



ANNE ZAHALKA

16 JUNE- 18 JULY 2015

THRESHOLD

An engagement with Morocco provides enormous scope for the intellect and imagination. The ancient cities abound with history and an intensity of colour and decoration. Medieval architecture, now peppered with satellite dishes brings the new world media to the masses. The Atlas Mountains and the Sahara lead one through a kind of time travel in an intensely metaphysical experience.

As Australians, we can relate to the ancient indigenous people of Morocco. The Amazigh (Berber) culture, that has survived a long history of invasions, the most profound being the Islamic overlay of the 7th- and the 20th-Century French colonisation, is not dissimilar to that of our own Indigenous Australians and of their history of dispossession and survival.

Recent developments in the Arab world make this an opportune time to explore the interface between Western culture and Islam. *Threshold* presents a rich and resonant body of work selected from Anne Zahalka's journey through this ancient landscape into its mysterious interior. The work reflects on the difficult relationship one has as a traveller in foreign lands while providing an intimate and respectful way of seeing into this diverse and complex world.

As the guest artist on our first photography tour we thank Anne for sharing her observations, her skills and her revelations. We look forward to hosting Anne for a new Residency Project and Tour in 2016 coinciding with the 6th Marrakech Biennale.

Rita Lazauskas
Director Amazigh Cultural Tours
Morocco

COVER IMAGE:

UNTITLED (FIGURE/PILLAR)

MIDDLE PAGE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:

UNTITLED (ALLEY/FIGURE); UNTITLED (FIGURE/STAIRWELL); UNTITLED (STAIRS/WINDOW); UNTITLED (DOORWAY/CHORD); **SECOND ROW:** UNTITLED (FIGURE/IPAD); UNTITLED (ARCH/DOOR); UNTITLED (FIGURE/PILLAR); UNTITLED (STAIRS/RAILS); **THIRD ROW:** UNTITLED (DOORWAY/WALL); UNTITLED (FIGURE/TRAY); UNTITLED (SHELF/POTS); UNTITLED (FIGURE/VESSEL); **FOURTH ROW:** UNTITLED (FIGURES/PILLAR); UNTITLED (PIGEON/ELECTORAL POSTER); UNTITLED (SECURITY CAMERA/COLUMNS); UNTITLED (FIGURE/TABLET)

INSIDE RIGHT PAGE:

UNTITLED (ROAD TO ZAGORA)

ALL WORKS ABOVE: 2015, PIGMENT INK ON RAG PAPER, 100 X 66.6CM

BACK PAGE:

UNTITLED (ATLAS STUDIOS, OUARZAZATE), 2015, PIGMENT INK ON RAG PAPER, 100 X 74.5CM

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THRESHOLD

Janus, the god of thresholds was also the god of beginnings and endings, change and time. Commonly depicted over Roman arches and doorways, Janus faced in opposite directions marking the spatial, temporal or existential transition from one place to another.¹ In this series of works photographed in Morocco, Anne Zahalka represents many thresholds—doorways, arches, a crossroad, a highway and a crumbling film set. Like Janus who embodied the value of looking both forward and backward, Zahalka invokes the slippery transition between documentary and staged photography, between ‘participant observer’ and tourist.

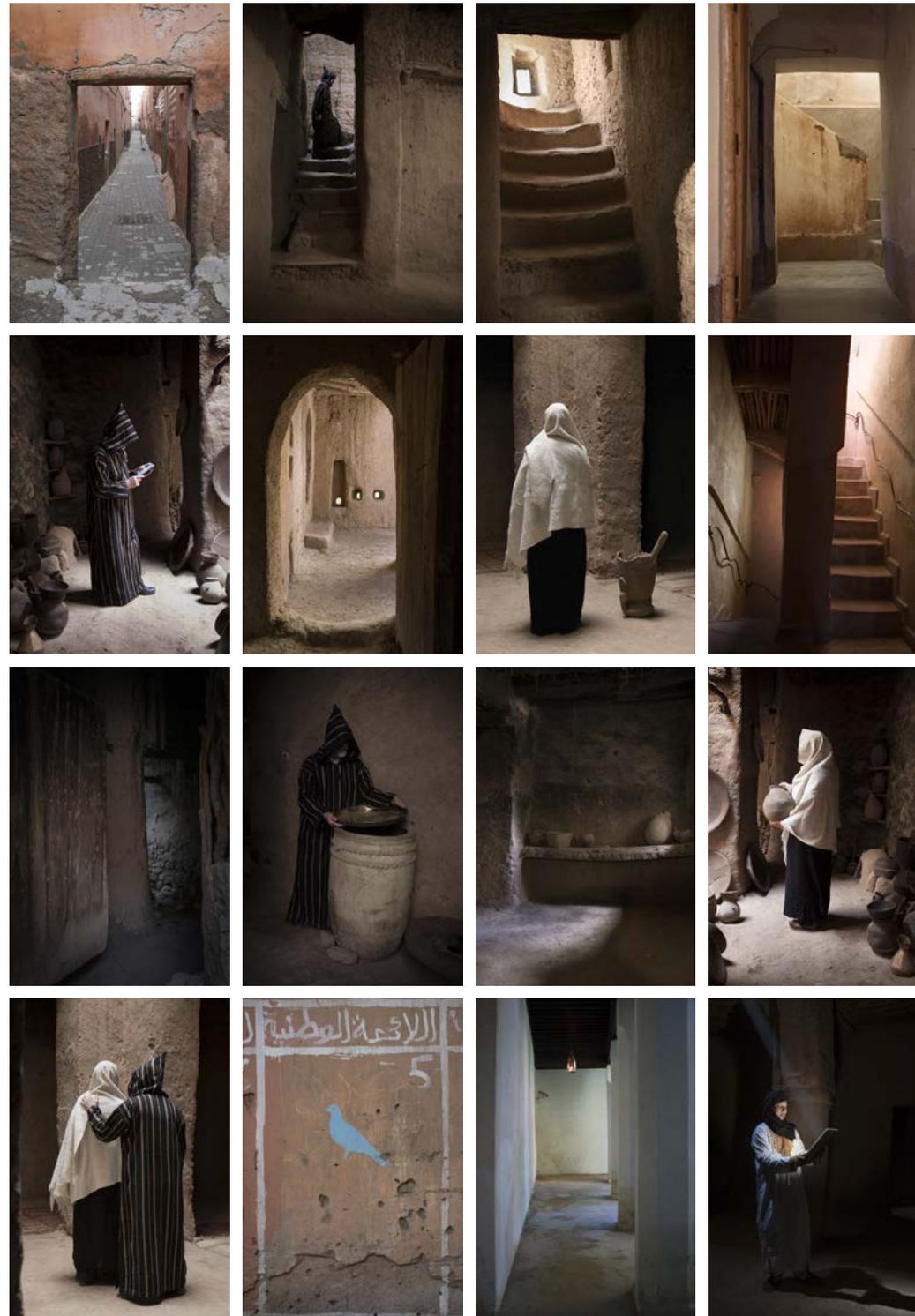
Threshold presents a set of interiors in portrait format and three exterior images, reminiscent of either postcards or the stereoscope (invented in 1838), not only in their format but also in their exotic subject matter. The setting is unmistakably Morocco with hand-hewn walls and figures wearing the Djellaba or unisex Berber robe. Or is this Morocco? Considering Zahalka’s ease in working both on location as well as her extensive and ironic use of backdrops in the studio, she might well have painted the country and staged these gloriously lit interiors with their warm chalky surfaces. After all, Moroccan interiors of varying degrees of authenticity hover vividly in Western imagination sustained through exploration and travel literature, painting, illustration, cinema, documentary photography and interior decorating magazines.

