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Several examples from Bâez's previous works demonstrate her ongoing commitment to addressing and reconfiguring entrenched histories, using mysticism and folklore as key elements in this process. While the large-scale artworks in the accompanying galleries of the exhibition engage the viewer in a choreography of approach and retreat, these artworks are an intimate affair that requires viewing at reading distance. After a day spent painting during her residency at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, Bâez would come into the domestic spaces of the studio, to the kitchen table and the living room floor, the book pages laid out awaiting treatment. In contrast to the expansive, outstretched surfaces of the aluminium and canvas paintings in the exhibition, the smaller pages allow for a focused engagement, where the artist's eye and hand can explore new ideas on a more intimate and manageable scale. A distinct new composition that appears to inflate like domes of blown glass with tendrils of colour unfurling out of them came to Bâez's mind on successive evenings during her Somerset residency. Unaware of its origins, she compulsively drew and tested these bulbous forms on the book pages, eventually deciding to enlarge two drawings onto the *A power visible to itself* series, displayed in the neighbouring gallery of the South London Gallery's Fire Station. This process of trial and discovery is central to Bâez's artistic process, destabilising the authority of the mediums that she works with. Within the context of the book pages, they become a stage for reconciling conflicting realities, one created by the medium and the other by the artist.

Fig. 13. Detail of Firelei Báez, *A modest mythology of walls (to think thought but stay away from its chaotic journey)*, 2024



Fig. 14. Firelei Báez, installation view of *A modest mythology of walls (to think thought but stay away from its chaotic journey)*, 2024

larger collection of books one knows that one will never read, but you still want to have on the shelves.”¹ He also added that “one could also make a negative biography of everything around one, defining one’s self by that which is not true.”² This negative biography takes form in the type of books Báez reworks in *Amidst the future and the present, time is a memory table* (2024; see pp. 24–25) and *A modest mythology of walls (to think thought but stay away from its chaotic journey)* (2024; see pp. 26–27), which cover topics of Darwinism, famous European battles, botany, geological surveys, and conquests of the British Empire. Despite seemingly varied subject matter, these books collectively produced a skewed narrative of the Caribbean and the African continent, as well as the displaced enslaved people, who themselves were voiceless in the construction of these narratives. Báez’s gesture of recourse turns the artist’s studio, as Kentridge views it, into a space for reflection where fragmented histories are pieced back together and brought to light.

For Kentridge and Báez, the act of drawing is a means to navigate and interpret complex histories and events. As an artist working through the gross absurdities and injustices of apartheid-era South Africa, Kentridge has an affinity for

charcoal as an intuitive medium because it is easily erased, while still leaving traces of the original marks. For him, the medium is reflexive, allowing an image to change as quickly as he can think. In the same Oxford University lecture, Kentridge ruminated on how thought is translated into physical gesture; it is not just fingertips moving over a keyboard, as mine are doing while I write this essay, but an activation of the elbow, a flick of the wrist, a change of pressure from the shoulder, each movement offering the viewer an intimate connection to the artist’s hand and subconscious.³ Both Báez and Kentridge use a technique of erasure and layering to reconcile difficult histories, whose scars on contemporary society continue to be felt. Kentridge himself completed a number of works on book pages in his *Baedeker* series from 1999, where he lithograph printed, painted, and drew onto book pages taken from the 1926 travel guide *L’Italie des Alpes à Naples* by the German publisher Karl Baedeker (figs. 15–16). For both artists, book pages become a foil to respond to, offering a framework in which artist and viewer are able to speculate and imagine alternative visions to the ones being prescribed by the authors. Whether that be for cultural tourism in Kentridge’s case or colonial domination for Báez,



Fig. 15. William Kentridge, *Baedeker (Cambio)*, 1999. Lithograph and watercolour on found paper (Velin d'Arches Blanc 250). Paper: 28 × 38 cm (11 × 15 in.). Image dimensions: 16 × 21 cm (6¼ × 8¼ in.).



Fig. 16. William Kentridge, *Baedeker (Pensione)*, 1999. Lithograph on found paper (Velin d'Arches Blanc 250). Paper: 28 × 38 cm (11 × 15 in.). Image dimensions: 16 × 21 cm (6¼ × 8¼ in.).

their original purpose is diminished. The response to the page contents is automatic and reflexive, creation through obscuring, encouraging the loss of oneself in the worlds staged, while also revealing how vision is constructed. These artworks are a game of intentionality and chance. Báez is at the whim of the paper's materiality and age, where gouache is applied and immediately seeps into the pages and cannot be manipulated. Sometimes the paper disintegrates or catches while other times it holds, the paint pooling in such a way it offers up fantastical possibilities. One can visualise the volumes these pages were sliced and torn from, an intimation of the heft and weight of all the words in them; they now carry a lightness, their authority undermined. The results are a myriad of paintings that reflect the *longue durée* of history. They are membranes that have dual identities, being so deeply from the past but also incredibly contemporary. The physical gesture continues into the installation of Báez's artworks, where the pages are presented unframed and unsealed, hovering away from the wall on small mounts as if to suggest that Báez is offering them back to us in an open gesture of reciprocity. Emphasised are the fragility and impermanence of the display mechanism suggesting that the artworks have the potential for change whereby we are reminded that any attempt to establish a singular history or a complete perspective is impossible.

