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## INTERVIEW: Sylvia Safdie's Ephemeral Video Work

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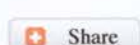
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(A still from Sylvia Safdie's "The Guardian")

Artist **Sylvia Safdie** creates video work evocative of paintings in motion, using light and duration to capture elemental nature and human history in flux. **BLOUIN ARTINFO Canada** spoke with Safdie about her new exhibition, "Amzrou/Morocco," at Montreal's **Joyce Yahouda Gallery** (transformed into a dark, four-roomed space to reflect the meditative worlds of Safdie's work), featuring four revisited and looped video pieces from her 2009 series shot in Morocco: a section of "Amzrou Synagogue Interiors" and full-length projections of "Dust," "Morning," and "The Guardian."

**We see the passage of time in your work in the stillness of the camera and the looping video, rather than in quick edits or effects – the images have a meditative, painterly stillness even though they are in motion. "Dust," in**

**particular, (wherein a steady, bright, natural light falls on a dusty nook in an thousands-year-old rock wall), could be on a canvas rather than a screen. What is your approach to capturing moments within the passage of time?**

The passage of time is in the very nature of video, as it's a time-based media, but in my work, there is also a sense that, as in speaking, our minds move ahead of us yet retain the memory of what has passed. Replaying what I shoot, over and over again, and looping my work in exhibition lets an image become more imprinted in the mind but can also let us see things we wouldn't see the first time. When looking at the work here that is focused on dust, we see how the dust moves within itself, how it floats. That can't be absorbed in one fleeting moment.

**The videos in "Amzrou/Morocco" are shot in a 2500-year-old synagogue in the Sahara Desert in Southern Morocco. How are you bringing that site-specific past into the present, connecting it to the future, and still honoring it for what it was during its time?**

There's definitely an honoring of the past, but I don't want to romanticize that. I chose this subject matter because in 1992, I was traveling in Morocco and came across a Jewish cemetery in a very small village. It was part of a garbage heap, but it was fascinating. Tombstones were lying on the ground in an organic way that echoed the shape of the body, round and rectilinear, and growing around them were tree roots and wildflowers. Seeing this, I realized how this cemetery would become a part of nature in time, which brought me back to thinking about my own history. I come from a Syrian-Jewish background, and none of my family lives in our place of origin and none of us will return there. What happens when a society that has lived in a place for all those years — in Syria for 3000 years, in that area of Morocco for 2500 years — leaves, and what is then left behind?

When I returned to that place over the [next few years], I saw the process of material breaking apart, history being absorbed by nature, and life continuing on. The synagogue this exhibition is based on was used as an oven for a long time, and the community lives in the old homes and uses the old tools of Jewish craft work. The dust returns to the ground and becomes an evolution of something else, maybe part of a building one day or simply part of the ground on which things grow. For me, what's important is to move from exploring the very personal to thinking about it in more universal terms. If we look at the world, how many communities don't exist in their place of origin? Sometimes they were forced to leave, sometimes they wanted to seek fortune elsewhere, but this is the history of the world and it goes on

**You only began using video as a medium in 2001, focusing on painting, drawing, and sculpture before that, yet similar themes come up throughout the body of your work. What is your relationship to the video camera, as a tool and an extension of your eye?**

My work has always related to nature and movement, chance, reflection, refraction, life, and death. I've also always been interested in the relationship between culture and nature. The camera can move as close or as far away from the subject as I want and can see what the eye can't capture. I work with framing a scene and leaving the camera there, stationary, which permits me to move in and out of the work and be a part of it. I would never have believed how the dust moved in the synagogue, but the camera revealed it. Being behind the camera lets me observe and gives me distance, but in giving me distance it also brings me closer to the subject. We talk about distancing as not being involved, but here it permits me to really focus. Whereas once I would have collected material from places all over the world for my work, such as stones, now I collect instances, footage that reveals what I saw or experienced. It's much more ephemeral.

**It's interesting that you talk about the ephemeral because in Eric Lewis's new monograph, "The Video Art of Sylvia Safdie" (McGill-Queen's University Press), he writes that video is in a sense a performance art because it unfolds in time. What do you think of that idea and of yourself being a part of an ephemeral performance?**

It's an interesting way of putting it. There is an aspect to video that I think is improvisational and maybe from that perspective it's performance. I've also worked with improvisational musicians, such as **Lori Freedman, Joe McPhee, Malcolm Goldstein**, and I think there is an aspect of performance in the work I've done with them. Thinking about the environments on screen in this exhibition, the dust in motion and the woman with the baby who is washing the ground with a pail in "Morning," they do appear to perform. Though I always wonder what the woman would think if she knew that someone captured that moment in her life, something she probably does every day.

**Your work explores the intersections of human civilization and the natural world of which we are a part, even when we try to control it. Just as nature breaks apart, the human-built structures and the human figures in your video work experience a natural disintegration as well. How do you convey the human within nature in your work?**

The architecture of Morocco seen in this exhibition is so much a part of the vernacular: the

materials come from the earth, the forms echo nature, the holes in the wall filter sunlight in, and it's all very close to human-scale. To me, culture is when man intervenes with nature. In my series of works "Earth Marks," I fill large surfaces with tiny figures, which are a gesture. We leave thousands of gestures behind with every moment of our lives, within a second they evaporate. In a way, the dust particles in the video work echo that "Earth Marks" not as human-like figures but as a life force. The present connects us always to the future and the past — it's just the way we live, the way the mind works. For the piece "Morning," I was standing in a huge, dark pathway that felt as if it were in the Middle Ages, and I was about to turn the camera off. The woman [in the video] appears for only a moment, like a mirage or phantom, in the opening to what I was told was the *mellah*, the Jewish quarters. "Morning" captures both those ephemeral gestures we as human beings make, and the gesture of what we make out of the ephemeral moment itself.

**Yet your process of filming has duration to it — how long do you spend filming an image and how physical is that act?**

I might focus on one image for an hour even though I may only use a short section of it in the end, but it all becomes part of the experience I've undergone. It's very physical and takes discipline because even in leaving the camera stationary, I'm still looking at the image it's capturing as well as seeing more around it. I don't go out with a preconceived idea: I arrive somewhere and I let what's in front of me dictate what I'm going to do, often by chance. But I think we have to be ready for those moments to capture us.

In a way, video changed the way I looked at the world. In "Invisible Cities," Italo Calvino writes that what we seize upon goes beyond the image, has symbolic meaning to us: "You walk for days among trees and among stones. Rarely does the eye light on a thing, and then only when it has recognized that thing as the sign of another thing: a print in the sand indicates the tiger's passage; a marsh announces a vein of water; the hibiscus flower, the end of winter. All the rest is silent and interchangeable; trees and stones are only what they are." And while trees and stones are only what they are, and dust is only dust, they all have their own inner forces and life lines that tell us so much about the world. And that is what moves me and talks to me in my work.



**TAGS**

Visual Arts Sylvia Safdie Joyce Yahouda Gallery Eric Lewis Lori Freedman Joe McPhee  
Malcolm Goldstein Montreal

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