

"Everything can change, but not the language that we carry inside us, like a world more exclusive and decisive than one's mother's womb."

Italo Calvino, *Hermit in Paris*

Petrit Halilaj's work is deeply connected with the recent history of his country, Kosovo, and the consequences of the political and cultural tensions in the region. But while confronting a collective memory, his work often originates from a personal experience and it is usually the result of an intimate process and a shared moment with someone he loves. His unique, and sometimes irreverent, way to playfully confront the essence of reality results into a deep reflection on memory, freedom, cultural identity and life discoveries.

For his second solo exhibition at the galerie kamel mennour in Paris, Halilaj is presenting his series of works titled *ABETARE*. The project was first developed for his solo exhibition at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne (2015) and further expanded this year at the Fondazione Merz in Turin, where he was awarded the Mario Merz Prize.

"*ABETARE*" is the title of the artist's alphabet book, the traditional handbook where each letter of the alphabet is associated with a drawing and a corresponding word. Halilaj, like all the children of his generation, learned Albanian language on it while attending primary school in the Kosovar village of Runik between 1992 and 1997. At the time the oppression of the ethnic Albanian population of Kosovo by the Serbian Government was reaching its peak. The book became an essential part of their cultural identity and each generation would pass it on to the next one. In Halilaj's work a one-to-one reproduction of the book is playfully exposed page after page as a wallpaper, recalling the familiar process of learning, whereby, beside the alphabet, the foundations of society are taught through the representation of scenes from everyday life.

Surprisingly many of the drawings in the book have a resonance with the artist life and practice. The page corresponding to the letter "P" refers to a boy named Petrit who plays with chickens ("Pulat e Petritit"), an animal often present in the artist's work. In another page we see a boy bending metal wire to create letters. And finally the letter "F" for Fluturat (butterflies) introduces us to the new series of works presented here, where the artist has inserted small and detailed black ink drawings of moths on this page of the book. These animals are present in the artist's memory since his early childhood, when he used to chase them around lights at night in his house in Kosterc. The drawings relate to an intimate conversation with his mother about his childhood fascination for butterflies and moths, and his particular sensibility towards natural wonders. They trace an ideal connection

between the *ABETARE* (wallpaper installation) and the series of the Moth sculptures *Do you realise there is a rainbow even if it's night!?*, currently presented in London. Both works were presented as part of the 57th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia where Halilaj was awarded the special mention from the Jury. A moth sculpture and a series of butterflies drawings are currently on view at kamel mennour gallery in London.

The second part of the exhibition presents a large-scale site-specific installation composed of a group of 12 school desks and several steel sculptures that occupy the entire volume of the gallery. The school tables come from the Primary School "Shotë Galica" in Runik, a small town in the north of Kosovo, where Halilaj lived and studied. The artist discovered the old desks for the first time in 2010 while filming the demolishing of the building of the school in favour of a new and more modern one. The green surface of the desks and the wooden benches were covered with thousands of drawings, inscriptions, carvings and scribbles left by several generations of school kids.

By reproducing and enlarging these drawings in his sculptures Halilaj preserves and celebrates this unauthorised, but yet extremely precious and genuine, visual representation of the local reality that surrounded the children of his community.

As visitors we immediately feel connected with these images through our own childhood memories. We recognize names of international music and sports idols and drawings that we have seen many times as students inscribed on our own desks. They are symbols of love, animals, names, human figures, body parts or other common stylized designs. But on closer inspection, we also discover elements connected to the national identity of Kosovo and its recent war history such as the acronyms of the military groups that operated in the country, like the KFOR (Kosovo Force), or detailed representations of several models of guns and pistols.

This complex juxtaposition of different narratives and layers of history in the space reveal the delicate condition of childhood, when reality is absorbed without filters. But it's also a celebration of a moment of freedom in life where we develop our own individuality and language and a way to reconnect to an age of discoveries that sometimes we forget, where often reality and imagination are merged.

Leonardo Bigazzi

Born in Kostërrc (Kosovo) in 1986, Petrit Halilaj lives and works in-between Germany, Kosovo and

Italy. His work has already been shown in several solo exhibitions at the New Museum, NYC, at Hangar Biccoca in Milano, at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Köln, at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, the National Gallery of Kosovo, Prishtina, the Kunshalle Lissabon, Lisbon, the Fondation d'Entreprise Galeries Lafayette, Paris, the WIELS - Contemporary Art Center - , Brussels ; as well as in group shows at the 57th Venice Biennale, the Merz Foundation in Torino, the MAK Center for Art and Architecture in Los Angeles, the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, and the Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster.

Petrit Halilaj was the first artist to represent Kosovo at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. He won the Mario Merz Prize, and the special mention of the jury of the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017. Upcoming solo shows include the Fondazione Merz, Turino, the Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

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