



Ali Kazma. *Subterranean*. 2016. Diptych video HD, colour, sound. 5 min 20 sec.
Image courtesy of the artist and Borusan Contemporary, Istanbul. © Ali Kazma

GOING UNDERGROUND

The Istanbul-based video artist Ali Kazma is fascinated by how human beings make their mark on the world. His films often portray the movements and rhythms of human activity in an almost post-Marxist look at the relationship between man and machine. In his process of documenting the complexities behind the world of industrial, artisanal and artistic production, he has amassed a formidable visual archive. **Arie Amaya-Akkermans** delves into Kazma's deep-rooted explorations at the artist's recent solo show in Paris.



Ali Kazma. *Safe*. 2015. From the *Resistance* series. Video HD, colour, sound. 3 min 13 sec.
Image courtesy of the artist © Ali Kazma

At first sight, the works in the second and fourth room of *Subterranean*, Ali Kazma's loosely retrospective exhibition at the Jeu de Paume, seemed like an exercise in abstraction. The images are beautiful and profound, rather painterly, with interminable colour fields and the kind of empty landscapes that are more familiar in the melancholy and monotony of slow cinema. But there is a paradox we have learned from Cézanne: "Man absent, but everywhere in the landscape." The spectacular and almost sublime lost paradise(s) of Kazma's video installations are never empty, as the artist is keen to emphasise: "At this stage in my work, I am just as interested – if not more so – in the traces of past activities, in their imprints, as in the activities themselves."

Shot in abandoned mines located in two opposite, extreme geographies, the Atacama Desert in Chile and Svalbard in the Arctic (another kind of desert), these recent works were specially commissioned for the exhibition. *Mine* and *North* (both 2017) use alternating wide-angle shots and detailed close-ups to explore a rich spectrum of surfaces and spaces, both visual and historical, in the Turkish artist's trajectory. According to Kazma, mines have always

been linked to the political history of Turkey, through the influence of the coalmining unions of the 1970s and the news of accidents in the pits right up until 2014, when hundreds of miners died in the Soma mine disaster, less than a year after they had protested about the dangerous conditions there. The mines came to represent the brutality of this underground hell, itself a dark metaphor for the modern condition.

Yet in retrospect, mines are also a vanishing world. Kazma's analytical eye therefore serves not merely as a descriptive tool but also as an archaeological gaze towards a set of borderlines contained within mining: geographical, human, economic and technological. Far from social realism, the absent dialogues and deliberately non-ideological framework of reference release not only images, but also stories, from the linear narration of film. Poetic moments, charged with undiluted time, emerge from the hinges of this construction. "This possibility of recomposing time is very important for me," explains Kazma. "For example, in the case of Chacabuco, the workers' town in *Mine*, it enables me to remember that, after times of dereliction, as under Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, other more clement times have returned."



In Svalbard, an archipelago between Norway and the North Pole, Kazma has captured the isolated Soviet-era coal mine at the Pyramiden settlement as a relic of a heavy industrial past (it was closed in 1998) in a glimpse of the uncertainties of a technological future. In his work *Safe* (2015), set in the global seed vault for a latent Doomsday, the lens examines the pristine surroundings, devoid of human presence, in juxtaposition with the massive architectural structure and day-to-day functioning of the vault. It leads us to pose the question: what kind of role do we play in nature? And, what do environments that may outlive us look like? This work was recently on show in *Clouds Forests*, the 7th Moscow International Biennale of Contemporary Art, which addressed our present networked condition and the cloud of the Internet as a living space, highlighting Kazma's poignant scepticism towards both romanticism and hyperrealism.

But what does 'subterranean' mean for Kazma? Of course, it is more than an emplacement or an architectural site (e.g. the mine), since what we are dealing with here is the moving image, which by nature, is resistant to shape. There's an earlier (2016) work of the same name, in which he goes on a fascinating journey – underground pipelines transport gas from country to country, without any sense of border or territory, often from turbulent regions to wealthy countries. This film highlights the degree to which, in the world of energy and its derivatives, nothing is invisible. Energy is a physical force that occupies vast spaces and translates into definite power structures that are

nowhere near abstract. Here, subterranean is a reference for all those invisible, but deeply magnanimous, forces that surround us.

Throughout his work since the early 2000s, Kazma has explored this notion of power and how it is manifested from different angles, a selection of which were showcased in this exhibition (a total of some 20 videos were presented, mostly of between three and five minutes in duration). Back in 2015, during the 56th Venice Biennale, Kazma presented the series *Resistance* (2012-ongoing), focusing on the human body and, in a manner similar to the phenomenologies of perception, understanding the body not only as a medium or site, but as the epicentre of creative and intellectual pursuits and processes – and therefore as our only access point to the world. The series explores interventions on the body in different settings, from an operating room in Istanbul and a research centre on robotics in Berlin to a tattoo studio in London. As the work was being shown in Venice, the most profound political crisis in contemporary Turkey unfolded, followed by a period of unrest that is still current. Unwittingly, Kazma had presciently highlighted the inescapable relationship between the personal body and the body politic.

"One very specific human trait is to see the world as unfinished, as potential. I think this has generally been the starting point for me," remarks Kazma in a conversation with Barbara Polla and Paul Ardenne, reproduced in the book of the exhibition. And it is possible to observe the continuity of Kazma's artistic project by following his conversations



through the years with curators and critics, attempting to define the limits of the observable, given that no matter how informative his works might be, it would be a mistake to understand them as documentaries. Kazma responds to Polla's question about why he makes films, why represent things? "Why 'represent'? Well, because the world could be better... There are things in the world that could exist but don't exist yet, that you feel should exist, so you work to make them exist."

The moving image of course does not redeem, but Kazma's drive towards the complexities of the world and its internal relations, isn't coming from the desire to produce utopia. Turkish curator Adnan Yıldız has previously argued that, "Ali Kazma liberates the camera from its basic function of producing images. He accomplishes this by transforming the lens's relations with technology, body and nature into an agenda whereby he questions this relationship politically around the idea of production." Of course, with there not being so much you can call strictly political in Kazma's work, it is necessary here to consider the artist's subtle assertion that complexity itself is a foundational block of the world, as a political stance – to use the words of the exhibition curator, Pia Viewing.

In his earlier works, Kazma seemed interested primarily in showcasing this variation and diversity (within human experience) from the standpoint of the aesthetics of shock, bound to either traumatic repetition or radical breakout, and moving in later years

onto a semi-structure of architectural spectres, in which the traces of human activities appear, paradoxically, as a more reliable repository of historical memories than our own bodies, living in continuous time. The rupture with the familiar and the near, to be replaced by a more neutralized, ever-distant, globalized image, in the work of the artist, signals not only a shift in position but also a movement towards the possibility to study, in a single exhibition, the multiple fragmentations and atomisations taking place in the world of digital world-images, over the course of a single generation.

Ultimately, through discreet gestures, Kazma's exhibition invokes the production of images not as a technical know-how, but as an expression of human productivity; the complex aggregate of relations between technology, nature and history governed by humans. In that sense, regardless of his mild scepticism regarding the power of discourse to negotiate between the image and the world, the artist is still committed to reality, no matter what the outcome might be, thereby overcoming the cultural pessimism of the documentary genre and asserting his entire belief in a thin possibility. "That's why *Mine* gives me a kind of hope, the hope of a time that is more generous. A relative hope. The world may change, and not necessarily always for the worse. Yes, the world goes on." 📷

Subterranean ran at the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume from 17 October 2017–21 January 2018.