

***Moon Dust*** by Mohamed Mahdy

**Our Methodology of Writing Image descriptions** by Jessie Stainton and Raphaëlle Bessette-Viens

Following introductions by Roï and a few e-mails, we (Jessie and Raphaëlle) met Mohamed Mahdy online, via a zoom meeting. We briefly explained the object of the collaboration, and the objectives for the image description. The artist then went through his pictures one at a time, explaining the narratives of each of his documentary photographs, the context in which they were produced, and his intent in making the series. The context that Mohamed provided was extremely rich and we had ample material to work with.

When describing the images, the artist did not separate visual information from contextual information, indicating the equal significance of each. For example, it was important for him that the names of the persons that appear in the pictures to be specified. He discussed his relation to the images and to the community he photographed. He explained how he would visit and stay with families in the area to establish a relationship before beginning to take photographs. At the end of our conversation, he mentioned that he was interested in getting feedback from viewers/readers/listeners engaging with the image description.

After the first meeting with Mohamed, we both met to discuss how we would organize our work and what approach to the descriptions we wanted to take. We had an issue of choosing where we should include contextual and relational elements and where we should stick to descriptive information. What are the essential elements of the picture a reader or listener should have access to? What part of artworks should be left to interpretation?

We decided to separate the work in half, Jessie working on the description of the even pictures and Raphaëlle on the odd. We completed a first draft of the pictures and commented on each other's work. We then met again to discuss our intention in the descriptions and how to harmonize our separate work to make it cohere as a series. Our approach turned out to include minimal descriptions of the pictures, focusing on the elements of the pictures that support the narration of the series (the consequences of the cement factory pollution on the bodies and lives of the neighbouring population), the names of the people who appear in the photographs and a few elements that convey the atmospheres or 'feel' of the photograph.

**Jessie:**

At first, I found it difficult to focus on what should be included in the image because I wanted to include everything that we had talked about! For each image, I went back and looked at my notes and then I made a bullet list of the general contents of the image. I would then piece it together testing out different language to convey the mood, adding in details from the context to convey visual information as well. I ended up splitting some of my descriptions into two paragraphs, the first focusing on visual and the latter more contextual details. I did this so that it wouldn't diminish the primary purpose of serving as image descriptions. I (Jessie) had difficulty choosing which details to focus on when describing, I have a tendency to over describe minute residential and domestic details because that is generally what I am drawn to. In Mohammed's photographs a major theme was the juxtaposition of the cement factory and

domestic life so in my first draft I didn't always catch that. It was great to work on this collaboratively with Raphaëlle because they were able to provide input on where there was superfluous information or an imbalance of detail. As image descriptions are a created practice of their own, should the describer aim for objectivity or weave their embodied experience into the writing?

**Raphaëlle:**

In one of our collective meetings a core Lab-member Yolanda Munoz recommended an article by Georgina Kleege titled *Blind Imagination: Pictures into Words*. I found it helpful to understand what could be relevant for blind or low vision persons to have as information when reading image descriptions. Amongst other ideas, the article proposes to de-center visuality in image descriptions in order to favor description of other elements such as moods, textures, movement, posture. I tried to follow the idea of an 'affective description' while still being mindful of access. That is, to give an impression of the picture, while still giving sufficient information which is faithful to the artist's work.

In order to give an affective description, I tried to focus on the elements of the picture that struck out most to me, all while being informed, through Kleege's article, that important elements of photography such as light and contrast might not be most relevant to low-vision or blind persons. I tried not to focus so much on the details of the pictures, but what they might 'mean' or try to convey. Mohamed Mahdy's work is documentary and narrative. When he explained to us his work, he pointed towards the narrative intentions he had in his formal choices. Therefore, I was guided by this question: What is the picture trying to communicate through its formal elements (composition, juxtaposition, hors-champ, movement)? I tried to focus on describing this aspect of Mahdy's work in multi-sensory and affective terms. I tried to establish a situated reading (my own impression of the work) of the artist's work (both as formal and of its content) informed by blind and low-vision approaches to visual art (affective descriptions).