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Rosalind Nashabishi

ICA, London SW1

By Laura Cumming, Saturday 12 September 2009



A detail from Rosalind Nashabishi's film Jack Straw's Castle (2009). Photograph courtesy doggerfisher, Edinburgh

Rosalind Nashabishi is one of the best film artists at work in Britain today. She has the depth and precision of a poet. Her images, and the ideas they carry, continue to blossom in the mind long after these short but luxuriously slow-moving films have spooled to their end. At 36, she has long deserved a full-scale retrospective.

What is remarkable about the beautiful presentation at the ICA is that it succeeds even without her established hits: the quartet of films for which Nashabishi won the 2003 Beck's Futures award, variously shot at twilight in small-town America, in the noonday heat of the West Bank and the grey mist of Glasgow, but in each case drawing subtle connections between disparate worlds and peoples.

Or the stunning *Bachelor Machines* (2007), set on a cargo ship manned by sailors from across the globe. Nobody who saw this portrait could forget the in-turned life of the mariners plunged deep in their floating institution, unaware of the hovering camera. Nashabishi would stare closely over their shoulders at the strangest of details: the cicatrice on a poker player's hand, the arrangement of locks on a cupboard resembling a face, its counterpart in portholes and ladles and sailors' epaulettes as if all belonged to the same nautical family.

The artist saw, as it seemed, what the sailors did not: both their intimate affinities and the haunting vistas gliding by through the portholes. The film had no obvious narrative, no climactic incident, yet somehow it achieved its own nail-biting tension through the sustained enigma of its observations and that is how Nashabishi has proceeded, more or less, ever since.

Take *Eyeballing*, the film that anchors this show; its only action, so to speak, is the twining of two strands of images. The policemen of the NYPD precinct house in Tribeca are viewed at a distance (it is illegal to film them) massing on the street outside their door. No matter that they might only be smoking, idling or entirely off-duty; each maintains an air of ostentatious alertness as if perpetually on the look-out. On guard, and on their guard, they are the surveillance eyes of the world.

Or are they? The second strand shows the streets apparently looking right back. Two windows and the low-slung awning of the East River restaurant form a pair of eyes above a rueful mouth; likewise, two pearl earrings and a choker in the jeweller's shop window. Fire hydrants, letterboxes, even two nail holes and a knot in worn wood: once the first detail is framed – the origin of species, as it were – the cityscape appears filled with rudimentary faces.

The visual analogies are clear, particularly between the bosses of the hydrant and the bulging eyes of one prodigiously exophthalmic sergeant, but the inferences are left up to you. It made me think of a baby's instinct for reading two dots and a dash as a face barely before its eyes can focus, a fundamental anthropomorphism upon which art has always thrived; and of the curious, often theatrical way in which policemen declare their profession by eyeing the world.

In a nearby film, a bright green frog keeps jump-cutting its way into a pensive study of a woman reading in bed and one suddenly notices its bizarre camouflage. Beside a real pair of bulging eyes are two decorative marks that give it second sight, extra eyes: a two-faced look at the world.

And this frog, in turns, seems less of a puzzling pop-up if you consider that the woman's eyes eventually notice a footnote at the bottom of her page. Perhaps footnotes pop up like frogs in the mind; perhaps our eyes notice the world around us in sudden leaps too; or perhaps this is how the mind's eye works.

The allusions between one film and the next enrich all of Nashashibi's works, which is why they are best viewed together. Her symbols recur like characters: figures in the manmade world, creatures in the landscape, faces in walls. A recent photographic series inverts fan-vaulted abbey interiors so that one immediately sees the architecture as newly expressive – arches for eyes, complex smiles drawn in stone.

The world turned upside down can be a child's fantasy or a radical vision and Nashashibi's art is a fusion of both. What she chooses to observe is simple enough – a couple chatting, a woman walking in high heels, young men wandering through a wood. But her way of looking – deliberate, oblique, measured, the long takes as perfectly composed as a painting, then mysteriously interwoven – absolutely alters what one sees.

The latest and finest work here, *Jack Straw's Castle*, follows those young men through the wood. Or, rather, it spies them as they appear in the field of vision like figures in a Poussin landscape. Evening light glows, mist unfurls, birdsong rises and falls: nature's so rich it feels unreal.

And then reality appears seamlessly allegorical – these are men hunting men, cruising the woods – just as the magic of film-making is revealed. Floodlights, gantries, crew members messaging countdowns: the rituals of the second half are also a performance.

Men and animals, metamorphosis and magic, artifice and nature – this account leaves out a hundred other nuances, not least the gentle humour of the film's conclusion in which a magpie struts into the same frame as a rabbit (art or picturesque nature?) But by then Nashashibi has somehow achieved her own parallel atmosphere of intense and enduring anticipation.