

"Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, in that grey vault. The sea has locked them all. The sea is history."

-Derek Walcott

Dear Alex,

I'm composing this note to you from a rickety New York City subway, bodies wobbling as we hurtle toward Manhattan.

Where are you?

Are you on the sea?

The last time we were in touch you were. On the sea that is—in a far-flung Nordic strait called Kattegat, training to be a professional sea farer in the tradition of Ahab, Odysseus, Popeye ...

So much has happened. Between now and then, I mean. You got your captain's license. A boat, too. You told me that the boat was called Tindra, a name, you insisted, you couldn't change because it's bad luck to. (You, a little embarrassed, admitted that it translates to "twinkle" in Swedish) You reported that your boat was sturdy, its hull made from steel. You said that it was so sturdy that you could sail it all the way to Antarctica.

Alex, is that a real plan or were you jesting?

I also spent the summer on the sea. The Mediterranean: a miracle patch of blue that's Janus-faced, paradoxical: paradise for the leisure classes; a graveyard littered with bodies, too. Like that Marianne Moore poem, do you know the one I mean? You said it yourself once in a letter: "she is like a living creature with emotions ... soft but quite brutal." Quite. The Mediterranean is moody. It swallows people en masse.

In August, I met a woman from Gabon who had tried to cross into Greece from Turkey seven times, each time intercepted by the Greek coast guard, each time turned back. All of this while pregnant, all of this while on her own. She slid through the seventh time, care of money handed to a smuggler and a precarious rubber dingy. Even though she now lives in a country encircled by the sea, she tells me she can't bear to look at it. She does not know how to swim.

The sea holds stories. Alex, I think of the motley sails you've collected, from ships and shipyards around the world. They're tattered, weathered, stained by time, by experience. If only they could speak. What tales would they relate? What horrors—and delights—have they seen?

(You once described them as paintings made without paint.)

You're a dreamer. Why else would you choose to become a sailor? You compare your sails to screens, surfaces on which one may project. A place where anything goes. Where fiction becomes reality. You once noted that early science fiction used to envisage preposterous things like robots and spaceships and ... here we are. Woowoo people would call that "manifesting."

You have a thing for animals. I remember once walking into a cavernous exhibition space in Milan where you had a show and being knocked over by the smell of hay, poop. Traces of animals that you had brought through. You told me that because animals experience the world differently, they serve as a sort of mirror. *They force us out of our own crowded human heads.*

Can you tell me about the seagull plopped over in the gallery? He looks like he may be sleeping. Or perhaps he's doing yoga? I google seagulls and the Internet tells me that they must be revered because they hold the souls of drowned fishermen. I like to think of them as hopeful presences. Signs for the itinerant sailor that land is not far.

I see that there will be another show, on the other side of Paris, open at the same time as the exhibition at Balice Hertling. Apparently, you'll be sending missives from the sea, a little like the ones you send me, to audiences there via a huge antenna. A note about the shape of a cloud. A meditation on utterings overheard on the ship radio. Your view of a passing orca. Wind patterns.

Psychic dispatches.

Alex, so much of your work to date is about embracing the unexpected, about having faith, about submitting to what the world hands you. Chance, serendipity, its opposite. In this case, your sparring partner is the sea—unruly, impossible to tame. Myriam, a common friend, calls you “a traveler,” and that feels right.

You once made a joke about getting lost—not in the sea, per se, like Bas Jan Ader, but in a correspondence between two strangers. Many months later, we still haven't met, but I think we're not strangers anymore. Is that fair?

Yours,
Negar

Alex Ayed was born in 1989 in Strasbourg, France. He lives and works between Paris and Tunis.

His work has been shown in solo exhibitions at Kunstverein Freiburg (Freiburg, Germany, 2022), Renaissance Society (with Lydia Ourahmane, Chicago, USA, 2021), B7L9 Art Station (Tunis, Tunisia, 2019) AND the Institute of Arab and Islamic Art (New York, USA, 2018). He has recently been included in group exhibitions at the 3rd International Biennial of Saint Paul de Vence (France, 2023), MAMbo (Bologna, Italy, 2022), Frac Ile-de-France (Romainville, France, 2021), and Wiels (Brussels, Belgium, 2020), as well as in the New Museum Triennial of 2021 (New York, USA).

Alex Ayed's solo show Farewell is on view at Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris from October 17th 2023 to February 19th 2024.