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Rosalind Nashashibi: Bachelor Machines

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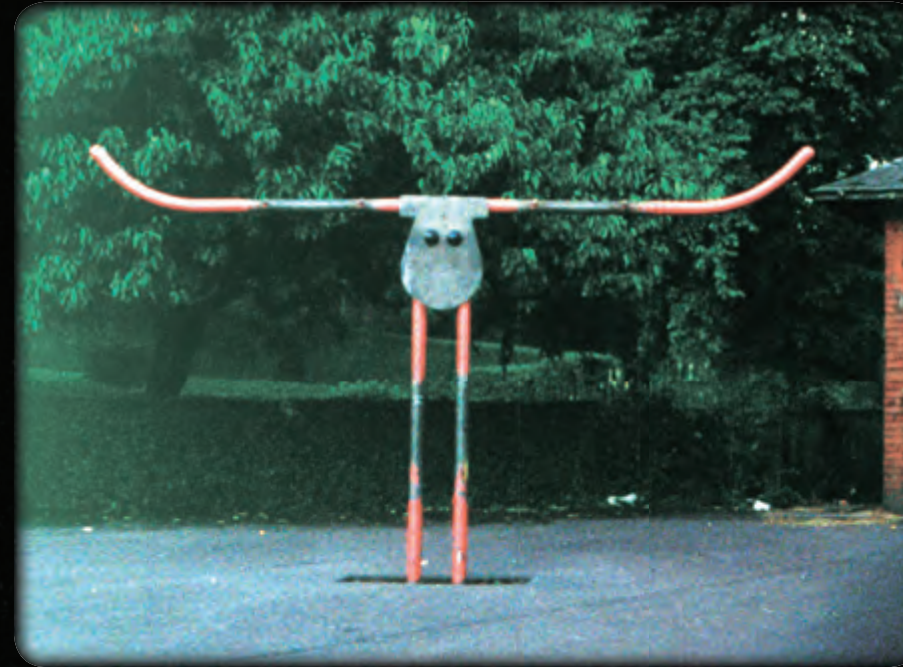
Contemplating the charm of a well-composed painting, the influential psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan writes, “The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am in the picture.”¹ Lacan had in mind *trompe l’oeil* perspective, which—for all its too-frequent cheesiness—sucks us into the worlds that it creates. And if an artist accents that depth by putting a tree or curtain in the foreground, a technique called *repousoir*, the viewer’s sense of being in the picture becomes irresistible.

Similarly forceful, given the *trompe l’oeil* and *repousoir* in Rosalind Nashashibi’s *Bachelor Machines Part 1* (2007), is the impression that Nashashibi understands art’s history and its connection to film. *Bachelor Machines Part 1* captures snippets of life aboard a cargo ship sailing from Italy to Sweden as part of its ceaseless journeys through Europe and the Middle East.² As the camera travels through corridors, contemplates clouds passing before the moon or records mundane sequences of life at sea, it produces astonishingly deep images of the freighter: passageways recede for miles, decks go on forever, darkened rooms fade into limitless voids. To highlight this vertiginous depth, the painting-sized film projects into a white rectangle described on a grey wall. The grey expanse pops out at the viewer as energetically as the projected image recedes—playing *repousoir* to the film’s *trompe l’oeil*. If, historically, painting has wanted to appear as a window onto a world behind the picture plane, then nothing could be more painterly than this.

Along with informing how *Bachelor Machines Part 1* looks, history informs what it shows. *Part 1*, as Jennifer Higgle writes of Nashashibi’s earlier films, appears “a little ordinary.” Commenting on the artist’s interest in unstaged bits of daily life, Higgle says, “She concentrates on scenes with the intensity of someone trying to still a lazy eye—her gaze wanders, lingers and then fixes on faces, textures and communications between people, dignifying the everyday with a curiosity that maintains a respectful distance as it probes.”³ Put another way, Nashashibi looks back to genre painting, the elevation of the unremarkable episodes that frequently fill our lives. No doubt drama arises on the *Gran Bretagna*, the ship at the centre of *Bachelor Machines Part 1*. But, judging from what we see, mostly the men on board wait.

The stillness of their waiting allows Nashashibi to explore other artistic traditions, such as seascapes and portraiture. However, as Alexander Dumbadze suggests, this film also invites viewers to contemplate the contemporary conditions that make the *Gran Bretagna*

ABOUT THE ARTIST
Raised and educated in Scotland, Rosalind Nashashibi now lives in London (UK). Her numerous exhibits include the Venice Biennial in 2007 and Manifesta and the Berlin Biennial in 2008, and solo shows at the Berkeley Art Museum, Tate Britain and the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow. She is represented by Harris Lieberman, New York and doggerfisher/Susanna Beaumont, Edinburgh.



