

TALENT

# Ismail Bahri: washing the gaze

You won't come across him much at fairs, or if you do, only through fleeting appearances at, say, Art Geneva in 2016, or Barcelona's highly specialised Loop Fair dedicated to the video, which is his main form of art. The Franco-Tunisian artist Ismail Bahri is not what you might call "market-friendly". This doesn't stop him from having loyal admirers, starting with French institutions (to date, the purchasers of nearly three-quarters of his works), followed by (according to his Paris gallery), a major Swiss collector, who remains anonymous, and Joop van Caldenborgh, a Dutch industry magnate whose Caldic Collection includes several contemporary art heavyweights. The creator of scarcely more than fifteen projects in ten years – the man likes to take his time –, Ismail Bahri is the subject of a solo show this summer at the Jeu de Paume in

Paris, consisting solely of videos: little gems of extraordinary poetry expressed as a walk towards "the outside, the wind and the light".

## Inviting screens

He was present to greet journalists at the evening opening, as keen as ever to talk about his work – in a barely audible voice, as though deliberately lowering the decibels to force us to pay greater attention. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who came to visit the exhibition in person, whispered a few words in his ear: probably congratulations. Theorists generally like his work, finding in it material for reflection on the image and time. Bahri returns the compliment. An avid reader of Deleuze when he was a PhD student in Visual Arts at the Sorbonne, he now readily cites Jean-Christophe Bailly (who has incidentally written one of the articles in the catalogue). A few weeks ago, he could be heard talking on the radio about Vermeer's "Woman Holding a Balance", revelling in its enigmatic aspect rather than hunting down its meaning at all cost. Bahri's works are similar in that they dictate nothing, and are full of possibi-

"Ismail Bahri, Instruments", from 13 June to 24 September, Jeu de Paume, Paris.

[www.jeudepaume.org](http://www.jeudepaume.org)



HD Gallery

Photo: Adrien Chevrot © Jeu de Paume



Ismail Bahri (b. 1978), "Ligne", 2011, HD  
16/9 video, 1 minute in a loop.

HD Gallery

lities. They shouldn't be pigeonholed too quickly as "conceptual". First and foremost, his works are sensitive, and remain an incredibly hospitable field of experimentation. Simplicity reigns as a benevolent force, in terms of materials (ink, paper and water), capturing techniques and operations carried out. The latter are often limited to a gesture, like the manipulation of a page from a magazine that gradually effaces its content ("Revers"), or the relationship created between two elements, whose interaction produces a speaking result. This is the case with "Ligne", which films a drop of water placed on a person's wrist, which reacts to the pulse. All these tools for exploring – the "instruments" of the exhibition's title – take the pulse of the world and narrate its visual, physical/optical and emotional phenomena.

### Screwing up the eyes

At the Jeu de Paume, we are welcomed by a video enlarged to the size of the wall. The space is too narrow to get far enough back to grasp it in its entirety. All along the circuit, through the nature not only of the very presentation but also of the works, play is made with the time it takes for the eyes to readjust, forcing the body to change constantly. Where does this sand come from, as it gradually fills a hand transformed into an hourglass? You squint to try to detect its flow, or on the contrary, the gushing source. What is the artist seeking, if not to keep us in a state of instability that fosters our critical faculties and permeability to poetic events? In the last room, a flag swimming in mist ("Esquisse") discreetly reflects the sea, irrigating this lunar territory on the way. A few metres on, the video "Foyer" (2016) devours the wall with its palpitating whiteness. To make this film, Bahri set up his camera in the streets of Tunis, fixing a sheet of paper onto the shutter, thus reducing the landscape to its atmospheric content: wind and light. The comments of passers-by, intrigued by the experiment in progress, become an integral part of the work. A filtering operation that reinforces the intensity of reality by removing the dross of the visible from it.

Céline Piettre

Ismail Bahri (b. 1978), "Dénouement", 2011,  
vidéo HD 16/9, 8 min.

