

THE POETICS OF DISAPPEARANCE

Imane Farès analyses a recent work by Lebanese artist Ali Cherri, which looks at the power and symbolism as well as the rise and fall of Syrian political figures.

In line with his philosophical, poetic and political dispositions, Ali Cherri carefully masters the technicality and visual nature of his works, lending them an intimate and enigmatic feel. His videos and photographs explore the realms between the real and the virtual, and the physical and the digital. His most recent work, *Dust and Other Anxieties*, is inspired by his 2012 video installation *Pipe Dreams*. The video captures a historic phone call between the late Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad and Syrian military aviator and astronaut Mohammed Ahmed Faris, who was part of the 1987 Soviet Interkosmos space programme. The 'father of the nation' questions the 'hero' about his impressions as Faris looks down on Syrian lands from space. The conversation sees the 'eternal leader' cast a watchful eye on the children of the nation from the comfort of his office, even when they are thousands of miles away up in space. This was the end of the 1980s, a time when young revolutionaries – in Libya (Muammar Al-Gaddafi), Iraq (Saddam Hussein), Egypt (Hosni Mubarak) and Syria (Al-Assad) – asserted themselves as leaders of their countries, often taking power following coups. Power in these nations was – and in many respects still is – communicated through symbols: statues of 'founding fathers', larger-than-life billboards, speeches by leaders and of course, by the country's heroes.

In a sort of *mise en abyme*, Cherri's video installation comprises a monitor depicting Al-Assad as he addresses the cosmonaut in his spaceship through an identical monitor: an infinite loop of the image of the leader looking at the hero. Cherri juxtaposes this archival government footage with YouTube footage from early 2011 (when unrest in Syria began) in the background of the dismantling of statues of Al-

Assad across the country's protesting towns, including Hama and Daraa. The Syrian regime, fearing vandalism and haunted by the memory of destroyed statues of controversial leaders such as Joseph Stalin and Hussein, attempted to stave off the inevitable, sacrificing the 'symbol' in order to safeguard the 'image'. After all, the end is imminent when power begins to lose its monuments. This interface between two moments in recent Syrian history encapsulates the history of the entire region: the mechanisms of the construction and deconstruction of totalitarian power as well as the dreams and disillusion of an entire nation.

In *Dust and Other Anxieties*, Cherri transposes a statue of Al-Assad – one that still stands in Lattakia – to a desert. The effigy is almost swallowed by a cloud of dust, similar to one created by a spacecraft in the process of lift-off. Through the haze, we perceive what was once a symbol of authority vanishing in a desolate landscape; it is far removed from the signs of life in the foreground, the recent passage of cars perhaps. The monument is seemingly lost in a vast, dusty and claustrophobic post-apocalyptic panorama and is almost forgotten in the background, taking up only a small fraction of the image. Cherri renders the main event a non-event: vulnerable in the midst of a majestic desert, the figure of Al-Assad becomes a haunting after-image, already a ghost of the past. This portrait of a landscape captures the moment when the figurehead begins to lose his power, both as a political figure and as a dominant, and dominating, idea. *Dust and Other Anxieties* is not a political statement; rather, it is a projection of a hazy, complex and polarised reality. It is a poetic disappearance that leaves us anxious about the void it creates. 

Facing page:
Dust and Other Anxieties, 2013. Archival digital inkjet print mounted on dibond, 90 x 160 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Galerie Imane Farès, Paris.

