

## SEBA KURTIS (\*1974, ARGENTINA)

### Immigration Files

19<sup>th</sup> of November 2015 – 16<sup>th</sup> of January 2016

Christophe Guye Galerie is pleased to announce Seba Kurtis' upcoming solo exhibition *Immigration Files*. Kurtis works from experience – his own, as he lived as an illegal immigrant for five years – and that of individuals he has met in the course of his wanderings. With his use of coloured filters and other graphic subterfuges, he charts the obliteration of identity and its close corollary, the dehumanisation of the gaze on the move.

**One news bulletin follows on another's heels, showing aerial views of masses of people packed into drifting boats, invariably tiny and indistinct. A few dots on the sea, a few statistics on a table, and that's about all there is on the 'migrant' issue. Where they come from and whom they are is generally excluded from the media coverage as well as the reasons for their exile, which are all blurred into the word 'migrant'. Individuals exist only as part of the human tide that they have no choice but to become part of.**

Seba Kurtis grew up in Buenos Aires under a dictatorship regime. He studied journalism and was a political activist. In 2001, Argentina fell into economic and political crisis, unemployment rocketed, banks restricted access to money and chaos erupted in the streets. Kurtis left for Europe and remained in Spain as an illegal immigrant for over five years. This experience and the people he met during this time became the main inspiration for his work, which consists of exploration of the dynamics behind irregular migration and the resulting impact on culture, society and the individual.

Kurtis works with what he calls 'Interventions'. After shooting a story he tries to add something to the works with his own hands. He has been developing this approach since he first started working in photography. Even though he couldn't afford a camera, Kurtis visited a photo course. The teacher encouraged him to work with existing photographs, colours and magazines. That's when he started to do collages. This experience took a hold of him and later, during his studies at the University of Manchester, he started to manipulate the exposure, colour and texture of the photographs while developing the pictures. In this way he was able not only to add his own artistic ideas to the existing photographs but also to create a uniting context for the individual works of art.

This exhibition presents five emblematic series he has made since 2008. The video *Shoebox* (2008) marks the starting point. It shows family Super-8-films that were damaged during a flood; they were stored in a shoebox together with several photos. These precious memories of the life Kurtis and his family were left behind when they went to Europe. The demolition of these is a metaphor for the effects that the financial crisis that ravaged Argentina after the fall of Carlos Menem had on the life of Kurtis and his family. Water, and even more precisely, the sea, which inspires hope and despair, which joins people and separates them but also too often causes destruction and death, became the leitmotif of his work.

The series *A few days more* (2008) deals with immigrants from Egypt trying to come to Europe via the open borders between Egypt and Libya. This used to be the cheapest and most frequently used route, taking one to two days. But due to tighter regulations the immigrants had to take a new route leading from Rashid to Alexandria. This itinerary could take up to five days, dramatically increasing the risks to the migrants. For the *Drowned* (2008) project, Kurtis submerged boxes with sheets of film in the same ocean that Africans cross to migrate to the Canary Islands. Thousands are believed to have drowned or died of thirst or exposure during the attempt. For Kurtis the expressiveness of those negatives damaged by the seawater is stronger than that of scenic photographs taken by him.

*Heartbeat* (2012) is inspired by one of the immigration detection systems implemented by the UK Border Police: the Heartbeat Human Detector. The artefact is placed on a lorry's chassis on entering ports in the UK. It contains sensitive software that is able to detect a human heartbeat inside the truck within 30 seconds. The desired invisibility of the immigrants and their exposure to the detection system are the subjects of this abstract

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photographic case study. Long exposures, transparencies, and a scanner were used. Levels were pushed to the limit as a metaphor to detect the non-visible information on the film sheets.

His latest work series *Talcum* (2015) is the first chapter of Kurtis' recent creative residency close to a camp of asylum seekers in Cherbourg, a small city in Normandy, France. The coast and its horizon leading to a distant fantasy world abruptly contrast with the enclosed suffocating environment of the camp and its makeshift shelters. Here again, the collage process interferes with the traditional portrait of the photographic chamber. The faces of the migrants, scared to show themselves in public, are lost in the bright and translucent colours of layers of talcum ore. In accordance to the formal grammar developed by Seba Kurtis, the chosen form relates to migrants' experiences: one morning, an article was published in the local newspaper under the headline "Hidden in a tank truck full of talcum". From this piece of news, Kurtis extracted symbolic material. The masked figures remind us of the quest, reckless and forced, for invisibility – when survival means erasing oneself, when to "be in the world" one has to become non-existent. Here is a man disappearing behind the ore and its market value.

The generic title the artist has given all these series is *Immigration Files*, which might suggest that he has adopted a documentary strategy. Yet, they are not a literal transcription of reality. Kurtis hovers close to fiction and his stance is aesthetic, not documentary. The form of his work reveals the reality that the artist is commenting on: colorimetric manipulations to imitate the systems used at the frontiers to detect human presence, the immersion of negatives in saltwater to conjure up the exiles' crossing, and fragments of talc, a reference to a news item. In Kurtis' work, the image is a traveller in time that is made to undergo experiences similar to those experienced by the migrants. The faces are masked and the bodies erased, much in the same way as people's identities are often denied.

In the light of the current situation Christophe Guye Galerie and Seba Kurtis decided to donate parts of the proceeds of this exhibition to the Schweizerische Flüchtlingshilfe (Swiss Refugee Council).