

# Bill Brownstein: Ashes to ashes, dust to art

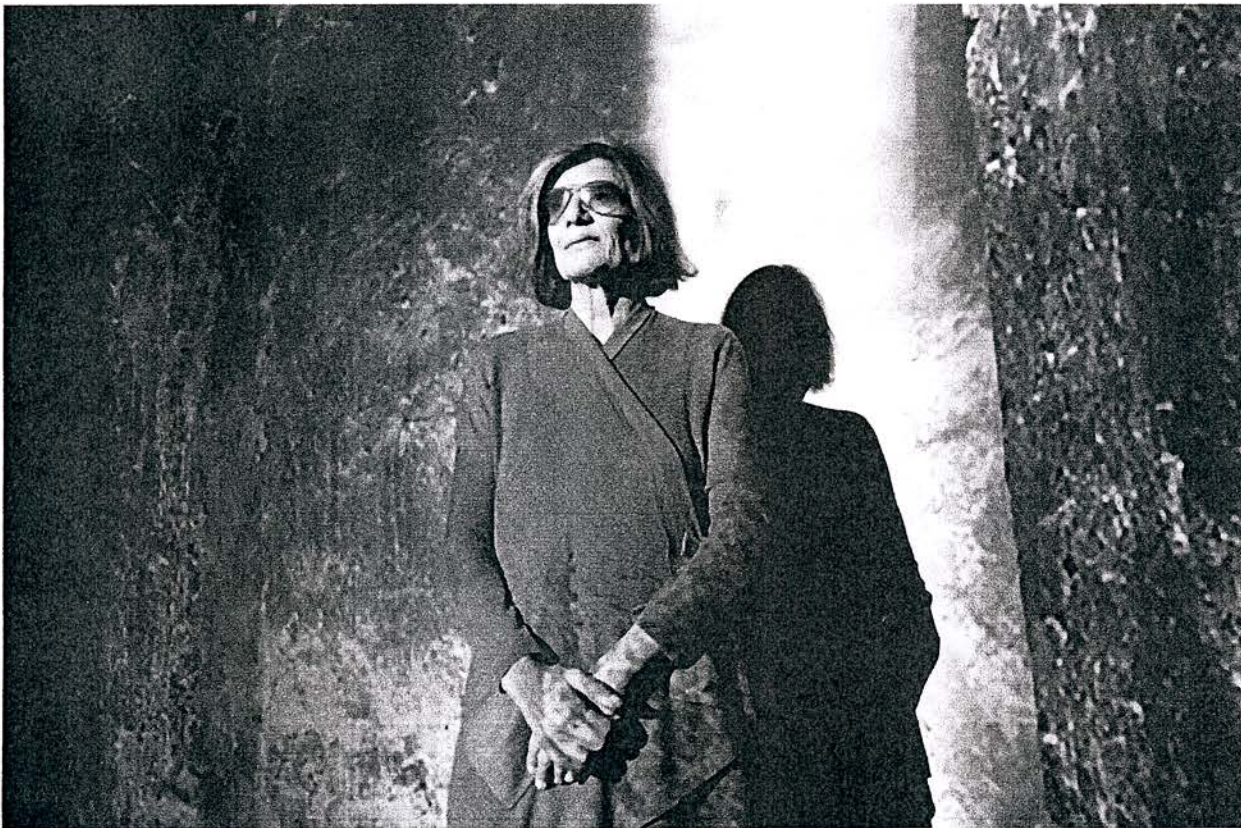
**‘I don’t think I could have hit a better image than the dust,’ video artist Sylvia Safdie says. ‘It has such a transformative quality of what was and what will be’**

By Bill Brownstein, The Gazette September 11, 2013

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**“The fact that I worked as a painter and in installation art for so many years really had an impact as to how I use a camera,” Sylvia Safdie says.**

**Photograph by: Marie-France Coallier , The Gazette**

MONTREAL — First impression is that the thousands of dark moving dots on the screen are shots of humans scurrying around an urban jungle. No, they’re schools of fish in the sea. No, they’re trees swaying gently in a forest.



Wrong on all counts. They are images of minuscule particles of dust, illuminated by a surreal stream of light that looks like it's emanating from some sort of crack in the universe. In fact, it is emanating from a crack in the roof of a centuries-old building in a small village called Amzrou, on the edge of the Sahara desert in southern Morocco.

