

# Marc Bauer: Mal Être / Performance

Sara Jaspan



Installation view of Marc Bauer, *Mal Être / Performance*. Image: Eva Herzog. Courtesy the artist and Drawing Room, London

**'Mal Être / Performance'** by Marc Bauer explores the motif of people on boats throughout history, from ancient Greece to contemporary media footage of the migrant crisis. The exhibition is on show at Drawing Room in London until 17 November, then travels to De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill on Sea (1 February – 10

May) and FRAC Auvergne in Clermont-Ferrand (summer 2020). Here, Sara Jaspán speaks to the Berlin-based artist about the themes and concerns behind the show.

*Sara Jaspán: The cycle of drawings in 'Mal Être / Performance' apparently began in response to a photograph you saw in the French newspaper Le Parisien in 2018 of the ship Aquarius rescuing migrants from the Mediterranean Sea. This image led you to begin scouring history for others that relate to the plight experienced by humans at sea, and the exhibition is made up of a synthesis of drawings made in response. Why did you choose to engage with the photograph through this trans-historical approach? What does it reveal?*

Marc Bauer: We've seen a lot of these types of images depicting the migrant crisis in the media over the last few years, and as I was looking at the photograph, I suddenly realised I felt a lack of empathy towards it. I wanted to understand where this came from – what it was within me that was making me less responsive.

It occurred to me that the photograph's basic motif – the plight of humans at sea – is not new, so I decided to look back through art history at other examples in order to understand how it has developed over time. What I realised very quickly is that the people depicted at sea were rarely neutral; slaves being forcibly transported along the Middle Passage, or prisoners being shipped to the colonies, for instance. This visual history means that you subconsciously approach a photograph like the one that appeared in *Le Parisien* with a prior reading of victimisation, which makes it difficult to then project yourself into the image and find empathy.



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The other thing is that the sea has always been linked with trade and possibilities of communication, but also threat – the potential for foreign invasion or the arrival of people whose intentions may be good or bad. The image of a boat is therefore intrinsically bound up with this sense of fear and danger.

I think humans are very basic animals that need to represent reality in order to understand it. How we represent reality then defines our way of thinking. We are partly constructed by the images of the past. When you look at one image, your reading is always shaped by the others you have in your mind, whether you're conscious of this or not.

*SJ: How did the cycle of drawings then develop from this starting point?*

MB: I began with a close visual analysis of the Aquarius photograph, dividing it into four sections and then compiling a sort of index of other images that it brought to mind in response. It was a very organic, intuitive way of trying to understand the photograph through a process free association.

The image is quite complex and each of the four sections led in a different direction. In the top left-hand corner, for example, you can see the edge of the boat, one of the Aquarius rescue workers in a white protective suit, and the sea, which appears as this vast void or emptiness. The combination of these elements made me think of the famous picture of the 1969 Nasa moon landing, so I made a drawing of this which is included in the show. When you see the two drawings alongside each other, the second affects your reading of the first; you see the sea as something absolutely cold, dark, foreign and isolating.



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I sourced all the images from the internet, but they range widely. There are reproductions of historical paintings, other examples of media reportage, and even film stills – one of the drawings is based on a group of people from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927).

I also included an image of the European Parliament Chambers because migration has always been a political issue and how we respond to it politically is very important to me. Unlike the other drawings in the exhibition, this one is mounted on an aluminium plate and displayed on a metal tripod because I wanted it to occupy a different space. The tripod is very big and sort of thrusts the image in your face in an aggressive way, you can't avoid it. For me, this connects to how Europe is a very foreign institution in a sense; we don't really have power over it.



Marc Bauer – *Untitled, European Parliament*, 2019. Pencil on coated aluminium board (Dibond), 45 x 64 cm

*SJ: So, would you describe this body of work as political?*

MB: Art is always political. Whatever you choose to represent, that choice is a political one. In a way, the overall theme of the exhibition is the potential danger and threat that the sea still represents, and how it can either connect or divide us. These two elements have enabled politicians to instrumentalise it for their own purposes.

