

## CHARIF BENHELIMA (1967, BRUSSELS)

Graduated and Master in Fine Arts at the Higher Institute Sint Lucas (Brussels, 1990-1995), Laureate at the Higher Institute for Fine Arts – HISK (Antwerp, 1995-1998) and graduated in Documentary Photography at the International Center of Photography – ICP (New York, 1999-2000), Charif Benhelima is a Belgian photo-artist who lives and works in Antwerp.

Nominated for his complete oeuvre for the Robert Gardner Fellowship in Photography 2008 (Harvard University/Peabody Museum), Benhelima investigates the notion of identity, memory/oblivion, document, and truth through images that explore perception, time and space, and a sense of invisibility. Worked out in long terms, his diverse aesthetic, formal and conceptual research compose nevertheless a coherent and singular oeuvre.

Consumed by a sense of incongruence, the artist worked on a nine-year (1990-1999) photographic research on the sentiment of being a foreigner, which later resulted in the tough yet poetic book *Welcome to Belgium* (Ludion, 2003). Combining four (B&W analogic) photographic series, family pictures, decree definitions, self-written texts, and a historical document, *Welcome to Belgium* offers a complexity of meanings within its cyclical construction, besides a view of Benhelima's development process as an artist and as a man.

New York city was somehow a turning point in Benhelima's work, once he brought his conceptual documentary approach to the popular Polaroid 600 (camera and film), embarking on a kind of countercurrent to the digital medium and, mostly important, creating a highly personal style. Living in Harlem for 3 years (1999-2001), he developed the unpaired and far most accomplished work made with an amateurish Polaroid: *Harlem on my mind - I Was, I Am* – presented in vibachrome in greater formats, as well as in an artist book form (V-Edition, 2007, edition of 54 copies) – is a reflection of the African-Americans situation in the artist's life. Having a timeless quality, the B&W and red monochrome images bring the viewer back and forth to past and present, creating a feeling of destabilization, enhancing the idea of transition and obscuring the notion of truth.

In 2003 Behelima participated in the artist residency program at the Cité internationale des Arts, Paris, where he continued working with the instantaneous film – this time as final medium – and started the project *Semites*, which he defined as a “fake document”. The series of works reflected his Arab-Sefardic background and consist of fading-like Polaroid reproductions of find-footage photographs, archival images, photo IDs and family pictures arranged in a monumental installation. In *Semites*, besides the timeframe, the cultural identity of the Arabs and the Arabs-Jewish portrayed gets mixed up by the aesthetics and the juxtaposition, being discernible only when the viewer gets close enough to perceive the two layers – one more inward than the other – that divide the two groups – an allusion to the invisible walls that separate people.

Benhelima was also granted with the Künstlerhaus Bethanien Artist in Residence Program, Berlin (2005-2006), which gave him the opportunity to accomplish the Semites series and develop the first part of the ongoing project Black-Out. It could be said that this project is the one that most deconstructs the way of looking at things, bringing the Semites research to the extreme. In Black-Out's images – which made use of the Polaroid 600 for support – almost none or no context of what has been photographed is offered. A white haze layer covers most of the image - ordinary daily scenes, objects, or simply things -, as if it were fading or still to be fully developed. It is as if the images were at the limit of existence and non-existence. The photographs challenge the viewer's perception; yet one can realize what the depicted thing is. Still, and ironically, they suggest - through the wide void created by the mist and by their individual titles - there is much more in the image that you do not know. Perhaps this is an allusion to the entire load of historicism that Berlin carries and that Benhelima prefers not to touch upon, at least not directly: the invisible is the context itself, the history itself, the identity itself, all open for the viewer's interpretation.

Benhelima was the curator of the group show Zonder Titel (Untitled) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp – MuHKA (Antwerp, 2007) - collaboration between the museum, Moussem vzw, deBuren and the artist – which was a success of public and critic.