

Nicole Bouldoukian

Comme une oasis...En noir et blanc

Fifteen portraits of Lebanon (Palm, yucca)

Balance (mizān) is the aim, or reciprocity between what is taken from the earth and what must be given back in order to make this vital alliance with Nature endure.

Ibn al-'Awwam, Kitab al-filaha (Book of Agriculture), fl. 12th century

Nicole Berjon Bouldoukian's discrete exhibition at Saleh Barakat's Upper Gallery comprises fifteen drawings, executed in fine black ink on white paper. The drawings describe certain types of palm and yucca, trees and foliage found around Beirut and the wider Lebanon.

Indeed, these particular plant varieties have been chosen for a reason. Palm trees are endangered, disappearing from Lebanon, from the world, as human influenced habitat destruction is changing irrevocably the ability of these valuable plants to live and thrive. At first glance Bouldoukian's drawings might be viewed as plant descriptions, illustrations for an imagined flora or herbal of Beirut palms. However, their positioning as artworks, their siting in an art gallery, prompts another way of looking.

I look for palm tree shapes as I walk around Beirut, my eyes remembering them.

Herbalists, then plant collectors, have always walked and gathered, smelled, tasted, felt and looked. Gradually, along with increasing opportunities for travel, the sharing and comparison of plant knowledge across the world, a former intimacy between plant, place and describer has become one closer to an interrogation. Descriptions of plants made for identification now rarely show a closeness between observer and observed, even if it continues to exist. The relationship between plant and human is disturbed even on this level. No matter, this closeness is found again here.

Indeed, the works of Bouldoukian betray her closeness to her subject, her craft, her place, an intimacy not quite hidden under the observational, the not-quite-almost scientific, descriptive style of drawing that she has chosen, or that has chosen her. Bouldoukian wants to remember the variety of foliage, to put it

somewhere within. There is a sense in which these drawings are reminiscent of a tree bank, an archive, but one intentionally filtered through the artist - an archive that takes time to structure, to find its structure - an archive that is about the slow time of disappearance.

These drawings are intimate portraits. As she works with her images to make drawings, she also makes sense of her sculptor's hand and mind.

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As I look at these trees I feel them as individuals. They are trees that are disappearing from Lebanon and I am seeing them as portraits. A definition of portrait reads 'a description of a particular person'. In my mind, the trees sit for Bouldoukian. I want to know how to find these individuals, what lies near them, what air they exist within, what problems they face, how they are adapting. Like the scientific descriptions that they also refer to, these trees have been evacuated from their environment, placed on the page, cut out, made specimen. They have been uprooted with no key to their maps.

The palm trees of Lebanon have their portraits made.

Text by Amy Todman



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NBN-002

Phoenix dactylifera 1

75x50 cm

2020

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NBN-007
Trachycarpus fortunei
75x50 cm
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NBN-008

Phoenix roebelenii

75x50 cm

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NBN-001

Cocos nucifera

75x50 cm

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NBN-011
Chamaerops humilis
70x50 cm
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NBN-013
Strelitzia nicolai1
70x50 cm
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NBN-014
Yucca gigantea1
70x50 cm
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NBN-003

Phoenix dactylifera 2

70x50 cm

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NBN-004

Ptychosperma macarthurii

70x50 cm

2021