

Interview with Irit Batsry

by Carlos Motta

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Video and installation artist Irit Batsry's presentation in the 2002 Whitney Biennial Exhibition, "These Are Not My Images (neither there nor here)" interweaves elements of different genres (documentary, essay, experimental, narrative) in order to question the way we see and show reality. The film follows the voyage of a disillusioned Western filmmaker, accompanied by a half-blind guide and her encounter with a local filmmaker in a skewed "road movie" set in the near future. It evokes the different meanings of "place" : a location, a territory, a context, a situation, and a home. It speaks of being at your own place and being (at the place of) another, about identity and alterity, intimacy and distance, about the relationship between the "first" and the "third". Images and sounds were recorded in Tamil Nadu. The images refer to different modes of image-making (painting, photography, film and video). They alternate from "documentary" to "painterly images" created through digital and analog processing.

CM: In conversation with a viewer at one of the screenings of your film "These Are Not My Images (neither there nor here)" at the Whitney Biennial, she referred to you as an "image weaver". I thought her analogy was very appropriate considering the rich texture and different layers of each image.

IB: Even though the electronic image is considered to be cold and remote, for me the process is very physical. For me an image is not a finality in itself but rather a starting point. When I see an image that I've shot it is not something that is closed, it is not an object. It is material that I work with, I go into it, I change it, I work its texture, I work with its different meanings in relationship to other images. It is open material that transforms either through image processing, juxtaposition or editing.

CM: The transformation of the images reminded me of studies on the nature of perception. Is this something you were concerned with in the process of making them?

IB: Perception is a subject that has constantly reoccurred in my work even when it was not meant to be about it like in the case of "These Are Not My Images (neither there nor here)". It ended up surfacing in the work. Previous works I've done are very clearly connected to perception, one is "A Simple Case of Vision", in which I use a paragraph of Buckminster Fuller that speaks about the evolution of his vision. He was born cross-eyed, until he was four years old they didn't know the cause of this. The cause was that he was abnormally farsighted. His vision was corrected with lenses but his dependence on big pattern clues persisted. I took this paragraph as a testimony about how our vision works. Even though his vision

was corrected (to fit what we call normal vision), his mind went on behaving the way it used to. I realized with this work that there is absolutely no normal vision. Many people approached me after screenings telling me all kinds of vision stories.

CM: Because in the images you use elements that literally obstruct the view...

IB: Yes. I use a lot of obstructions to vision, weather they are images of fences, the layering itself, or the manipulation of the images. I think obstructions make you more aware of what you see.

CM: How about the slight disjunction between image and sound?

IB: The soundtrack is by Stuart Jones, with whom I have collaborated since 1988. The way our collaboration works is that he gets edited sequences and works very close to them, literally frame by frame. In "These Are Not My Images (neither there nor here)", it was different than the work we've done in the past. Because of the very difference between this and my previous works in which the place was not recognizable. Stuart had to go to record sound in South India in the place where I shot the images, it was clear to me that the sound had to come from there. None of the sound is sync sound, however, some of it feels almost like it and almost perceived like a hiperrealist sound.

CM: There is a strong sense of displacement in the film. It denies the recognition of the physical place through which we are moving. (This seems to be a reoccurring topic in contemporary art)

IB: You can tie this question of displacement initially to my personal history. My parents are Iraqui jews that migrated to Israel. Their first language and culture is Arabic. I was born and raised in Israel yet my first culture is a culture of mixes, because in Israel there are people from all over the world that came together and created a culture (that certainly has a distinct identity). I must say that I didn't feel connected to this culture, I feel more comfortable not living there because I am not expected to be part of it. Later I moved to New York where I have been based since, yet since 1991 I started working in different parts of the world. For instance "These Are Not My Images (neither there nor here)" was shot in India and edited in France and Germany, a place where I never lived but spent over six years going back and forth to.

CM: I am interested in the development of the narrative, specially in the relationship between the 3 characters that seem profoundly dislocated and foreign both from the place they inhabit as well as from each other. However they are constantly searching for communication.

IB: The narrative developed three years into the process of making this film. Originally I went to India accidentaly and wasn't planning to make a film, however, while there, I ended up shooting a lot. The camera was my way of

relating to the place. When I went back to the Cité des Arts, in Paris, where I was a resident, I started printing still images from the ten hours of material that I shot. Most of them were images that you don't see when you look at the video. It was a kind of archeological process. They are very interesting images because they are hybrid between photography and video. This body of prints is actually part of this project at large. At this point I realized I would make a moving image work with this material. It is then that I started writing text. Short magic realist stories. This and the interpretative responses to the images of an Indian filmmaker friend who came from the place I had shot. The first version of the narrative was actually alternating between my text and Madou Thyagarajan's responses. This didn't feel right. My text was too remote and his was too near. It was then that I started writing the present text reflecting on the process of image making. The work became less about India and more about the images. The title went from being "Notindia", to "Neither There Nor Here" to "These Are Not My Images (neither there nor here)".

The characters are not only removed from each other but live each a personal dislocation. The western filmmaker's dislocation in India is the more predictable and external. Her main strangement, however, is from the "image totalitarian" society that had banned a personal approach to filmmaking and made her renounce the right to making images. Crossing the border meant that she could not go back to her country, separating her from her culture. The guide who is loosing his vision was very attached to his profession and is now being confronted with a forced retirement. I don't think he is as much dislocated as he is resigned. As he says in his opening sentence: "Every life follows its course, mine has reached its twilight". The third character, the local filmmaker, has lived many years abroad... he was actually the hardest one for me to see. In a way I stopped caring, as I stopped caring about the narrative. At this point it became more a personal essay than a narrative film. My interest in narrative is as part of this weaving you have mentioned before; it is an element that its not more important than the image, the structure, rhythm or conceptual framework. I am not interested in doing a film in which the narrative is the focal point, as it is in traditional filmmaking.

The notion of being foreign is very similar to what we previously discussed about the obstruction to vision. It makes you question your own identity, your own vision of the world, your own culture. You start thinking: what is indispensable to human kind and what is just "the local color", that we have been brought to think is indispensable. It is very stimulating to be as far from your own culture as you can be.

CM: There is a quote from Passolini in the film: "A westerner going to India has everything but gives nothing. India has nothing but gives everything". This quote relates immediately to the title of your film.

IB: Yes. It definitely has to do with the question of whom the images belong to, which is actually a sub-question. The main question is: when you are making

work as an artist do you take or do you give? I think it is both. There is not taking without giving. Yet you don't always give back to the one that you took from.

Irit Batsry is an artist working mainly in video and installations. She was the recipient of the 2002 "Bucksbaum Award", for her contribution to the 2002 Whitney Biennial.

Carlos Motta is an artist living in New York.

More on Irit Batsry at:

<http://membres.lycos.fr/iritbatsry/>

<http://www.fondation-langlois.org...>