# Looking Out
MONOGRAPH

Rosalind Nashashibi



*Proximity Machines*, 2007, split screen film projection

When she began to look, they turned out to be omnipresent. Here, in the two parallel slits and subtending circle of an American plug socket. There, in a trio of indentations on the head of her electric toothbrush. Everywhere in the city: in paired ventilation grilles flanking a larger third, a couple of porthole windows above a white-painted rectangle of brickwork, the twin eyeholes of public binoculars goggling over a mouth-like section of negative space. Cartoon faces, malevolent faces, faces found in sheared-off metal rods and stained concrete walls that resembled urban cousins of the Turin shroud. Faces that felt, sometimes, as though they were created by the viewfinder of her 16mm Bolex, and at other times as though they had always been there, waiting.

In *Eyeballing* (2005), shot indoors and outdoors in New York, Rosalind Nashashibi lingers over these anthropomorphic items, staring so long and fixedly that they stare back. (Here 'eyeballing' refers not only to looking for as long as you like but also to turning something into a faux eyeball.) But these silent confrontations are only half of the film's dialectic. Amidships are shots of the busy exterior of Manhattan's First Precinct, filmed by the artist from across the street (and under an innocuous pretext, since it's illegal to film police activity in the USA). One's first interpretation of this convening of viewpoints, particularly as the precinct is a stone's throw from Ground Zero, might be that it summarizes an aggravated mistrust. Read from the police's angle, it implies communities of otherness lurking conspiratorially below the visible: smiling in their secrecy, even. Yet there's another take, one that not only enlarges *Eyeballing*'s remit but also suggests what a clarification of long-standing intent it functions as in the London-based Nashashibi's art.

New York's finest emerge from behind the stationhouse door, which is painted with a big bold heraldic shield, as though it were a stage curtain: in Nashashibi's implicit conception that's exactly what it is. Once in public, the New York Police Department are clearly playing a role. Conferring, advising passers-by or simply guarding the entryway, they move slowly, with assumed authority; secure in their black costumes, they are in a sense (and almost unconsciously), elevating themselves above workaday reality into a condition that's almost theatrical or cinematic. In donning the uniform they willingly, eagerly, become representations: the mythic guardians of New York. *Eyeballing*, then, is partly about how individuals negotiate a city-state that has no room for individuality: we witness, in turn, a code for humans (the constructed faces) and humans codifying themselves. In fact, Nashashibi has long been concerned with how we accommodate ourselves, or don't, to inherited institutions; to assay the cloudier territories that her recent work broaches, however, we need to go back.

If those American lawmen form an *ad hoc* community with its own codes and customs, the idea that similarly protective assemblies manifest themselves society-wide is evident in Nashashibi's *oeuvre* as far back as *The States of Things* (2000), a three-minute stretch of bruised and scratchy black and white film that surveys pensioners and pigtailed students alike rifling through knolls of discarded clothing at a Glasgow jumble sale. Films like this, and successors such as 2002's *Midwest* (focusing on Mexicans in Nebraska killing time on the streets and in cafés), 2003's *Blood and Fire* (documenting old ladies eating at a Salvation Army centre in Portobello, Scotland) and 2004's *Hreash House* (shot at the end of Ramadan in the concrete apartment block of the half-Palestinian artist's extended family in Nazareth, and revolving around preparations for the traditional feast Eid al-Fitr) feature progressively static camera-work and imply a respectful distance from diverse cultural clusters. Nashashibi never subtitles foreign dialogue, for instance, a move that redoubles the impression of her subjects' self-containment.

