

Israel/Palestine from both sides now

In their installation, Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky look at sometimes gorgeous, sometimes ghastly life in the disputed area

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Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky: Road Movie

NFB/TIFF/O'Born Contemporary, 51 Wolsley St., Toronto, until Sept. 18; oborncontemporary.com.

Whenever a work of art dealing with the continuing Israel-Palestine conflict pops up, I feel compelled to offer the following disclaimer: In regards to this topic, I remain blissfully neutral.

I am neither Israeli nor Palestinian, Jewish nor Muslim. I have never visited the area in question. I do not feel qualified to speak on its issues. As my late, mad father once put it: "My guts will be well long chucked down the lime pit and they'll still be killing each other over there." Enough said.

Tamira Sawatzky and Elle Flanders have no such qualms. Their new multimedia installation, *Road Movie* (co-presented by the National Film Board of Canada, O'Born Contemporary and the Future Projections wing of the Toronto International Film Festival), inserts the viewer into several key contested spaces in the conflict, including the controversial "security fence" that surrounds parts of the West Bank.

Using transcribed interviews from both West Bank Palestinians and Jewish residents of the Israel-built settlements, and then pairing the texts with sometimes gorgeous, sometimes ghastly film

footage taken at the disputed sites, Sawatzky and Flanders attempt to show life on both sides of the literal and figurative fence.

The main feature of the installation is a room-length domino line comprising three enormous, equally sized rectangular blocks, onto which individual segments of the film are projected. The fractured dialogue between the two worlds thus unfolds as the

viewer moves from side to side and between each symbolic block. The viewer is not asked to pick sides (again, literally nor figuratively), but rather to immerse herself/himself in the geography of the West Bank, in the loaded banalities of daily life within a deeply paranoid, overmilitarized space.

Everything from a bustling Palestinian market to the monotonous rows of settlements to giggling children to the boring grunt work of soldiers is presented as simultaneously rich yet limited, stagnant and hyper-frustrated but aspiring (and inspiring). The viewer walks away from *Road Movie* imagining the lush possibilities that peace would bring to this small but culturally fertile patch of desert.

Speaking with Sawatzky and Flanders is equally revealing. Both artists are as invested in the political dynamics that fuel their film as they are in the art object itself – in fact, they see the two as inseparable.

Flanders's long history of peace activism in Canada and Israel (media watchers will know her as a spokeswoman for the group *Queers Against Israeli Apartheid*) lingers over our conversation and, of course, the installation – but it would be a mistake to read *Road Movie* as a diatribe, as a mere polemic without nuance (or balance).

Road Movie is a pensive, patient, long-view look at a complex situation, not an easily digested sound bite.

The way you've set up the blocks is intriguing. It's hardly the most comfortable way to watch a film, in pieces across a large space.

Flanders: Welcome to the Middle East! It's an uncomfortable place.

Sawatzky: There's an obvious connection between the blocks and the security fence, but we were also thinking of this being a way to take people on a journey. When you come in, you see one side but you don't necessarily know about the other side. The blocks create a forced perspective that leads the eyes down the gallery. And at certain physical points in the installation you can see both sides of the blocks. It's like Israel/Palestine, where everything is kind of right up against each other, where it's not as simple as inside/outside.

What kind of permissions did you need to make this film?

Flanders: [Shrugs.] Well, you know me.

In other words, you just did it?

Flanders: I'd love to play up the "danger," that would be fun, but once you learn how to navigate your way through these spaces you learn that war is a lot about bureaucracy and a lot about the mundane – how you get to work every day, how you wake up.

For me, because I speak Hebrew and I speak a little Arabic, they don't know what to do with me or what to make of me. When we're in Palestine, we're Cana-

dians. When we're in Israel, I'm Jewish and Tamira is my wife, and we're gay ... But you have to know. You do have to be conscious of where you are.

Sawatzky: We also discovered that all those permissions are fairly arbitrary. Certain soldiers will absolutely shut you down if you are filming, and then the next bunch don't care. We real-

ized, quickly, that soldiers shouting legalities at us didn't really mean much because it's really the Wild West out there.

Were you ever stopped or arrested?

Flanders: We were arrested once, when we were being taken through a settlement by an Israeli peace activist. We got arrested because I thought it was a good idea to open a checkpoint and drive through – which was probably not such a good idea!

What happened? Did you have to go to court?

Flanders: No, no. That's the thing about the arbitrariness of it. When the soldiers say: 'We're taking you in for detention, give us your passports,' and they have very large guns, you're not as cocky as you might be another time. It all depends on the context.

Sawatzky: But they didn't take our film.

Flanders: It's all about harassing you by wasting your time. Israel/Palestine is nuts, and lush and beautiful, and horrible. Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet, wrote a book called *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*. I think that's a lovely way to put it.

This interview has been condensed and edited.



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