So begins this video odyssey of Montreal artist Sylvia Safdie's latest exhibition, *Amzrou/Morocco*, at the Joyce Yahouda Gallery. Visitors can take in Safdie's stunning voyage, in four video installations as well as her accompanying photos and drawings throughout the gallery.

The wonder of it all is that visitors have no clue what they are seeing until making their way, in the dark, through the four rooms, each with its own screen. The intrigue intensifies until the end.

Safdie had been travelling regularly through Morocco over the years and only after arriving by chance in this remote location did she learn that it had been home to a significant Jewish population for more than 2,500 years. The last of those families left in 1958. The ancient building in which she ended up and where she shot turned out to have been an abandoned synagogue, still bearing small traces of its prior existence.

"When I actually use my camera, I never have any preconceived idea of what I'm going to do," explains Safdie, whose compelling work is the subject of Eric Lewis's newly published tome, *The Video Art of Sylvia Safdie*. "I usually get engaged with what's in front of me. In the words of James Joyce, I'm like a man who stumbles and my foot strikes something, and that is exactly what I need."

And that's what happened to Safdie on one of her first visits to southern Morocco in 1992. She and her husband stumbled upon an ancient Jewish cemetery by accident.

"The cemetery had become part of a massive garbage heap," she recalls. "What was so interesting was that it was very organic in nature. Roots of trees and wild flowers were growing through the tombs. At the head of some were stones engraved with names. I realized that in time it would all be absorbed by nature."

In addition to planting creative seeds, it also revealed to Safdie part of her own history. Her parents both came from Aleppo in Syria, which had a rich Jewish history going back 3,000 years, yet one which Safdie felt unable to explore. "But this really provoked me to learn something about my past," says Safdie, who was born in Lebanon, spent her childhood in Israel and moved to Montreal, with her family, when she was 11. "I couldn't go back to Syria, but being there in Morocco gave me the same sense of my history."

Safdie, the sister of renowned Habitat 67 architect Moshe Safdie, later undertook intensive research on that Sahara region of Morocco and the people who had inhabited it. "Regardless, I had no idea that this village of Amzrou even existed when we went back years later. We just happened to be on our way through the Sahara. Someone suggested we take in this place that was right out of the Middle Ages. We walked through this long, dark pathway and ended up in this synagogue. It had all this vital energy with streams of light pouring through holes in the ceiling."

Safdie set up her camera. Looking through the lens, she was startled to see this massive field of dust, through a stream of light, undetectable to her eyes.

"I have always been fascinated by the relationship between culture and nature. I'm interested in the lifeline of the object I'm filming. I don't think I could have hit a better image than the dust. It has such a transformative quality of what was and what will be."

Safdie's work has always had a meditative quality. Her video installations certainly bring this out. For

much of her career, however, she focused on more static media — paintings, drawings, sculptures photos, which have been widely displayed throughout Canada, the U.S., South America, Europe and Asia. It wasn't until she was 60, in 2002, that she first started to dabble in video art. The timing was particularly opportune, since Safdie had developed an allergy to some painting materials.

“If somebody would have told me that I would start doing video back then, I would have thought they were crazy,” says Safdie, who still occasionally paints. “Then I had this idea that I wanted to capture the essence of life in my work, that maybe video could help me to explore that.

“The fact that I worked as a painter and in installation art for so many years really had an impact as to how I use a camera. I frame like a painter, and what's in front of me is like a moving painting. But once I frame what I want, the camera doesn't move. Otherwise, I wouldn't see its transformative quality. Video, in its essence, is time-based.”

A friend taught Safdie the basics of video production. And with a little experimentation, the concept took hold. It was like an epiphany.

“I love the concentration that comes with video. It can be so soothing, fulfilling and magical,” she notes. “You can also play it over and over and discover things you didn't see the first time. The beauty of video is that it can really seize the moment. Plus, it's just so accessible.”

*Sylvie Safdie's Amzrou/Morocco video installations are on display until Oct. 5 at the Joyce Yahouda Gallery, 372 Ste-Catherine St. W., Suite 516. Details: 514-875-2323 or [joyceyahoudagallery.com](http://joyceyahoudagallery.com). Eric Lewis's *The Video Art of Sylvia Safdie* (McGill-Queen's University Press, \$55) is available at bookstores.*

[bbrownstein@montrealgazette.com](mailto:bbrownstein@montrealgazette.com)

Twitter: [billbrownstein](https://twitter.com/billbrownstein)

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