Such works may have implied, and have certainly received, readings along pseudo-anthropological lines – regardless of the fact that Nashashibi shot all of them because she happened to be there for other reasons, often on residencies and never out of any globetrotting, world-swallowing curiosity. And, being nothing if not layered, these films are about their specific locations, at least partly – *Midwest*, for example, being undeniably evidential of limited opportunities for employment and easy camaraderie, and *Hreash House* capturing worlds that are variously timeless and fleeting: the rhythms of an ancient consensual ritual, the blank, television-watching longueurs within them and, at heart-warming points, the carefree oases of childhood. But, seen through the optic of *Eyeballing* and its successors, in their patient observing of groups the films are also, if rather less obviously, concerned with how selfhood mingles with or is dissolved into performance and codification. Nashashibi points to the formative influence of watching groups of actors rehearse, seeing how fluently they slip from role-play to being relatively 'themselves', and she's also confessed to artistic crushes on Pier Paolo Pasolini and Robert Bresson – who famously used non-actors in their films – but she proceeds from the opposite direction, locating the latently fictional in the factual. These are not only tribal behaviours she's recording here but a collective, if almost subconscious, fortification against mundanity and constraint: a method of enlarging and enriching one's journey through life by softly turning it into an act. Nashashibi tracks this notion back to Carl Jung and used a pertinent quote of his as the justificatory subtitle of a photographic triptych from 2007 juxtaposing a mud-caked Gambi figure in tribal dress, photographs of the cover of Pasolini's Oedipus Rex and Ilona 'La Cicciolina' Staller holding her son: *Gambi, Pasolini, Cicciolina (mythologizing gives existence a glamour we wouldn't want to do without)*.

One obvious extension of that thought is that reality is mutable, objectivity open to the operations of the subjective. This notion, too, has subsisted, albeit not necessarily with full endorsement, in Nashashibi's work since the outset. In *The States of Things* (the title is pointedly plural, signposting instability), the film's aged appearance, with a fogged palette reminiscent of early documentary, sends it part-way out of time; meanwhile, the soundtrack (a rhapsodic yet controlled love song by Om Khalsoum, the doyenne of Arabic popular music) pitches the scenario into an implausible compound space, neither quite dowdy Scottish interior nor garrulous Middle Eastern bazaar but with something of both.

*It is the medium of film, Nashashibi has said, that most closely approximates the process of thinking.*

Here already are mythology and glamour – but it's in Nashashibi's more exploratory, even occasionally boldly sketchy, recent works, which downplay a potentially distracting focus on the human, that they have started to become dominant aspects of a filmic language. Despite her several forays into photography (another series of photographs from 2005, collectively titled 'Abbey' and featuring ecclesiastical buildings, again locates faces in the physical landscape), and the mixture of anthropomorphism and associativity that melds the diverse image hoard in her artist's book *Proximity Machine* (2007), it is film, Nashashibi has said in the past, that most closely approximates thinking. It has the capacity to represent and editorialize simultaneously, and 16mm film in particular has an almost uncanny quality that suits her arena of consideration. Precise enough to show things as they are, it nevertheless endows them with a glimmer, a flickering instability redolent of dreams.

One might measure the shift away from the anecdotally human – a movement, one might say, towards some kind of origin story, and an expansion of Nashashibi's fascination with how society is structured to the ethereal organization of an individual's thought patterns – in two films 'about' ambassadors, whom Nashashibi sees as some kind of ne plus ultra of person-as-representation. One, simply titled *Ambassador* (2004) and co-produced with frequent collaborator Lucy Skaer, is a relatively straight, five-minute monochrome study of the British ambassador moving about his Hong Kong residence, played out on two stacked screens with the lower featuring flipped footage: a move that slightly dehumanizes the figure in particular, emphasizing his symbolic nature. Nashashibi's own film *Proximity Machines* (2007), however, takes us somewhere else entirely.

It's made up of two short films from 2004: *Juniper Set* and *Park Ambassador*. The former, on the left-hand screen, cuts between medium and close-up views of two different train seats, scrolling views out of the windows beside them suggesting that their vehicles are moving in opposite directions, forward and back. The latter, on the right, fixes on a metal, figure-like form against foliage: with outstretched tubular arms and skinny tubular legs, the thin black torso could be a human figure or, perhaps, some kind of long-horned bull. To Nashashibi, though, it's another emissary. *Proximity Machines* is a film about coincidental, half-way meaningful connections (there are neat relays between the patterns on the seats and the design of the 'ambassador') and about getting somewhere, or desiring to, via the ministrations of something or someone: within its modest but potent visual economy the metallic ambassador becomes a potential go-between of sorts, a conveying envoy from another, more 'glamorous' echelon of reality. And so the film becomes concerned not with the present moment but with deep time, archetypes and, speculatively, with what underpins our continual appetite for anthropomorphism.

