ARTE FUSE

11.01.2017

- Jonathan Goodman (1/6)

ABSTRACT, BROOKLYN, DRAWING, FEATURED, PAINTING, REVIEWS, REVIEWS AND PHOTO STORIES

Lucile Bertrand at the Kentler International Drawing Space (Brooklyn)

11/01/2017 by **GUEST WRITER**



Lucile Bertrand, Touristic Route/Survival Route, 2017. Acrylic paint and pen felt on rescue blankets. 82 x 63 inches (210 x 160 cm) each.

Lucile Bertrand, an artist originally from France but now living in Brussels, offered a strong show that mixed stories of extended or difficult travel by persons adversely afflicted by social conditions, war, or the necessity of work, among other circumstances. She has written: "I would like to question false evidences about the accessibility and use of landscape and space to all." Her point is well taken; for example, she notes the difficulty and the length of time required for a Palestinian man traveling from the West Bank to Tel Aviv in order to work on a construction

site. Or a Jewish woman revisiting the cities she had passed through on a journey that of necessity began in Vienna in 1938 and made its way through Germany, France, and Switzerland. Or a Honduras woman traveling close to two thousand miles alone from Choluteca to Houston so as to reunite with her husband and son in the United States. Retelling these stories through drawings and lines following their passage on maps indicate the extreme hardship their travel incurred. Interestingly, the experience of viewing the works of art is as conceptual as it is visual—clearly the result of a conscious decision on Bertrand's part. In her refusal to personalize the ordeal of the travelers by depicting them directly, she distances herself from a realistic portrayal of their struggle.



Lucile Bertrand, Touristic Route, detail. Acrylic paint and pen felt on rescue blanket. 82 x 63 inches (210 x 160 cm).

This means that we, as viewers, must imagine the journey's details, which are not to be found in the lines drawn on maps or in the case of the works called *Touristic Route/Survival Route* (2017), in which the journey of Lucie, a Jewish woman in Europe, is traced on a silver rescue blanket, and that of the Honduran woman, on a gold rescue blanket. If we think about this closely, we see that the personal difficulties of very vulnerable people have been reduced to an abstraction. Bertrand's conceptual bent demonstrates a contemporary artist's predilection for passing on ideas and feelings in ways that do not necessarily visualize her personal involvement with the project—or the specific suffering of her subjects.

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So the pathos of the events forcing people to become refugees emigrating to places far away from where they came is several removes from the art. The work thus raises an interesting question: How do we empathize with people whose lives have been documented with a line on a map? Inevitably, we have to know what has happened to them, more than likely before we see the art. Bertrand risks losing touch with the distress she wishes to communicate because the journeys are so intellectually visualized. On the other hand, by conceptualizing the mapped journeys as markers of public and private turmoil, she gains a breadth of view that a close focus on a particular person would not achieve.



Lucile Bertrand, Survival Route, detail. Acrylic paint and pen felt on rescue blanket. 82 x 63 inches (210 x 160 cm).

Bertrand's audience can see for themselves the extent of the travels taken by these displaced persons in the compelling piece called *Touristic Route/Survival Route* (2017). *Touristic Route* is based on a trip Lucie and her husband made in the summer of 2000. They re-experienced the journey she made as a refugee fleeing the Nazis. One can follow their travels by examining a green line painted on a silver blanket. No names of towns are given; nor are there any indications of countries. But there are brief notes written by Lucie, indicating when they were passing through cities that she had traveled through while evading capture (the dates of her actual flight in the late 1930s are also written, along with explanatory notes). One can only imagine the grief and physical demands of a journey like

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Lucie's. Bertrand's simple evocation of the Jewish woman's drama has the benefit of transforming an individualized, traumatic experience into a schema of that adventure, globalizing it for her audience. In this way, Lucie's shock is distanced by such a treatment, but it may be that personalizing the particulars of her flight would cause us to focus on her alone, rather than on the big picture. Whatever the reasons behind Bertrand's choice in working this way, the imagery of the two works—*Survival Route* (2017) uses a gold rescue blanket and a red line to trace the trip of the Honduran woman from her country to San Antonio, Texas, to find her husband and son—becomes an exercise in empathic imagination for the viewer, who must envision the cruelties and dangers that accompanied these women's odyssey to a new home.



Lucile Bertrand, East-West/West-East, 2017. Gouache and printed text on paper. 59 x 39 in (150 x 100 cm) each.