SJ: The exhibition interpretation states that first half of the show's title ('Mal Être') translates in English as 'being in a bad way', whilst the second half ('Performance') relates to the various roles we adopt as viewers. Could you explain a bit more about this?

MB: Yes, 'Mal Être' also relates to a feeling of unease; of being uncomfortable witnessing something or being 'triggered' by it. The 'Performance' is to do with the fact that the viewer is forced to define themselves in front of these very troubling images. It's a position that you take, a posture. You are confronted with a series of difficult questions that you have to locate yourself in relation to. Where does your empathy lie? How do you deal with it? How do you respond? So, the two parts of the title feel separate but are actually very connected.

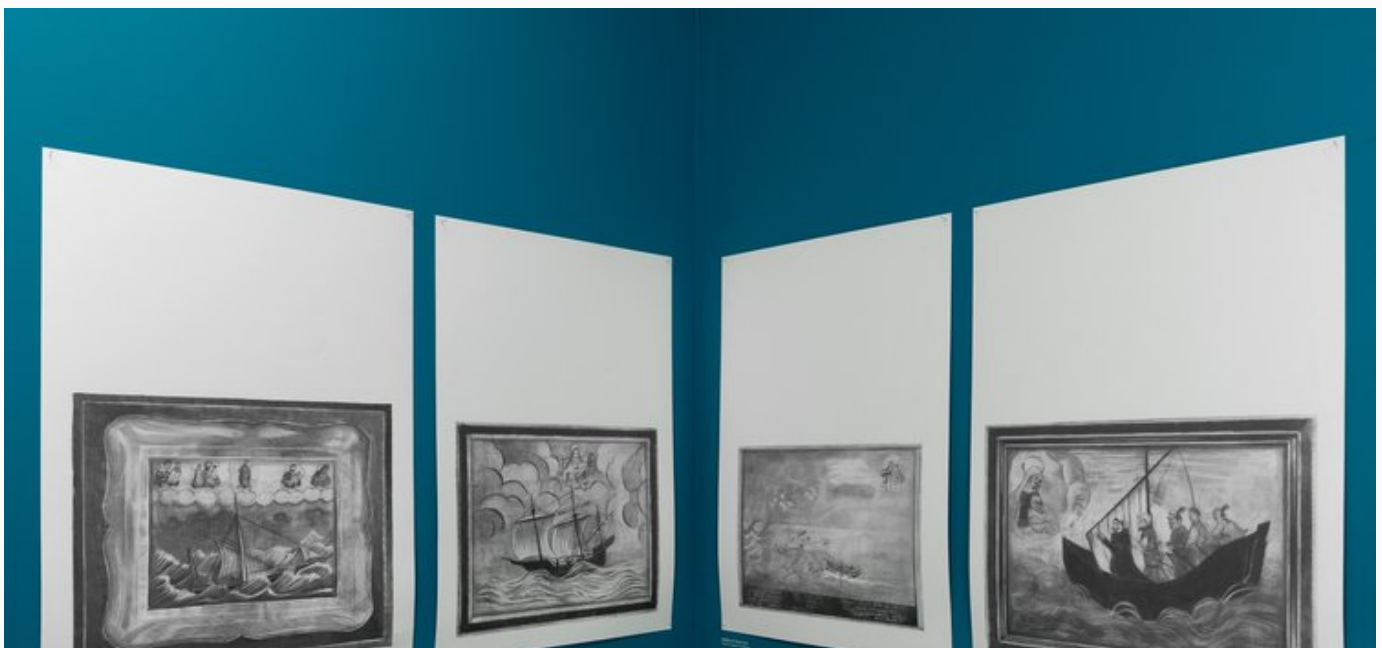




Marc Bauer – Untitled, Portrait, 2019. Pencil on 4 paper sheets, each 100 x 70cm

*SJ: Does the work partly comment on the way that people consume images today and their role within contemporary society, as well? Some of the drawings show explicit signs of having been copied from a screen or are based on social media posts.*

MB: Definitely. I think we are now confronted with so many images on a daily basis that we forget their importance and often fail to realise the power they have over us. The show is partly about the status of images. For example, several of the drawings are based on religious *ex-voto* paintings that were commissioned by survivors of shipwrecks and disasters at sea in gratitude for the divine protection they believed they received. I'm interested in how these paintings functioned, partly as a testimony to the experience but also as an exorcism of the trauma. They are magical, in a sense.