*The 16mm film that Nashashbi favours is precise enough to show things as they are, yet endows them with a glimmer, a flickering instability redolent of dreams.*

And in that speculation the outside world gains discreet entry. Just as *Eyeballing* incarnated the ambient tension that demands release in the policemen themselves, so Nashashibi's works repeatedly allude to pressuring chains of command. Her two-part *Bachelor Machines* (2007) sheds interesting light on this. *Bachelor Machines I*, a 30-minute film set on a southern Italian fishing ship and broken down into short sections, attentively lays out the social stratification in this extremely male, extremely self-contained floating society, while continually shifting between documentary and a freer 'idea realm' above it. Nashashibi's editing together, for instance, of interior footage of the crew with shots of the boat's mechanics and its isolation on the sea manages to insinuate that the boat is a kind of being in itself, a machine that is 'creating' the stacked society – the loosely Duchampian 'bachelors' – within it.

The idea of dominant social 'machinery', meanwhile, is given even more emphasis in *Bachelor*

*Machines II*, a shorter, two-screen work. On the monochrome left screen the German artist Thomas Bayrle and his wife, Helke, hold hands and mouth silently on a sofa, re-enacting, at Nashashibi's behest and somewhat obscurely, a scene from Alexander Kluge's film *Artists under the Big Top: Perplexed* (1968) – a few clips from which punctuate Nashashibi's footage. Meanwhile, Bayrle's voice-over, dating from a recent lecture in Oslo, finds him delineating an abstruse but weirdly attractive personal theory that industrial technology is an extension of religion, that religious chanting, particularly the mechanical rat-a-tat of the rosary, was a machine-like incantation of desire (a sequence of explosions in a line) for the industrial age, and that this prayer was answered because the latter developed 'in the Christian space of this world' – with, says Bayrle, catastrophic results. On the right-hand screen we see earlier films by Nashashibi (*Eyeballing*, *Park Ambassador*) fuzzed out of focus, seemingly again creating a dialogue between a sharp reality and a more ideational zone.

Although she doesn't quite espouse it – Nashashibi's closest bond to anthropology remains her careful appearance of neutrality – Bayrle's Faustian guess might be the extreme and even paranoid edge of her conception of contemporary reality as a series of interlocking systems and nested hierarchies, with no actual 'outside'. (Either way, it further underlines the scope of her thought.) When we organize into groups, partly to comfort each other and protect ourselves from the depredations of the real, it's often against oppressive social hierarchies which are another form of intuitively organizing into groups – and despite the fact that self-organizing might be considered a form of self-policing, internalizing authority: a way of not being free. Furthermore, we're capable in scattered instants of glimpsing a magic that seems to exceed us. But does it really?

*Footnote* (2007) again features Helke Bayrle. She sits up in bed beside the recumbent Thomas, sedately reading a book and, in the process, inwardly shuttling between two realms. A footnote has an anterior, elective affiliation to a body text; it's assumedly clear by now what that might be analogous for. Each time Frau Bayrle reaches one, a code – the author's superscript – sends her to the bottom of the page (and, internally, somewhere else), her head dips and the film cuts to a strange, stranded image, one whose first appearance seemingly keys off the succession of mildly transformative screen washes that colour the film's subsequent span. It's a grinning ornamental frog in a garden, but it could be anything with a comparatively maverick, self-assured, disruptive aspect: what matters is that it feels tremendously phantasmal, evocative of the mind's propensity to slip its bonds and chase that other-worldliness we wouldn't want to be without, because of what we've built.

There's the rose, Nashashibi suggests; there's the thorn.


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