In *East-West/West-East* (2017), the map details the complicated, overly long travel of a woman pianist, a Belgian-Armenian, journeying from Tel Aviv to Ramallah to teach at Birzeit University, and to Jerusalem and Nablus (this is the *East-West* section of the work). At the same time, Bertrand also details the even more arduous and complicated trek of a Palestinian worker to a construction job. His travel time is more than three hours. The black-and-white images present the topography through which the two people—one privileged and the other

marginalized—make their way to their vocations. The pianist's and the worker's words are incorporated into the text. One of the pianist's comments tells volumes about the relative ease with which she travels: "The Conservatory of Music sent a taxi to pick me up at the airport. Quick inspection at the airport before arriving in Ramallah." In contrast, the Palestinian worker says, "I am not a terrorist. I am not a criminal. I just want to work." These quotations and other are displayed alongside the meandering lines of travel (green for the pianist; red for the worker), accentuating the double state Israel has become. The contrast is tragic, but it is also more than tragic. As the two quotations suggest, we know that there are two kinds of lives being lived in Israel: that of Jewish people and that of Palestinian people. Bertrand makes no claims for violent upheaval, but the Palestinian worker's hardship, which he describes succinctly and without self-pity, can easily be seen as the basis of an angry insurgency.



Lucile Bertrand, Matter Of Perspective, 2017. Graphite and printed text on paper. 39 x 59 in (100 x 150 cm).

In *Matter of Perspective* (2017), a large graphite drawing of what looks like an abstraction rendered in gray and white, illustrates the vagaries of crossing mirrored paths on what is actually a map. According to the artist's notes, Bertrand was "inspired by a detail of a satellite view, both mirrored and reversed, of the Irish coast." The round parts of the image, found on the top both on the left and bottom right, are actually duplications of each other, created as a reversed mirror

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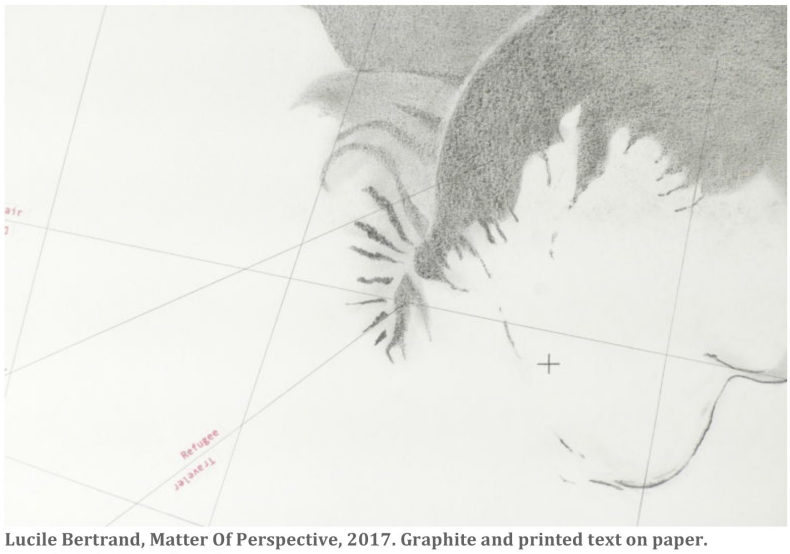
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image. Many viewers see the actual travels of people; paired words such as “Refugee” or “Traveler” describe a binary conflict, in which people who are traveling may be seen negatively as an irresolvable problem or positively as persons undertaking an excursion. Another pair of terms written on the drawing, “Undocumented Person” and “Nomad,” demonstrate how the word pairs describe the way someone on the run, usually a refugee or an immigrant, can be boxed in simply by belonging to a category of person. Bertrand lives in Belgium, but contemporary Europe has not escaped this intractable situation. And now Trump is doing his best to rid America of its illegal workers—people who should be welcomed for their initiative in making the kind of trip Bertrand describes in their attempt to find work. These immigrants, usually illegal, are terribly treated as if their relation to American society were entirely parasitical. This is of course untrue. Sadly, the problem will not go away, no matter the reason for the journey—social discomfort, racial or religious intolerance, the need for work—so the travelers are vulnerable for the duration of their journey. Then, often, their lives are marked by rejection. Bertrand’s decision to indicate the troubles of migrants by mapping their travels may omit details, but her choice to do so resonates globally—in ways that empathically emphasize the refugee as a world problem.

LUCILE BERTRAND, TRAVELERS AND STRANGERS
Kentler International Drawing Space
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Lucile Bertrand, Matter Of Perspective, 2017. Graphite and printed text on paper. 39 x 59 in (100 x 150 cm).