

Anna Boghiguian

STEDELIJK MUSEUM VOOR ACTUELE KUNST (SMAK)



Anna Boghiguian tells stories. The daughter of a Cairene Armenian family, the artist—who celebrates her seventy-fifth birthday this year—has led an itinerant life: traveling between Europe, Asia, and Africa, between the countries of the erstwhile colonial rulers and those of their slaves, as well as between antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the present. Even when her stories stretch into ancient times, they are always about the present. Consider the installation she created for her current exhibition, “A Short Long History” (curated by Ann Hoste) which is made up of works that trace the global cotton trade back to its origins.

Drawings, collages, and—the artist’s signature works—colorful, freestanding cutouts weave together motley images showing scenes from the history of cotton: shipping routes; violence; exploitation in factories; workers’ uprisings; slave labor on plantations in India, America, and Africa; the wealth of the few and the penury of the many, illustrating a history that deserves to be told and retold, especially in a place like Ghent. *A Short History: How the Industrial Revolution Changed the Pace of Europe, 2020*, shows how the Belgian city flourished as a center for the processing of cotton imported from the East Indies and subsequently from the US and the Congo. Industrialization brought Ghent affluence until the 1950s, when the textile industry began its exodus toward lower-wage countries.

Boghiguian renders her figures in pencil, wax, and pigment on paper, then cuts them out and mounts them on wooden supports. These objects, which somewhat resemble traditional Indonesian shadow puppets, are so large they can be set up in a room like game pieces, and here Boghiguian's ensembles transform the gallery into a stage on which viewers find themselves cast in an active role, studying one image after another and piecing together the larger story.

Promenade dans l'inconscient, 2016, probes the history of Nîmes in the South of France. The city's coat of arms features a palm tree and a crocodile, elements that hark back to the Battle of Actium off the coast of Greece in 31 BCE, when Octavian, the future Emperor Augustus, vanquished the united forces of Marc Antony and Cleopatra. He rewarded his generals with the land on which they founded the colony that would become Nîmes. The crocodile stands for Egypt, the palm for the Roman victory. Boghiguian interweaves the connections between the land on the Nile and the city near the Rhône delta with the religious conflicts between Protestants and the Catholic Church and the rise of Nîmes as a center of the textile industry. The city was also, according to some scholars, the birthplace of denim (*serge de Nîmes*, "sturdy fabric from Nîmes"). Boghiguian has staged this historical material as a kind of carnival parade of cut-out figures that inevitably brings to mind today's harrowing refugee treks. There's something absurd about the procession, but as Russian philosopher of culture Mikhail Bakhtin argued a century ago, the grotesque and the carnivalesque hold potential for subversion.

One of the largest galleries in the exhibition is reserved for the installation *The Salt Traders*, 2015, created for the Fourteenth Istanbul Biennial. In its previous incarnation as Constantinople, the metropolis of the Byzantine Empire, Istanbul was a hub of the traffic in both slaves and salt. More recently, the mineral figured prominently in modern history as the object of contention in Mahatma Gandhi's 240-mile Salt March. Salt is the most ordinary commodity and yet is the stuff of a history that spans the globe. When artist Timur Si-Qin was asked after a recent lecture how art could help change the world, he said it was by telling stories. The stories that Boghiguian tells might yet guide the world to a better place.

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.

— Noemi Smolik