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(author: Anna Khachiyan)

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“As common as sand,” in German, is an idiom used to describe something so abundant as to be of no apparent value; sand is also associated with tourism, erosion and the passage of time. In the exhibition “Gradual Kingdom,” at Signal Gallery in Brooklyn, Meriem Bennani inverted sand’s natural and symbolic cheapness by using it as a medium to examine its contested geopolitical status in the Middle East. Sand coated a staircase to nowhere in *Plage, Escalier* (Beach, Stairway; all works 2015), and a hubcap in *Mad Max*. In *Extension + Dune*, sand was gathered in a pile at the gallery’s rear, with a comically elongated iPhone sculpture laid on top of it.

In the exhibition’s title work, two videos are projected onto two pyramidal display units, which were hung on facing walls. One display is convex and the other concave, so if the walls had been moved together, the first would have been inserted into the second. The pyramids’ tiers break up and multiply the film.

The footage, all of it shot in Bennani’s hometown of Rabat, Morocco, shows a series of scenes: an open-air market with stalls selling junk and fresh produce; a stray dog out of Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* roaming in a vacant lot; kiln fires at a ceramics factory; a trio of hijabis seen from behind. The result, a kind of jerky, subtropical cinéma vérité, is set to a soundtrack combining a scrambled Mariah Carey song, background noise and people doing karaoke renditions of Justin Bieber songs. The tiered structure of the displays has the effect of several nested browser windows open at once.

“Gradual Kingdom” considered life in a developing economy caught up in a global network of breakneck technological innovation and mobile capital. The Mariah Carey song on the soundtrack, “Vision of Love,” which came out during Carey’s troubled marriage to record executive Tommy Mottola, is about running headlong into the arms of romantic destiny. A similarly reckless spirit prevailed throughout Bennani’s show. Yet it was more muted than the register of her previous work, which includes a fake reality show about a quirky headscarf designer.

The pyramid, of course, has unlimited symbolic reserve. Its design represents hierarchy, which, in turn, evokes the central organizing principle of economics: scarcity. As a diagram of geopolitics, its disposition suggests that global commerce is a zero-sum game. The way this plays out in North Africa is depressing but in hindsight not at all unexpected: over the years, Bennani said, Morocco’s native supply of sand has been steadily depleted to maintain artificial islands and luxury beaches in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere. The “Gradual” in her title refers not only to the stepwise motif seen in the pieces but also to the often inequitable logic of economic growth.

Bennani pulled her presentation off without nostalgia or didacticism, resisting the impulse to flaunt her insider status. The show shoehorned inchoate sprawl into an order of sorts, reminding us that soft tyranny is the price we pay for 24-hour air conditioning and a shot at being a player on the world stage.