

CANADIANART

Althea Thauberger: Faraways

SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY, TORONTO JAN 26 TO MAR 3 2012

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Althea Thauberger "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" 2012
Installation detail

The towering Himalayan peaks and pristine Kashmir valleys of northern India may seem especially distant in the doldrums of a grey, mid-winter Toronto season. But a vicarious escape to a part of that foreign idyll is closer than you might think thanks to the Vancouver artist Althea Thauberger.

Thauberger's latest work, a monumental photo mural titled "Who is it that can tell me who I am?", provides a multi-layered, if slightly surreal, look at a Kashmiri village in the midst of a performance of *King Lear*. Running the full length of one wall of Susan Hobbs Gallery, the billboard-scale work is fantastically immersive. Village spectators and theatrical players alike are rendered with piercing clarity at near life-size, an effect that

seems to intermittently invite viewers into the scene while setting up a complex teeter-totter between subject and object, viewer and viewed.

Walking the length of the photo—a composite of four key scenes from the play—also defies a single point of view, instead offering various thematic entry points to the Shakespearean narrative of corruption and catastrophe, and in turn into the conflicted history and everyday life of the region. It's a play on perspective that continues in the gallery's upstairs space, where Thauberger's new series of photo prints from 1930s glass negatives of a nudist camp offer a mirror-like counterpoint to "Who is it...", questioning ideas of performance, privilege and spectatorship.

Last week, Thauberger took some time out from a new project underway in Prague for a telephone interview to expand on the themes in both works, and to talk about the personal and colonial influences on her Kashmir project.

Bryne McLaughlin: Your latest work is a billboard-sized photo-mural composed of images you shot this past December in a village in Kashmir as part of your 2011 Grange Prize residency in India. This wasn't your first visit to India, but did you have Kashmir specifically in mind for a new project?

Althea Thauberger: I went to India as a 20-year-old in 1991. It was my first trip abroad and I went to discover Eastern spirituality—you know, the typical young backpacker kind of thing. And of course it was a very intense experience. I was in India for five or six months, often by myself. There was a lot of soul searching and I was extremely broke.

When I was there, I really wanted to go to Kashmir but it was completely closed to tourists. I did get permits to Assam, Nagaland, Sikkim and other places that were considered conflict zones at the time, but Kashmir was off limits. That left me with a sort of vivid regret for the past 20 years.

So when I had the opportunity to travel to India thanks to being a finalist for the Grange Prize, I immediately knew that I wanted to go to Kashmir. It wasn't so much because I wanted to make a work there; I had already travelled to India long before I thought that I would be able to be an artist. In a way it's kind of a cliché, this foreigners' imaginary of Kashmir. But I was interested now to think about what it means and to have some sort of relation to that.

BM: What do you mean by "it's a cliché"?

AT: Well, it's an incredibly beautiful place. There are these massive, fecund valleys surrounded by snow-capped peaks. Many people would describe it as heaven on earth. The people are incredibly beautiful and hospitable. They're complicated, wonderful people.

For a long time, up until the beginning of the militancy in 1989 and 1990, it was a very popular tourist destination. Of course all of that changed. But for decades, tourists had flocked to Kashmir and stayed on these incredible houseboats on Dal Lake, and would go trekking and skiing and all kinds of things.

So that idea of Kashmir as a peaceful, beautiful destination is something that ceased to become a reality for most people. To a large degree, it's now an imaginary place.

BM: Almost like a forbidden paradise?

AT: Yes, something like that. But that's not to say that tourists can't go there now; they can and do. But there are just so few international tourists; the vast majority are Indian. It is still a conflict zone. It's intensely militarized, the most militarized place—in the sense of the scale and normalization of the militarism—that I've ever been. That includes Palestine, and even Afghanistan.



Althea Thauberger "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" 2012 Installation view

BM: How did you link up with the theatre troupe that you collaborated with for "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" What's the background of this kind of theatre?

AT: I had already been researching them before arriving. I had local colleagues who helped me a lot and put me in touch with local directors and this particular Bhand Pather troupe.

The tradition of Bhand Pather is something you're born into, almost like the Roma. There are similar groups all over the Indian subcontinent. Bhand Pather is the traditional Kashmiri form, and it had been a kind of class of nomadic performers who trained from an early age and would travel from village to village and town to town doing these very complex memorized scripts. Nothing was written.

It also included a lot of improvisation depending on who they encountered, what their audiences were, if there were particular local issues that were pertinent to that site, et cetera. The form itself is one that includes carnivalesque music as well as very bawdy, satirical and unpredictable actions that, from what I've read and know, traditionally deal with power relations as a subject. Often these plays are dealing with historical occupations, which is very interesting given that Kashmir has been so often subject to the rule of empire from outside.

BM: Are these performances framed in the tradition of Indian mythological classics?

AT: Not at all. It's very vernacular, very much its own distinct form.

BM: So what brought you and your Bhand Pather collaborators to *King Lear*?

AT: They were working on a number of productions, including an adapted version of *King Lear* that had been commissioned by the Delhi-based theatre director M.K. Raina, who is very well known in India and who has been working towards reviving the form, as it has been suppressed for the last 20 years. So they had already done this production.

The day that I visited the entire group at one of their rehearsals it happened that they were working on this adaption of *Lear*. Our shoot was the next day. After the rehearsal, we sat down and had a group meeting to decide what we were going to do. Of course, it was natural to work with *King Lear*.

It wasn't my decision, and it isn't something that I could have imagined putting them to; it was something that they had already been requested to do. They had never actually worked with scripts before, only their traditional works, or works that they had been asked to do by local officials. So they'd never worked with historical scripts; they'd never worked

with classics as such. That was quite interesting to me. They had been asked to do a Bhand Pather adaptation of a Hindi translation of a Shakespeare play. It's very fraught. There are so many levels of—I wouldn't say imperialism, that's too strong, but a questioning of bases of power.