As an exotic location Morocco is highly specific in Western iconography, typically as a biblical setting, and yet the Marrakech cityscape is sufficiently unfamiliar and its surrounding desert sufficiently vast, that Morocco is also frequent location for futuristic and indeterminate landscapes. Standing as a threshold between Africa and Europe, Morocco performs for the west as both forwards and backwards, with breathtaking discrepancy between rich and poor, hand crafted and mass-produced. In her interiors, Zahalka frames small contemporary details

that sit comfortably amongst the soft terracotta, such as a light switch, door handle, surveillance camera and iPad. In this series Zahalka gently foregrounds Morocco’s Janus position and invites us to relish this country’s retention of its medieval past alongside its present, something we might also envy.

As it happens, in taking these photographs, Zahalka is standing on Moroccan soil whilst travelling across the country on a road trip. Morocco is a constitutional monarchy and Islam is the predominant religion, with both Berber and Arabic as the predominant languages. However, as Morocco’s cityscapes and landscapes come to us ahead and independent of any lived experience, the manner in which Zahalka has managed the sensuous onslaught of this iconic country, speaks of the relationship between documentary and staged photography and the artist’s recognition of and complicity in its exploitation. So tenacious, singular and clichéd is Morocco as an iconography, Zahalka is exceedingly brave to step inside this territory with her still and moving cameras. However, the threshold where Zahalka stands in relation to Morocco is both relevant and telling, because where she stands, we too stand. And how her subjects stand—turned way from the lens—thwarts unimpeded access and establishes Zahalka’s thoughtful entrance onto this much-photographed colonial stage. Turned in on their own thoughts, shrouded in traditional garments, Zahalka holds back the onslaught of our gaze.

From its representation in painting and photography, we can glean that traditional cities and towns are sonically bright places, with hives of economic activity taking place in souks and laneways producing a cacophony of sound bouncing off the hard surfaces of gloriously decorated tile walls, and with the call to prayer resonating from elevated minarets, threading the city together. And yet Zahalka’s interiors have a particularly muted sonic quality arising from terracotta vessels, clay walls and dirt floors.



This beautiful earthy visual and sonic tone is supported by natural light that chases along corridors and down stairs, penetrates small hand crafted apertures gently taking shafts of daylight into subterranean living spaces.

In her diptych *Untitled (Atlas Studios, Ouarzazate)*, Zahalka has paired a panoramic image of crumbling faux Egyptian columns with an aerial Google image, recalling diaristic and topographical photography of the 1970s as well as the ubiquity of surveillance—as if looking from a drone might reveal a better understanding of Morocco than seeing at ground level. I am in two minds as to whether this perspective would be inimical to Janus. Described as the world’s largest film studio, Atlas Studios consists mostly of desert and mountains. Founded in 1983, its success is attributed to being a landscape that can “mimic the natural environments of many countries well.”²

Zahalka advises me that *Untitled (Village of Ouled Edriss)* was not staged—that on emerging from a subterranean Kasbah

museum and home she photographed the street as it unfolded, with its heady medley of Eastern and Western references. Whether these images are documentary or staged hardly matters. Perhaps they are a combination of the two, documenting as they undoubtedly do, the position where Anne Zahalka stands between the imagined and the real.

Naomi Cass
Melbourne

1. While in more recent and less interesting parlance, Janus faced came to mean hypocritical, deceitful or two faced.
2. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlas_Corporation_Studios).