LEFT: ROSALIND NASHASHIBI
Park Ambassador, 2005
16mm Film
4 minutes, 30 seconds
Edition of 3

ABOVE: ROSALIND NASHASHIBI
Bachelor Machines Part 1, 2007,
16mm film installation, 31 min.

possible and necessary. Despite the much-discussed rise of managerial capitalism and post-industrial production, global commerce can’t rid itself of hulking machines like this ship, product and purveyor of industry’s most conventional manifestation.⁴

Yet the freighter is only one of two industrial artefacts contemplated by *Bachelor Machines Part 1*. The other is film: the emulsion-coated celluloid strips, mechanical cameras and projectors, and mass-produced prints that Walter Benjamin describes as the industrial art form *par excellence* in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” of 1936.⁵ But *Part 1* only implies film’s link to the freighter, leaving their shared history to be drawn out in the much shorter *Bachelor Machines Part 2*. (*Part 1* runs about 31 minutes, *Part 2* just over 5 minutes.)

For film became history with the rise of videotape and then digital media. Perhaps that’s why we see film more clearly today than before—we grasp it more firmly now that we’re beyond it. The crispness of digital formats throw into relief film’s soft shapes, fluid colour transitions and extraordinary depth of field. These visual effects are the traces of the film in the projected image, the presence of film’s physical and chemical composition in the moving picture. Film’s transparency is only a convention, an agreement we made to believe that, as it reached higher and higher resolution, film became invisible. Film is no more invisible than the art gallery’s white cube is neutral.

Still, some film might be less visible than others. The visibility of Nashashibi’s movies might derive partly from their not being 35 millimetre. But it’s more than that. The grain of a film’s image offers, Dumbadze notes, “a glimpse of a world far removed from the digital pixelations so often filling our visual field.”⁶ Pixelation abounds because digital technology—affordable, convenient, accessible—is now the default medium. This shift has given film a meaning that it didn’t have ten or fifteen years ago, before digital technology was readily available, namely, “This is not digital.” (Something similar happened in painting. Today, a highly realistic painting says, among things, “This is not a photograph” or, more emphatically, “It’s amazing that this painting is not a photograph, given how photographic it looks.” This meaning wouldn’t have attached to a painting 300 years ago, before photography existed.) Even if the medium isn’t the whole message for Nashashibi, it’s an important piece of it.

Just how important becomes clear in the differences between the two parts of *Bachelor Machines*. For one thing, painterly texture is inconstant in Nashashibi’s oeuvre. It predominates in the nautical scenarios of *Part 1* as in the light-dappled train seats of



ROSALIND NASHASHIBI
Bachelor Machines Part 1, 2007,
16mm film installation, 31 min.
All images courtesy of Harris Lieberman, New York.

Distant Benjamin’s and Hauser’s ideas may be, but *Part 2*’s soundtrack—excerpts from a talk last year by the artist Thomas Bayrle—suggests they’re still viable. Combining history, speculation and intransigent anti-capitalism in a mode founded on Benjamin’s lyrical yet infuriatingly—and deliberately—inconclusive writings, Bayrle hypothesizes that the repetition of the Rosary anticipated the diesel motor’s precisely timed explosions. In this way, he claims, the religion of the Middle Ages and Renaissance laid the ideological ground for the industrialization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. So, Bayrle startlingly insists, post-Enlightenment industrialization builds on, not breaks from, the religiosity that preceded it. Religion and industry together have created today’s catastrophes (global warming, permanent war, the potential for nuclear obliteration...choose one).

Such radicalism is unsurprising, given Bayrle’s artistic and intellectual trajectory. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, as a principal of a graphics and printing company called Bayrle & Kellerman (Masters of Display), Bayrle promoted chocolates, cars and banks by day while using his skills and equipment to campaign for his Maoist sympathies by night. As a commercial designer and printer, Bayrle saw libratory potential in the industrial repetition that he describes in *Part 2*—like Benjamin, who makes lithography’s mechanical reproducibility a key precursor to that of film.⁹

To reinforce this link with 1960s Maoism and bring it into film’s realm, Nashashibi nods at some of Jean-Luc Godard’s most radical moments (*Sympathy for the Devil*, *Week End*, *La Chinoise*) by mismatching her audio and video tracks. For neither screen shows Bayrle giving the talk we hear. On the left we see clips from Alexander Kluge’s film *Artists Under the Big Top—Perplexed*. Though obscure now, this Brechtian movie won the Gold Lion award at the 1968 Venice Film Festival with its story of Leni Peickert (Hannelore Hoger) and her dreams of creating a revolutionary circus. For Kluge as for Bayrle, Benjamin provides important ground; both artists dreamed of fomenting rebellion—or, better,

revolution—through their mass-produced media.¹⁰

Interspersed with these samples from Kluge’s film are shots of Bayrle and his wife re-enacting a scene from it.¹¹ By alternating between the original movie and the re-staging, the image creates a series of links that eventually connect the filmmaker to the graphic artist: from the ship, to Bayrle’s thesis about industry, to his Maoist youth, to Kluge’s parable about film’s possibilities and limits as procurer of utopia.