Situating her work within a British context, Báez was acutely aware of the ubiquity of surveillance and policing in London and its lineage to methods used during the British Empire. Outside of Asia, London is the most surveilled city in the world, with 5.2 million CCTV cameras in 2024, or around one camera for every 13 people, the number growing consistently with the population.⁴ The integration of surveillance into the architecture of everyday life is omnipresent—the street, the school, the train station, the workplace, the gallery are all deeply embedded within a refined system built on the management and control of people. While viewing

Báez's book-page artworks, a discreet camera in the opposite corner of the gallery has its lens trained on the space, quietly recording every passing moment with an unblinking eye. An acute feeling of observation in this city is never far away. Techniques of surveillance used by the British empire to subjugate the colonised have been modernised, now emerging in contemporary modes of observation and policing.

Throughout the two artworks, Báez refers to eyes, colour blindness tests, and Rorschach inkblots, creating a heightened awareness of viewership and the limits of perception. She calls into question the lines of sight that are imposed and prohibited by authoritative powers, and the voluntary and involuntary visibility that comes with it. While we often think of erasure within the parameters of loss and decimation (particularly in regards to invasion and warfare), Báez's artistic acts of obscuring create literal blind spots, ambiguous zones of viewership that inversely offer a space for expanded vision, one liberated from historical oversight. The role that images and text play in the history of mass surveillance is reconfigured, as art offers new theoretical models that acknowledge and work through this pervasive environment. Such vast and difficult histories are contained within these pages that fit too comfortably in the hand. Under Báez's hand, the minutest of details can disrupt historical narrative, a dab of paint enough to redirect its course.

- 1 William Kentridge, "A Natural History of the Studio: That Which I Have Drawn," *University of Oxford*, 8:20, <https://www.hoa.ox.ac.uk/that-which-i-have-drawn>.
- 2 Ibid., 10:25
- 3 Ibid., 9:25
- 4 Emily Macaulay, "The 15 Most Watched Cities in the UK (2024)," *Churchill Support Services*, 2024, <https://www.churchillsupportservices.com/resources/news-insights/the-15-most-watched-cities-in-the-uk-2024/>.

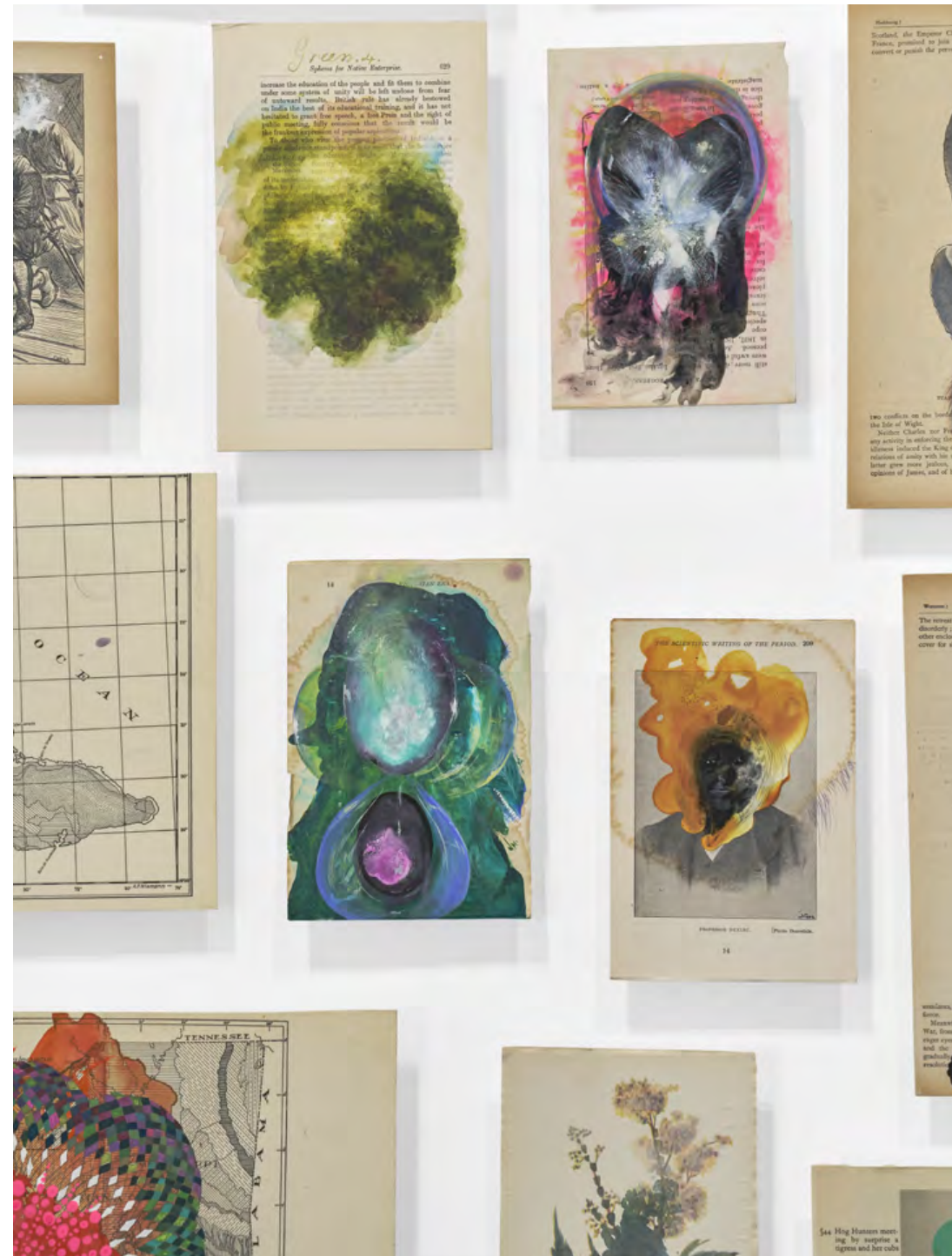


Fig. 17. Detail of Firelei Báez, *Amidst the future and the present, time is a memory table*, 2024