîmes' ('a sturdy fabric from Nîmes'). A blue zigzag line on the sail represented the Nile and made a link with feluccas, the traditional sailboats that still navigate the river today.

Furthermore, here at S.M.A.K., against a backdrop of horrifying red, this parade also features Catholic Popes and cardinals (the protagonists in the religious wars that tore Protestant Nîmes apart in the 16th century), soldiers, swimmers, ferocious gods and bullfighters. The seething ensemble is reminiscent of a carnival procession but at the same time evokes the waves of migration that have arisen through the many wars in the history of mankind.



Woven Winds. The Making of an Economy – Costly Commodities, 2016
installation with paint, cut-out figures in wax and pencil on paper;
supports in wood and metal
E. Righi Collection

Since 2011, Boghiguan has been charting the long history of the cotton trade and investigating, among other things, its impact on human rights. In the installation 'Woven Winds. The Making of an Economy – Costly Commodities', the artist outlines the indivisible links between the American cotton trade and slavery, violence and exploitation. The social and racial inequalities that this caused are very much in evidence today.

'Woven Winds' includes scenes of African slaves sailing across the Atlantic to the New World in vessels that, for many of them, became floating coffins. Also on display is the 'cotton gin', a machine invented by the American Eli Whitney in 1793. The contraption allowed seeds from the cotton plant to be automatically separated from the fibre. It was dangerous to operate but greatly speeded up the manufacture of textiles, thereby causing cotton cultivation, plantations and slavery to skyrocket. More recently, cotton has been the driving force behind the modernisation of cities such as Cairo, Mumbai and Shanghai, with the downside being the present-day exploitation of textile workers in low-wage countries and the fight for agricultural land.



The Salt Traders, 2015

installation with salt, sand, tarpaulin, fragments of a boat,
drawings on paper and wooden structures

Collection Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino,
on loan from Fondazione per l'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea CRT

Anna Boghiguian realised 'The Salt Traders' for the Istanbul Biennale in 2015. The ancient city of Byzantium, now Istanbul, was at the crossroads of trade between Europe and Asia and, more specifically, a hub in the global trafficking of slaves and salt. The work takes this raw material as a starting point for an indictment of the abuses that now dominate our planet, such as the depletion of natural resources, climate change, the consequences of colonisation and slavery and the migratory movements that accompany them, human rights violations and financial crises.

'The Salt Traders' is based on a story, set in 2300, about a Roman salt-trading ship that is suddenly released from the melting polar ice. A future civilisation uses the vessel to study its history.

The installation contains a sail on which a map of the world indicating salt-trading routes is combined with hexagonal patterns, the latter of which symbolise the chemical structure of salt. The shape is also related to the cells of the honeycombs that Boghiguian has placed next to the sail in large frames. Other themes also come to the fore, such as Alexander the Great's journey to the salt lakes in Egypt; the 'Salt March', a 390 km journey that Mahatma Gandhi and his followers made in 1930 in protest against the British salt monopoly in India; and the recent economic crisis in Greece, which Boghiguian describes as 'a collapse of bread and salt'. Glass windows, on the other hand, show us different kinds of salt, and a drawing of a foetus in the salty amniotic fluid of the uterus indicates that it is also vital for humans.



Good Alianore Is Coming, 2020

honeycombs, wood

Courtesy of the artist

The installation 'Good Alianore Is Coming' is part of an ongoing project to construct highly scented honeycombs. Anna Boghiguiian regularly depicts bees and beehives. She sees the organisation within a hive as a socio-political structure that is both a monarchy and a democracy. Bees work together but are controlled by the queen, whose main task is the reproduction of the species. Boghiguiian links this to the revolution that Egypt has undergone in recent years. The country has transitioned from a monarchy to a form of democracy that still appears to be essentially authoritarian. By creating work about bees and their precious honey, the artist seeks to draw our attention to the fact that nature is out of kilter, thereby threatening the bee population – which is indispensable to our ecosystem – with extinction.



Mapping the Ear, 2011-14

mixed media on canvas

Carré d'Art – Musée d'art contemporain, Nîmes

'Mapping the Ear' is a painting of a giant ear that is straining to capture the sounds of the world. It is a critical motif in the oeuvre of Anna Boghiguan. "The Ear listens, the Ear is one lobe of the Brain, but another lobe dissects the information received by the Ear, and searches for the Truth, assuming that what is received is false or an illusion," she once claimed. The artist distinguishes between the 'metaphysical ear', with which we hear our inner voice, and the 'physical ear', which enables us to communicate. This dichotomy is inspired by the theories of Carl Gustav Jung, who claimed that people use their environment to better understand their inner world and subconscious. For Boghiguan, the ear also has a personal meaning: she is hard of hearing and therefore dependent on different kinds of signals to capture information.