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*SJ: The exhibition includes lots of different types of images that originally served different functions. The ex-votos were commissioned to give thanks, The Siren Vase records the myth of Odysseus passing the Sirens, the Ship of Fools woodcut belongs to a particular strand of religious parody. Images are never neutral, even photographs. Those of the migrant and refugee crisis have been used by media outlets to fit different political agendas. Were you thinking about this when you made the work?*

**MB:** Yes, we often forget that photographs are an edited version or ‘frame’ of reality and can be very easily manipulated. A photograph is a tricky artefact; it shows reality on the one hand, but it’s also a construction of reality. The relationship between representation, truth, credibility and neutrality is very complex.

*SJ: How does this relate to your decision to re-present the original source images through drawing?*

**MB:** The fact that the images are drawn is really important. Drawing has a different quality and makes you see in a different way. It displaces the image from its original photographic form, and this allows you to re-experience it in a different way.

Drawing is always a duration – it’s slow to do, especially when you’re being very careful and precise. Whether consciously or not, the viewer knows that, and this invites a different, slower kind of looking.





Marc Bauer – Untitled, Detail 3 Aquarius, 2018. Pencil on paper, 70 x 70 cm

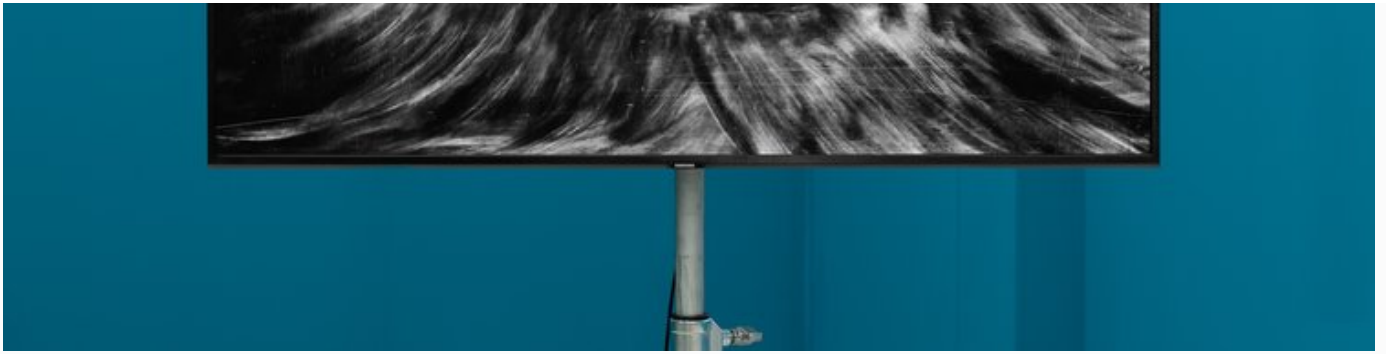
*SJ: The exhibition includes small and large scale works on paper, a wall drawing, and an animation. What decisions shape your choice of scale and medium?*

MB: It has a lot to do with the space in which the work is being shown and how the images combine dramaturgically. The cycle isn't meant to be seen as a series of separate parts but as one whole that tells a bigger narrative. The different sizes and mediums are an attempt to create a more complex view on the work's overall themes.

The animation began from an oil painting on glass and shows the sea moving, as if you were looking at it from a boat or, at points, from under water. The space is filled with the sound of water, heartbeats and breathing. The exhibition is intended to be immersive – a space in which viewers can lose themselves within different layers of meaning.







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*SJ: Are you working on anything else at the moment?*

MB: I've got several things going on. One big project I'm excited about is to do with the internet and how, back in the 1990s, it was hoped to become a very democratic space that would enhance democracy and freedom, but has now turned out to be a mechanism of mass surveillance instrumentalised by corporate entities and right-wing power. I'm interested in how this shift happened. The work will take the form of a big drawing installation which will be exhibited in Berlin next year.