

# Adelaïde

## Wilfrid Almendra

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A sculptor and craftsman, the Marseille-based French-Portuguese artist Wilfrid Almendra (b. 1972, Cholet, France) invites unexpected associations via narrative and storytelling to rethink connection and communion in everyday life. Through a process of imaginative interpretation, he develops an aesthetics of the working-class interrelated with deep ecology, rethinking the economic structures and production cycles that deceptively divide nature from culture. In *Adelaïde*, a collaboration between Fræme - La Friche la Belle de Mai and the Frac Provence-Alpes-Côte d' Azur, Almendra proposes an immersive installation featuring radio transmissions, rubble, and a series of sculptural elements made of stone, copper, aluminum, glass and peacock feathers, that combine found and repurposed materials into a reflection about being and belonging in flux, circulation, and transformation.

*Adelaïde*, the title of Almendra's two-venue installation, might seem like common name. It is, and it is also a transition between scenes: from the city's rooftops and backyards to the inside of the exhibition space, between two major institutions in Marseille – one located at the center and another in the outskirts of the city –, and from the artist's housing project in his family's hometown in Casario, a twenty-person village interior north of Portugal, to his studio in Marseille, carrying the same name, *Adelaïde*, where in the last five years the artist has invited the city's emerging art scene to produce and to exhibit, some for the first time, and share their works with wider publics.

*Adelaïde*, the name chosen by the artist to meaningfully connect these seemingly disparate places and peoples sings the absence of the bodies that inhabit them evoking experiences of a life lived between countries, Portugal and France. *Adelaïde* is also a vernacular for metamorphosis: it speaks both of human experience as it does of industrial remains, textile, feathers, stone, aluminum, plastic, and copper, all connected through stories of use, exchange, and transformation.

*Adelaïde* is present in the rough fragments of stone, brick, concrete, glass – the debris from a growing city layered with past and present histories, in the copper-lined fridge cylinders, a common household item welded to a fine tube that holds peacock feathers as if they were channels for coming to voice, as well as in the seemingly dormant workers' wear thrown on the ground yet vibrant with narratives to tell. A loose plastic sandal left behind, lifeless, on a pile of rubble is reminiscent of a familiar scene of abandonment. Yet, it carries the weight of the working hours and the distances walked by Teresa, one of many unknown care workers whose support is, in one way or another, essential to our daily lives.

In Almendra's work, abandonment and anonymity are transformed into namesakes through personal experience that render mundane and neglected objects perceptible to the eye and to the heart. Contrary to the modern fixation for naming and indexing, however, these namesakes favor openness and empathy in the perceiver, an awareness of our indistinguishable, shared need for shelter, comfort, and ease. For Almendra, workers' wear also challenges the stereotypical gaze that identifies a pair of shorts or a tank top with a culture of gender, beauty, and sensuality exploring them as signs of labor, such as construction and sex-work or leisurely, sexual practices, such as cruising, hidden from public view. By casting them in aluminum, the artist heightens their presence, bringing to the fore a kind of working-class consciousness that questions the status of everyday objects and their culturally and economically assigned values.

*Quinta de Adelaïde* is the name inscribed on the bottles "millésimées" that hold the olive oil collected by Casario's villagers, used by the artist as means of exchange for the copper collected by Amara, Anton, Antoine, Ismaël, and Momo, gleaners Almendra regularly collaborates with, which is then welded at his studio in an alchemical process that is as much about manufacturing as it is a mode of encounter based on circular economies, friendship, and mutual support. At the Frac, *Quinta de Adelaïde* is also a limited-edition olive oil carafe at art market price, contrasting its currency as speculation with the economy of exchange in which it is generated. Its proceedings return to Casario in support of the forthcoming harvest.

From Casario, Almendra invited Georges Sousa, a construction worker, farmer, and poet, to syncopate Marseille's radio waves with one-minute-long poetic interludes. Its poetry resonates with works such as *Ginette* (2020), an interstitial sculpture located somewhere between an incomplete garden shed and industrial architecture made of copper, galvanized steel and silicone retrieved from the artist's studio, a former furniture factory, and reminiscent of those found in Marseille's disenchanted neighborhoods, where a peacock feather and copper structure reposes or *Martyr* (2020) a façade for a shed also made with found materials in the artist's studio, wood and translucent corrugated polyester plates, and

continuously illuminated by daylight and neon during the night. The latter is placed at Panorama in dialogue with the monumentality of its meters-high glass windows and the expanse of rooftops visible from it.

*The martyr* is a large chipboard placed between a tool and a piece to be shaped. Repurposed for its translucence and mirror effects, *Martyr* questions the apparent transparency of life lying beyond the sheltering glass. A series of smaller glass sheets (*Ensemble Verre*, 2021), blue glass and glass ceramic, next to it play with the daylight entering the space creating new, colorful shadows with every passing hour. In *Adelaïde*, nothing is stable, neither flooring nor walls, nor identities for that matter. Sharing similar materials, in both *Ginette* and *Martyr*, organic elements in silicone and leather give the appearance of a skin, as if the shelters secreted life from their copper piping to inundate with presence the exhibition space.

At the Frac, a large double-sheet greenhouse glass installation layered with mallows (*Green, Yellow, Purple, Ladybird*, 2022), an invasive weed and wildflower the artist collected from Marseille's motorways and wastelands, extends the two exhibition spaces into a continued landscape that dissolves all divisions and separations: a complete expense by which the art institution becomes another character in *Adelaïde*'s reciprocal interplay between rural Portugal and Marseille's urban life. A large aluminum cast peacock whose feathers can be found at Panorama preaches on a large, plastic fuel container reminiscent of the period when the artist sold domestic petroleum products for his father's business before enrolling in art school. Commonly found in the city's public parks and awkwardly displaced from its original status as a royal bird, the peacock stages another scene that threads *Adelaïde*'s garden-like landscape at the Frac with La Friche's urban imaginary, confounding the two spaces and, with it, the long-held dualist perception that separates nature from culture and self from other.

At Panorama, a simultaneously regal and rural summer delicacy, a series of aluminum cast figs fallen ripe over two large blocks of stone complete this interconnected scene. They refer to the blocks of stone initially used to limit movement around Porte d'Aix in Marseille, repurposed through their use as public benches. One of the figs reveals the formation of a beehive on the rock, most likely belonging to the bronze animal located at the Frac. In the exhibition space, the stone blocks stand as a hybrid between a plinth, used for museum displays, and introspective seating taken from a Romantic landscape painting. They hold an invitation to repose and contemplate the continuous landscape that extends below their feet and that, ultimately, connects them with the world.

The poetics of dialogue in Almendra's practice resides in making apparent divisions perceivable to the eye by creating continued landscapes of material and narrative connections that capture the viewer's imagination. A fragile, immersive installation that questions the monumentality of its own scale, *Adelaïde* opens questions around empathy, humanness, and the porosity of narratives, objects, and structures, while gracefully elevating the arts of the working-class and its alternative economies based on generosity and exchange to a space of thinking, sensing, feeling, and knowing life without separation, differentiation, discrimination, or division. With much-needed awareness for the social and environmental challenges of our times, *Adelaïde* will continue morphing and transforming with the changing daylight, the erosion caused by the weight of bodies stepping over the rubble, and, finally, the slow oxidizing of the copper and decaying of organic materials in its sculptural elements. Ever-changing, Almendra's proposal is in flux, circulation, and transformation – it is *Adelaïde*.

Sofia Lemos