

DRAWING CONNECTIONS

Basma Alsharif in conversation with artist Christine Rebet on their work and how the collective is a way to affirm your position in the present.

Basma Alsharif: In my most recent piece, *Comfortable in our New Homes*, I use the concept of the "eternal return" as a way to bring together disparate landscapes and people. It's as a way of fusing the Gaza Strip with other parts of the world and to ask questions about civilisation and humanity – though fairly indirectly. This is something I do in a lot of my works (bringing disparate locations and ideas together), just as I think curiosity is a huge part of what drives my interests: wanting to find out how certain things will work together, or not. With this piece, I had a political agenda, but I also very clearly knew that I wanted to move beyond my own subjective inquiries and desires. And yet I found that impossible: how does one separate oneself from the work one makes? I'm curious to know how you think about this in your work.

Christine Rebet: I believe there's a personal take on any event. What triggers our thoughts could be both personal and political. The closer we are to a personal tale, the more collective it can become. When we start a work, I believe it's important to delve into the subject deeply to find the backbone of what matters. I understood it in making the animation *In the Soldier's Head*. I delve into the very intimate and painful subject of the traumatised psyche of a soldier during the Algerian war. The film mines the collective terrain of a colonised landscape and mind. I'm French and I've questioned the past of my country. I come from a country that has colonised many other countries. It's a reverse.

BA What do you mean a reverse?

CR It's going in reverse in the sense of observing colonisation from a different perspective. As a kid I grew up with political refugees and have developed sensitivities towards the history and origin of displacement.

BA Is it curiosity?

CR Curiosity, and I enjoy the exchange as well.

BA What made you this way?

CR It comes from my family: they taught me from a very young age to respect everybody. I never felt disconnected from kids who came from different

parts of the world.

BA You've spoken about how you're from a colonising country. In *In the Soldier's Head* you talk about your father, a soldier in Algeria who then suffered from PTSD. You reveal that you bonded with his experience when you suffered hallucinations from malaria fever, ultimately leading you to make the work you did. Can you tell me a bit more about this?

CR During the fever your body and psyche change, you almost shift into a third person. Similarly, when making an animation, your mind reaches another state. It's deep.

BA Because of the nature of animation being a slower process?

CR Because it's very repetitive and you have to commit to your subject and embrace the consequences for a long period of time. Although I'd been thinking about this work for a while, I was only predisposed to commit to it after contracting malaria. As I was hallucinating, I was somehow dispossessed from my mind and body.

BA What do you make of having had this experience in a foreign place, and not in France? I'm curious to know whether or not you needed to be removed from home in order to have such an experience.

CR I've always felt removed from my own country, as if my mind is a foreign land. I've built a second language that has been hosting my imagination.

BA I think I know what you mean. I've always felt like a stranger everywhere. It's a very deep feeling of knowing one doesn't belong anywhere because one's identity is so closely connected with the culture of the place one grows up in. But the trick is that we're all in a way foreign to the earth. These are human experiences that I imagine almost everyone has thought: why was I born to these people and why are these my siblings? Why was I born in this city or this country? How similar am I to other people here? But then, if we really think about it, we're foreign to the earth and that somehow connects us all. It may sound simple or naive, but I was after something like this in my film: to connect different histories, landscapes, people – not to say "We are the world", but just "Here we are".

CR I totally agree with all of this. I believe there's a multiplayer locus linking different places, histories and momentums together. It could be a trajectory connecting real locations with imagined spaces, real instances to fictitious ones, memory to its spectre. When I look at your work, that's what I see.

BA And yours removes time from space. We're in a space where time is no longer a function.

CR A space where time could be reassessed.

BA You started with drawings and then you morphed them into animation for *In The Soldier's Head*, right? How did this decision come about? Had you worked in animation before?

CR I'd worked in animation for about ten years. When I draw I can choose whether it's a singular narrative or a film. *In the Soldier's Head* appeared as I drew a cave entitled *Shadows of Family Tree*. The cave buried a secret. We never found the site of the hospital where my father was sent during the war. The military administration never revealed its location. From the drawing came an urgent desire to exhume the journey of my father's troubled mind and an invitation to grieve for collectively colonised minds.

BA Do you feel as if this work speaks to a certain political environment in France today?

CR Yes, it was in response to today's political environment that I started interrogating French society's denial of its colonial history. I'm interested in the fragile terrain of dispossession. I want to animate what's uncomfortable, unnameable, unspoken, whether it's trauma, violence, colonisation or domination.

BA Do you question that in your work?

CR In my own and through others. When I joined the Columbia MFA I wanted to extend film further into the subconscious of collective agency through live action, performativity and social sculpture. In an echo of the Arab Spring uprising, I constructed *The Square*, a film/monument enacting the movements of civil union and revolt found in public squares. It's a reinvented narrative of existing locations. For example, the lost and violent territory of *In the Soldier's Head* is reinvented from my father's biography. This location exists, yet its real geographical placement is unknown.