BM: In the end, the image depicts four different scenes from the play. Were those scene choices intentional or practical?

AT: We did two versions of the entire panorama showing different moments from the play in each one. All of those scenes were chosen together with the actors and the local directors. We thought about what some of the pivotal moments were in the play and how it would be possible for us to put all of them together at one time. If there were two scenes that incorporated the same character, we had to choose one of them. The same character couldn't be here and there at the same time.

So the work was made with those kinds of pragmatic criteria in mind, as well as trying to think of scenes that were somehow important to the performer's understanding of the narrative. It had to do with what they thought, and what I also thought, was going to be compelling. Of course, in the end, I had to choose between the two photos. One of the films got accidentally exposed in transit. So my decision was made for me.

BM: The final work is a composite of five images shot with a large-format camera. Why did you choose to work with film as opposed to digitally, and what was involved?

AT: It was definitely an ordeal lugging all of that gear around. I had to make all of the technical decisions myself, as well as direct the shoot and work in a very chaotic environment. So I guess I'm not surprised I lost some film. You make one mistake in all of that, and before you know it, you've lost the whole shoot.

At the same time, if I'd shot in any other format, I wouldn't have been able to have that kind of image detail and clarity to make it into the mural. So I knew in order to accomplish something like that, I had to shoot on 8-by-10 or larger.

BM: I wanted to talk a bit about the installation. Susan Hobbs Gallery is a former salvage shop, and the main gallery space is long and narrow with a high ceiling, which obviously limits the kind of work that can be shown. I was told you had this exact space in mind for this project, that squeezing this mural or billboard-sized image into the tight gallery space was very intentional. How so?

AT: Yes, it is a challenging space. But I really wanted to work with the fact that if you are going to try to use that entire wall, you're not going to be able to have any kind of viewing distance—you won't be able to see the entire scene at one time.

That makes the work even more episodic, I think, moving through the scenes and moving through the actions and engaging somehow with the figures that are depicted. It makes it a little bit more personal and it reveals itself over time. Duration becomes an important aspect of viewing it. Time in relation to photography and film work is something that I'm always thinking about. So that was something that I was trying to bring out.

BM: Yes, considering the scale of the image—the figures in the image are nearly life-size—you do get the feeling that you are moving across and into the image at different points. The gallery said that it's a 180-degree perspective?

AT: Yes, exactly.

BM: So the perspective seems to skew and shift. It's not as if it's distorted, but it defies a straight-forward viewing.

AT: I guess the distortion would be in the illusion that you're seeing a linear scene, when in fact it's a semi-circular scene. If the work were to be installed on a semi-circular wall, then you would have a sense of the correct orientation of the buildings. Because it was shot in many different exposures, and the exposures overlap each other, you don't have that kind of blended distortion. The effect is quite different than what you might get with a traditional panoramic camera.

BM: In the upstairs gallery, you're showing a suite of black-and-white snapshots of members of a nudist colony printed from vintage glass plate negatives. What's the correlation between the two works?



Althea Thauberger *Recovered Gelatin Print (Unknown American Nudist Colony no. 9)*

AT: I think there are connections. I can say that there are particular relations to histories and the position that the viewer is caught in relation to those histories.

Of course, the depiction of the body and the sense of self-presentation to the camera is something that's important to all of my work, and I think there are similarities and obviously quite strong differences here. To consider them in the same space is something I was interested in.

One is very Western. There's a lot of privilege embedded in the nudist images, they seem to exude privilege in a way. These are people of European descent who have probably chosen to become part of this naturalist cultural movement and who are placing themselves in relation to an ideal of nature and social spheres that they have brought into existence through that movement.

That's something very different to the kind of relations that you see in the other image. Of course, in the nudist images you imagine that the photographer was one of the group, so there's a very different sense of the relation to the person who is actually responsible for the images coming into being and the relation of the subjects to that person.

In the case of *"Who is it..."*, it's me, I'm the Westerner, I'm the person with camera, I'm the person of privilege. The regard that meets that is very different. The gazes are bouncing around. I was interested in the reactions people would have. In the nudist images, there's a very subtle sense of performing their culture and their comfort with their nudity.

BM: As a viewer, you're definitely required to ask questions about the performances and performers in each of the works. In the nudist series, one might assume that these are private photos.

AT: I don't know. They well could be, but I still puzzle through that. They could have been documentation for the purpose of distribution among the group, or of that summer retreat. Of course, that's personal, but it's also historical. There's a sense of that in them, for me.

BM: How did you come across these vintage glass negatives?

AT: I bought them on eBay. I've been buying glass negatives for years, collecting them, I guess, not really knowing what to do with them. This is the first time that I've exhibited work I've made from them. It's the first of what I now know will be a series with glass negatives.

BM: In past works, you've collaborated with real people in making these stage-like scenarios, from teenagers to female soldiers in Afghanistan. In *"Who is it that can tell me who I am?"* and in the project you're currently working on in Prague, your collaborators are actors. What's the difference in working with people who are actors and working with "normal, everyday" people?

AT: Well, even when I've worked with actors who are professionals, like the Bhand Pather troupe or the people I'm working with now in Prague, it doesn't mean that I'm not interested in depicting (or that it isn't also important to depict) the actor who's acting—the actor as a person in the world who has an identity and associations, who has made certain kinds of decisions and who has a story in addition to the role that is being played or depicted. That's of course much more on the surface when you're working with non-professionals, where the real-world bit is much more easily discernable. For example, for this work I'm doing in Prague, the actors will be interviewed as part of the work, and they'll talk about their roles and the decisions that they've made. So performers are just that; they are people who are playing in the world, positioned in the real.