

ARTFORUM

Dawit L. Petros

TIWANI CONTEMPORARY

16 Little Portland Street

May 20–June 25

In many of Dawit L. Petros's large-scale color photographs, fragmented or partially obscured figures stand in vast desert landscapes, flanked by swathes of sea, sand, and sky. The effect is enigmatic—like de Chirico's abandoned city plazas—but might be more appropriately characterized as *opaque* in the sense described by the late Martinican writer Édouard Glissant, whose words grace Petros's film, *The Shop*, (all works cited, 2016). Glissant writes: "There is an opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today. . . . Opacities must be preserved." A degree of illegibility, then, is integral to the maintenance of difference amid the rapid globalization of Western culture.

In this spirit, there is some incomprehensible element in each of Petros's works. He hides the faces of his photographic subjects, and *The Shop* is filmed in a dark interior that one can never quite make out. Formalist allusions to opacity exist in the surfaces carried by some figures: the mirror that faces but does not reflect the cameraman in *Untitled (Prologue II)* or the fleeting views of prayer rugs with *A Series of Complicated Ambivalences*.

The theme of the stranger that gives the exhibition its title converges with notions of migration that are central to the artist's practice. Produced during Petros's yearlong journey throughout West and North Africa, the exhibition comments on the experience of passing through, on outsidership and mobility. In the three-channel sound installation *La Tente n'a pas de porte* (The Tent Has No Door), an unseen speaker muses on the Mauritanian conception of the foreigner, in alternating English, French, and Arabic passages. The hostile environment of the desert, he suggests, renders openness to cooperation a necessity for survival. Just as Glissant attests, relationality is key.



Dawit L. Petros, *A Series of Complicated Ambivalences* (detail), 2016, 12 archival color pigment prints, dimensions variable.

— Allison Young