Untitled, 2005

acrylic on paper

Djurhuus Collection Copenhagen

Untitled, 2010 (6x)

oil and sand on canvas (5x)

acrylic on paper (1x)

Djurhuus Collection Copenhagen

Anna Boghiguian made a series of paintings with gardens and flowers for her solo exhibition 'Gardens of Egypt' in Cairo in 2010. Just as the daily, sometimes brutal life in the streets of Cairo fascinates her, Boghiguian is also attracted by the beauty and meditative tranquillity of gardens. Here she shows a number of works with roses that were part of the exhibition.

Roses on canvas are immediately associated with romance or even kitsch, but in Boghiguian's work they possess the same power and conviction that can be found in her politically inspired work. The artist makes roses tangible via precise brushstrokes and beautiful, expressionistic colours, which she applies to a sparse surface of oil paint, sand and other gritty material.

In this space, Anna Boghiguian combines her paintings of roses with a spatial installation of real rose bushes on scattered beds. She thus creates a poetic space, one in which she also includes a painting of a veiled woman. Here, Boghiguian alludes to the rich, inner 'gardens' that women know how to develop within themselves.



A Tin Drum that has Forgotten its own Rhythm, 2018-19

cut-out figures in tin on supports

Courtesy of the artist

The cut-out figures in 'A Tin Drum that has Forgotten its own Rhythm' were part of a larger installation of the same name that was shown in the exhibition 'A Wanderer Through Time' at Tate St. Ives (2019). The raw material tin, as referenced in the title, is closely associated with the industrial history and culture of Cornwall, the region around St. Ives. The area was once one of the frontrunners of the mining industry, but gradually lost its importance. The last tin and copper mine, that of South Crofty, was closed in 1998. Boghiguian's figures are made of steel covered in tin, nickel and copper. They represent the typical inhabitants of Cornwall throughout the centuries: miners and fishermen, the latter of whom have traditionally used local metals from the mines to can the sardines they catch off the coastline.



Anna's Egypt, 2001-03

drawings

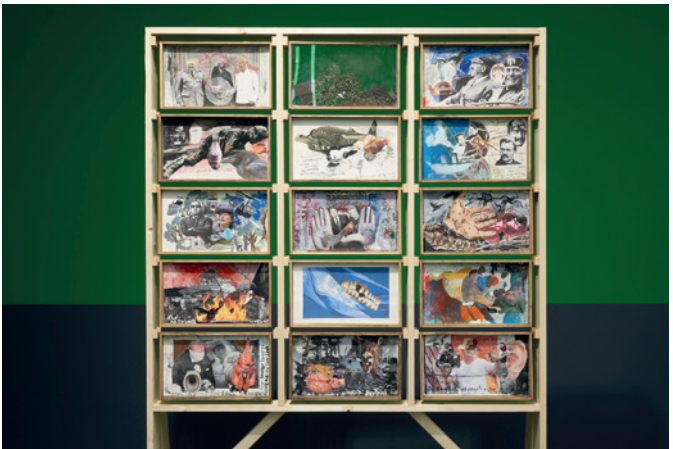
Private collection

Anna's Egypt, 2001-05

sketchbooks

Private collection

Sketchbooks and notebooks form an important part of Anna Boghigian's oeuvre. Their portable format is perfectly suited to her nomadic lifestyle and allows her to draw, paint and take notes anywhere. In 'Anna's Egypt' she does not sketch the traditional tourist pictures that we readily associate with the country, but takes a sweeping look at local and everyday life: the history of Egypt and its myths, numerous great and small events, the city, nature and all the inhabitants, both historic and contemporary. Through spontaneously sketched scenes and texts, Boghigian allows us a glimpse of the things that instinctively attract and innerly move her. Here, we do not get to see the real Egypt, but Anna Boghigian's idiosyncratic, challenging and eclectic version.



In the World. East and West, North and South, 2017

collages on paper, wood and glass

Courtesy of the artist

In these series of surrealistic collages on paper, Anna Boghiguan brings together portraits of dictators and dubious politicians with images from the mass media. Figures such as Vladimir Putin and Narendra Modi, Sheikhs, Mao and Donald Trump are placed in explosive scenes that are teeming with wild animals and villains. Because of their associative and particularly absurd character, the images are as terrible as they are funny. In one of the collages, a monkey with a wide open mouth listens to a screaming Donald Trump. In yet another work, Boghiguan shows a gorilla and a dirty toilet participating in a tea party with Margaret Thatcher and Augusto Pinochet, a reference to their actual encounter in 1998.



Anna Boghiguan (b. 1946, Cairo) has regularly exhibited her work in international museums and art institutes over the past ten years. She has participated in the biennials of Sharjah (2011), Istanbul (2015), Venice (2015), Santa Fe (2016) and Sydney (2019) and in Manifesta 13 Marseille (2020). Over the past five years, she has created solo exhibitions for Carré d'Art, Nîmes (2016), Castello di Rivoli, Turin (2017), New Museum, New York (2017), Museum der Moderne, Salzburg (2018) and Tate St. Ives (2019), among others.