



ART BURN

Which side are you on?

Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky set out on the West Bank's segregated highways in their arresting, provocative and challenging Road Movie

BY: STEVEN LEYDEN COCHRANE
26/07/2012 1:37 AM | COMMENTS (0)



TOM BLANCHARD ENLARGE IMAGE

Details of the multi-channel video installation Road Movie

Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky's Road Movie is a video and sound installation examining the segregated roadways of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. The two-tiered transportation system, which the artists travelled extensively, comprises a network of modern highways (accessible only to Israeli drivers) that connect the territory's Jewish settlements (which have been all but unanimously deemed illegal by the

international community) and separate, visibly second-rate roads that Palestinians are permitted to use.

Flanders and Sawatzky photographed the West Bank landscape through car windows, interviewing and filming both Israeli settlers and Palestinians (three each) as they navigated or attempted to navigate their routes through it; in this sense, their methods are consistent with those of documentary filmmaking. Road Movie consciously tests the boundaries of that form, however, ultimately becoming something else, and the artists are cautious to disclaim absolute objectivity or "documentary realism." Immersive and impressionistic, Road Movie favours poetry over polemics and, while it's a strategy likely to anger many with strong views on the subject, it also creates space for reflection, for positions (including the artists' own) to emerge organically over time — space critically lacking in most discussion of politics in the region.

The work owes much of its success to an ingenious installation format: film is projected simultaneously over both sides of three free-standing walls that dominate the narrow gallery space. One side shows footage collected along Palestinian roads; Israeli highways feature on the other. Like the roads themselves, which criss-cross the West Bank like arteries and veins of a single organ, elements of these two "sides" abut and overlap one another in unpredictable fashion, most notably in the work's single soundtrack, which meanders seamlessly between audio corresponding to each half, a constant reminder of action taking place out of sight.

This creates a disorienting, dreamlike effect compounded by the nature of the footage itself. The artists compiled thousands of still photographs to create stuttering, stop-motion animations of their travels, intercutting these with evocative live-action passages featuring the various "characters," as the artists pointedly refer to their interview subjects. The imagery differs subtly across the three screens, falling in and out of sync and prompting viewers to glance anxiously among them so as not to miss anything: in short order this becomes, perhaps appropriately, a kind of paranoid tic. Elliptical, repeating fragments of text excerpted from the interviews recur fitfully throughout; it's seldom clear when one account ends and the next begins, and we become acutely aware of artists' authorial role in selectively framing the "stories" being told.

This brings us to a crucial, justifiably controversial quality of the work: as much as we seem to be offered "both sides" of the situation, the "characters" are not equally sympathetic. The Palestinians we encounter are presented as attempting to live their lives under conditions that look, to put it bluntly, oppressive and inhumane — see, for example, the ambulance driver denied access to the newer, faster and better-maintained Israeli thoroughfares. The settlers, by contrast, occasionally come across as self-serving, disdainful or naïve — one man likens the conflict (dismissively, to my ear) to "sibling rivalry," asserting his belief that he lives on land "promised" to him.

It's possible to be even-handed in assessing a conflict without pretending that both parties are equally justified in their views and actions. It's left to individual viewers to decide if Flanders and Sawatzky accomplish this. Road Movie may be equivocal, nerve-racking, even claustrophobic, but this befits its subject matter. If one can allow nothing else, the work forces us to assume perspectives that we might find uncomfortable or even intolerable, perspectives that we might not encounter any other way. This, in and of itself, is necessary, noble and rare.

Steven Leyden Cochrane is an emerging artist, writer and educator from Tampa, Fla.

Elle Flanders and Tamira

Sawatzky: Road Movie

Until August 19, Plug In Institute for Contemporary Art

Find this article at:

<http://www.uptownmag.com/arts/art-burn/Which-side-are-you-on-163746216.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.