

# WAVES OF HOPE AND DESPAIR

It may have been filmed on a stunning Mauritanian coastline, but Zineb Sedira's (*Canvas 3.6*) *Floating Coffins* marries themes of hope, survival, arrival and departure, and more. **Caroline Hancock** discusses the Algerian-born artist's 14-screen work.

**B**orn in France in 1963 of Algerian parents, Zineb Sedira has lived and worked in London since 1986. Her international artistic practice has become known for passionate engagement with the history and culture of Algeria. In 2009, she made a decisive step to expand her explorations to unexpected locations in order to avoid entrapment in any particular subject. Her quest led her further south, to film and photograph in Nouadhibou, a major commercial port town in Mauritania, and specifically to its splendid shores, which are repository to the largest ship graveyard in the world. Evidently, the iron they trade comes back to haunt them. *Floating Coffins* is a complex video installation composed of 14 screens of different sizes and speakers for composer Mikhail Karikis's dedicated soundscape.

Though poetic, the title rings ironically of death and levitation, of universal salvation or doom. Similarly, the videos record land- and seascapes, still-lives and close-up shots of rusting boats and detritus.

Life forms survive in these drastically polluted circumstances – evidence being fishermen, birds and swimmers looking for resellable scrap. The breathtaking natural beauty of this poverty-stricken land, obliged to accept the globe's wast-

age, is underlined in Sedira's presentation. As if insisting that environmental issues are far from exclusive to Western Africa, *Floating Coffins* found a pendant in the installation Sedira created for Qatar's Mathaf, Arab Museum of Modern Art. *The End of the Road* (2010) was filmed in a car heap and recycling plant in Kent, UK.

The Mauritanian cemetery not only highlights the detritus of today's consumer society, but also the remnants of colonial history and architecture. Nouadhibou on the Cap Blanc peninsula was part of the slave route and some of the forts visible in this project were witness to that period. Reference is made to an icon in the history of French painting: Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1817–19, Musée du Louvre, Paris). The shipwreck of *La Méduse* in 1816 took place nearby on the Banc d'Arguin, now a national park and World Heritage Site since it is a major feeding place for migratory birds. The theme of migration is connected to Sedira's previous work. Indeed, since the Moroccan borders became increasingly controlled, this coastline has become a (dangerous) launch-pad for migrants trying to leave Africa for the Canary Islands. There is therefore an obvious link with the situation of the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa.

Right and below (stills): Installation by Zineb Sedira at New Art Exchange in Nottingham, UK. *Floating Coffins*. 2009. 14 LCD screens with electric cables and eight round speakers. Eight minutes each, variable dimensions. Commissioned by New Art Exchange. © Zineb Sedira. Image courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris.

This work is part of a series of works – light-box installations and photographs – inspired by this voyage. Their titles are also worth listing, since they are highly evocative and capture the anthropomorphic character of the boats: *Remnants of a Scattered Vessel*, *Shattered Carcasses* and *The Architecture of the Forsaken*, *Shipwrecks: the Death of a Journey*, *Reusable Space*, *The Lovers*, *Maritime Nonsense* and *Other Aquatic Tales*. The experience of *Floating Coffins* is necessarily physical and offers multiple perspectives due to the number of films on display. This fragmentation of the image to create a deconstructed whole is reminiscent of Cubist endeavours or Polaroid photo-collages of the 1980s and 1990s. The studied installation – a mountain of electrical equipment with chaotic wiring – formally replicates the scrap heap effect and potentially announces other pending dilemmas. 