The right screen breaks this chain, in the spirit of Hauser’s evaluation of concurrent but unrelated images. (Not that I think Nashashibi reads Hauser—unlike Benjamin, he has few admirers now.) Flipping the camera back onto Nashashibi’s art, this image presents re-photographed sequences from two of her earlier films: *Park Ambassador* (2004) and *Eyeballing* (2005). The former stares at a sun-saturated, anthropomorphic object in a park; the latter switches between “faces” found in everyday objects (windows, knotholes, electrical outlets) and the traffic at the door to a Manhattan police station. As *Part 2* begins, the re-used footage is out of focus, gradually becoming clear as the film progresses.

A relationship comes out of this juxtaposition, though what kind is uncertain. Perhaps the disparities between Nashashibi’s re-photographed footage and the 1960s radicalism of Bayrle and Kluge signal unbridgeable gaps—ideological, aesthetic—between then and now. But the opposite also is possible: that Nashashibi composes this history of art and politics in the mid-twentieth century and highlights this split in order to build, or propose, a connection.

And other options exist: maybe both meanings are right; maybe neither. The fact that we can’t know, because neither still nor moving photographs talk back, is the hook that makes them compelling. They create worlds so convincing that we imagine them to be truthful, enterable, alive. When, as Lacan says, we are in a picture, we expect it to respond to us as vividly as we do to it.



ROSALIND NASHASHIBI
Bachelor Machines Part 2, 2007,
16 mm film, Two-screen projection.

That it doesn’t, drives us crazy—as Lacan shows with his own nautical tale:

I was on a small boat, with a few people from a family of fishermen in a small port. At that time, Brittany was not industrialized as it is now. There were no trawlers. The fisherman went out in his frail craft as his own risk. It was this risk, this danger, that I loved to share. But it wasn’t all danger and excitement—there were also fine days. One day, then, as we were waiting for the moment to pull in the nets, an individual known as Petit-Jean...pointed out to me something floating on the surface of the waves. It was a small can, a sardine can. It floated there in the sun, a witness to the canning industry, which we, in fact, were supposed to supply. It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me—*You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you!*¹²

And this, Lacan adds, even though the sardine can “was looking at me, all the same.”

— Charles Reeve, Curator

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Jessie Washburne Harris and her staff at Harris Lieberman for their help in realizing this exhibit.

ROSALIND NASHASHIBI
Bachelor Machines Part 2, 2007,
16 mm film, Two-screen projection.

¹Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques-Alain Miller, ed., Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978): 96. I’ve changed this translation to accord with the French, as Sheridan inexplicably changes the second sentence to “But I am *not* in the picture.”

²Rosalind Nashashibi, email to the author, July 15, 2008.

³Jennifer Higgle, “Rosalind Nashashibi,” *frizee*, no. 88 (January/February 2005): 101.

⁴Alexander Dumbadze, “Optical Disillusion: the films of Rosalind Nashashibi,” *Modern Painters*, vol. 19 no. 9 (November 2007): 80-81.

⁵Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 1936, in *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn, trans.; Hanna Arendt, ed. (New York: Schocken, 1968): 217-251.

⁶Dumbadze, “Optical Disillusion,” 80.

⁷Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, vol. 4 Stanley Goodman, trans., (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962): 230-231.

⁸This failure of the contemporary imagination the subject of Žižek’s *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008).

⁹On Bayrle, see Christine Mehring, “Mass Appeals,” *Artforum* vol. 45 no. 8 (April 2007): 228-237. For this connection in Benjamin, see “The Work of Art”: 219.

¹⁰See chapter 12 “Beyond Spectacle: Alexander Kluge’s *Artists Under the Big Top: Perplexed*” in Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: texts in context* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995): 181-197.

¹¹Re-enacting has become an important theme in contemporary art. See the exhibition catalogues *History Will Repeat Itself*, Inke Arns and Gabriele Horn, ed. (Dortmund and Berlin: Hartware MedienKunstVerein/KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2007) and *Not Quite How I Remember It*, Helena Reckitt, ed., (Toronto: Power Plant Contemporary Art Centre, 2008).

¹²Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*: 95.



Related Events

Curator’s Tour with Charles Reeve:
Thursday, July 10, 7 pm. Free.

Thursday evening walk-throughs:
20-30 minute discussions of the works on view. Free and open to the public. Walk-throughs begin at 6:30 p.m.

July 31: Pablo de Ocampo. Pablo is a curator and occasional artist living in Toronto where he is the Artistic Director of the Images Festival.

August 7: Jacob Korczynski. An independent curator, Jacob has organized “*Skip, Divided*,” a program of Nashashibi’s earlier films, for Pleasure Dome. “*Skip, Divided*” will screen on August 16 at 8 pm. (pdome.org)

September 4: Simone Jones. Simone is a multi-media artist and associate dean in the Faculty of Art at the Ontario College of Art & Design.

“*Skip, Divided*”: the films of Rosalind Nashashibi.” Organized by Jacob Korczynski for Pleasure Dome. Saturday, August 16, 8 p.m. At cinecycle, 129 Spadina Avenue. \$5.

Flash in the Metropolis, a film by Rosalind Nashashibi and Lucy Skaer. In “Wavelengths 5” at the Toronto International Film Festival. Sunday, September 7, 9:30 p.m. Art Gallery of Ontario, Jackman Hall. (For info and tickets, visit www.tiff08.ca.)

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