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Saelan Twerdy on Althea Thauberger



Althea Thauberger's latest major work is a large-scale photomural that documents re-enacted scenes from a public performance of *King Lear* by a Bhand Pather theater group in the Kashmiri village of Akingam. In its current installation at Susan Hobbs Gallery, it sprawls from wall to wall and floor to ceiling along one side of the gallery's main space, bursting with a colourful profusion of figures who confront the viewer at nearly life-size. Its title, "*Who Is It That Can Tell Me Who I Am?*" is a quotation from Shakespeare's play, but it names a preoccupation that is central to Thauberger's oeuvre as whole: who is the author of the roles we must play?

Her work, which revolves around developing and documenting creative projects with specific communities of participants, often uses performance as a vehicle for dramatizing the mechanics of relations between individuals and the larger collective units (families, cultures, nations) to which they belong. In dramas that they co-create, Thauberger's subjects play allegorical versions of themselves. Appearing before her lens as they wish to be seen, they are caught between the sincerity of their own convictions and the detachment that comes with self-awareness. Naturally, this can be an awkward position, and it has made some of Thauberger's works controversial – despite the co-authorship she grants them, she has on occasion been accused of exploiting her subjects.

In her early works, Thauberger made this ambiguity, awkwardness, and discomfort her main themes by focusing on youth and adolescence. In their own ways, *Songstress* (2002), *A Memory Lasts Forever* (2004), and *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt* (2006) all represent the "transition from powerless adolescent to autonomous adult," as one commentator put it. The dramatic action of these film works is the traumatic process of self-discovery through individuation, in which Thauberger's young actors struggle to define themselves in relation to their community, whether it be the adult world (*A Memory Lasts Forever*), the civil state (*Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt*), or the industry of pop culture (*Songstress*). In their inevitable amateurism, these works demonstrate that self-presentation is, to some extent, always theatrical, always predictable. Despite our relative freedom and our desire to distinguish ourselves, we are nevertheless constrained by certain limitations. Again and again, we find ourselves, often against our will, playing roles that strike us as intolerably cliché, pre-scripted, corny, or melodramatic.

But these are the vicissitudes of individuality. In her more recent works, Thauberger's interest has moved away, thematically, from the conflicts of young people trying to find their place in the world and towards groups of adults in situations of conflict -- in fact, the majority of her recent projects have involved communities involved with or affected by military actions. *The Art of Seeing Without Being Seen* aroused controversy when it was displayed at the University of British Columbia's Koerner Library in 2008. The piece, a large-scale photomural almost as big as "*Who Is It That Can Tell Me Who I Am?*", depicted a group of Canadian soldiers re-enacting a military exercise in a fake Afghan village (actually in B.C.). Guns in hand, they confront the viewer at life-size, as if you were their target. Whether the work was pro- or anti-war was a topic

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of much consternation, but while her work may be politically loaded, Thauberger is not interested in making art that can be reduced to a slogan. Rather, by working *with* groups of people in fraught situations, she is able to give visual form to complex human bonds that can too easily disappear when reduced to abstract issues of power and ideology.

Though her latest work is her first artistic venture into a non-Western culture (something she says she wouldn't have been comfortable with earlier in her career), her commitment to avoiding reductive positions remains. Learning that Bhand Pather theater is a satirical form that blends traditional stories with improvisation to comment on current politics, and then finding that Bhand Pather has been suppressed in Kashmir since the beginning of the militancy and military crackdown over 20 years ago, one might assume that a staging of *King Lear* in Kashmir by such a troupe would be a resistant act. But, as with most of Thauberger's works, "*Who Is It That Can Tell Me Who I Am?*" does not lead viewers by the hand to any particular reading. Instead, it presents a riot of incident and pageantry, and a complex play of gestures and gazes worthy of a 19th-century history painting. What we encounter is a web of cultural negotiations that can't be easily untangled: a Canadian artist documenting a Kashmiri adaptation of a Hindi translation of a canonical English play about disputed territory, in a disputed territory.