BA We can only understand where we are, based on our understanding of being the most important beings on the planet. We can only understand the earth in relation to ourselves. Even if we say that there's a vast, empty landscape that exists where there are no humans, it's still a human conception. And archaeology, the unearthing of this history, is an affirmation of our own importance: to say "*We did this.*" When people speak like this – *we* built churches, and we made pots or jewelry – you think, "*We* didn't do that. That was some other person in another space and time." A person of whom we have no true conception, and it's all in our imagination. It seems to serve

an affirmative purpose and is a desperate grasping at our own importance. And actually I think that in *In the Soldier's Head* you're using our connection to each other through trauma.

CR I think the connection I have in the film is in the form of trauma, fantasy, hallucination, dream and spectres. In early works, I borrowed those forms from the optical illusions of the pre-cinematic landscape. *In the Soldier's Head* is conceived as a deceptive apparatus to parody the hypocritical and violent machinery of the imperialist agenda. The trauma is channelled through the constant rapture and disruption of hallucinations and mirages. It's already a projection. It's both embedded in the earth and magnified as a projection, horizontal and vertical.



Christine Rebet, *In the Soldier's Head*, courtesy of the Artist and Bureau Gallery NY



Christine Rebet, *Llorando*, courtesy of the Artist and Bureau Gallery NY

BA We're much more comfortable knowing that another civilisation or nation could destroy us than thinking that we could be wiped out in the blink of an eye by a natural disaster. Palestinians were a people

before the occupation, but as far as the modern construction of “identity” is concerned, our identity is wrapped up in being oppressed by Israel. And that’s a terrible thing, but the real terror is knowing that something without logic could wipe us out and we wouldn’t be given a chance to write history books to explain why we ended up where we are.

CR The Middle East has been subject to so much destruction, war and pillage. For so many years, civilisations have built resistant traditions to survive erasure, disfiguration, colonisation. Some societies developed a belief in immutability through history, memory, public edifice. It’s so powerful. It’s because they knew that the world experiences this continuous destruction. What a terrible and horrifying fate!

BA Both in the drawing and animations, you create your own language. You make images that aren’t necessarily opaque or hard to read, but at the same time I feel like my brain is working, my eyes are actively reading both the still and moving drawings. The drawings feel like artefacts out of time, and for me, that’s very much about how we exist: in a perpetual cycle of positive and negative. The only way to survive is to forget, but forgetting means repeating the same mistakes over and over again. This is a central idea that I’m obsessed with in making my work.

CR I’m shocked to see that racism in France has become a normalised situation. Palestine is the same.

BA Yes, it’s not unique. There have been conflicts since there have been people.

CR What’s important is that we keep using our form of expression, that we sharpen our critical tools, making sure we’re still growing as part of a discursive, socio-poetic space, challenging consensus.

BA Our greatest resistance is to not martyr ourselves for our work, but to continue. In the art world, even when you have pieces that are intentionally violent or depressing, the ones that stand out for me are those with something else in them: a little bit of tooth, sarcasm, irony, or even just beauty that’s self-aware. It’s the straightforward lamenting that I’m not interested in at all. I like this about your work – that there’s this immediate pleasure, because your work is very beautiful, and that’s the first thing you see and *then* you’re brought into this other world, this other meaning. And that makes me question the experience of pleasure in an idea that’s not inherently pleasurable. For me, art doesn’t seem like the first line of resistance or activism, but it’s always felt very important because it involves more than just the first reaction. It reflects and reinvents. It may not feel as

if an artwork reaches the world beyond the museum walls, but I believe the entire process around the production of the work that brought it to the museum is as important as the final product.

CR How to address the tumult of the world? How to exorcise the memory of suffering souls? The aura of collective horror? I like to approach film as a collective monument where the after-image revives its own remnants in a poignant and eternal presence. I don’t know whether or not it’ll have an impact in the museum. I’m just thinking it’s important to come up with something that’s true, and then you’ll find out if it’s right.

BA Through how an audience engages with the work?

CR My works may be abstract and you might not understand the narrative, but I treat research and subject with passion, humour and candour. I drew my dad when he died, outlined the contour of his soul, and these delicate lines are still alive. I hope I can share this directness and awakens in my films.

BA Do you think of it as a collective experience? In my mind, the collective produces an awareness of oneself. A collective where everything is shared is a false idea, or can only be temporary because it relies too much on the individual to make it work. But collectives happen all over the place, without intentionality, and it’s when collectivity is hindered that we suffer. I think about art in the same way, I guess – in its interconnectedness with everything.

CR I like to think of it as a kinetic monument addressing a transforming contemporaneity. We have all sorts of live collective exchange.

BA The collective is also a way to affirm your position in the present.

CR Wherever you are, especially now, you have to learn how to survive through the present.



Christine Rebet, *Shadow From Family Tree*, courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.