In the outdoor scene of the village square in which the play is being performed, ringed by brick houses with thatch and tin roofs, a large group of onlookers has gathered. Apparently, their curiosity has been drawn more by the photography than the play, since the majority of the several-dozen figures in the image (including the actors) are looking at the camera. Their reactions vary. Some of the children look bored or glum, or challenging, as do some of their mothers – a woman in an orange headscarf on the upper left looks particularly displeased, as if she was examining someone in order to determine why they smell so bad. Other are laughing or smiling. The actors (incidentally all men, even those in traditionally female roles, just as in Shakespeare's era) are enjoying themselves: Sikander (Edmund) grins and grimaces on the ground as he is "fatally stabbed," mugging cheerfully for the camera. One woman in a turquoise scarf appears to be taking a picture of her own, pointing her mobile phone in the direction of the viewer.

The image itself is so large that taking it all in at once is impossible. Instead, one looks at it episodically as one proceeds along the panorama. In fact, the picture depicts several scenes from the play, combined digitally so as to appear synchronous. It is also relevant that, while the staging of the photo was a collaborative effort, the production of the play itself preceded Thauberger's arrival. Despite the sophisticated staging and digital collage that went into it, "*Who Is It That Can Tell Me Who I Am?*" has more in common with "straight" documentary and journalistic photography than most of her previous works. Moreover, the actors this time are professionals performing a classic (if adapted) text rather than amateurs acting out a work of their own co-creation -- though of course the picture is also full of village onlookers who "play" themselves for the viewer's benefit. This work is thus one of Thauberger's most hands-off creations in terms of her negotiations with its subjects (perhaps appropriate to her outsider status), even though it is among her richest and densest visually.

This hands-off approach is also mirrored in the suite of small, black-and-white photographs in the upper gallery, though otherwise they differ in almost every way from "*Who Is It That Can Tell Me Who I Am?*". Collectively titled *Recovered Gelatin Dry Plates (Unknown American Nudist Colony)* ca. 1935/2012, these prints were produced from scans of the titular glass plates, which Thauberger purchased on ebay. The pictures, taken by an unknown photographer, show groups of men, women, and children at leisure in indoor and outdoor settings, all nude, though Thauberger's prints are victim to the chemical decay of the original plates, resulting in blotchy stains and corrosions of the images that are often striking in their organic complexity and necrotic beauty. Small-scale while "*Who Is It That Can Tell Me Who I Am?*" is huge, black-and-white while the latter is vibrantly polychrome, found while the other is painstakingly constructed, corroded and worn instead

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of professionally finished, and historically distant rather than contemporary, these photos nevertheless share Thauberger's preoccupation with the relation of the individual to the community and the world.

While present-day Kashmir offers us a spectacle of globalized cultural exchange in the face of territorial struggle, these nudist colony snapshots present an Edenic vision of a community that has isolated itself in order to enjoy a utopian existence of holistic naturalism. It is tempting to imagine that these Americans, when they face the camera for a casual portrait, arms linked, smiling wholesomely (or knowingly), are absolutely themselves, shameless and without mediation. At the same time, in an image of nude aerobics showing heroically fit bodies with arms extended upwards, balanced on their toes (some barefoot, some in socks or canvas sneakers), one woman seems to suppress a laugh, hinting at an awareness of the inherent ridiculousness of corporeality in its flopping, fleshy glory.



Still, many of these images possess a haunting innocence that derives from the subjects' seeming ignorance of the camera and freedom from self-consciousness. In certain classically pastoral shots, men and women lounge in grassy areas while processions of their carefree fellow nudists wind in a row towards a shadowy wood (or out of it, towards the foreground). In the last image in the series, a single woman surrounded by foliage turns away from the camera, reaching up, palms out, towards a leafy branch – perhaps grasping for an unseen fruit or absorbed in a prayer of nature worship. Like all of these pictures, however, this one is corrupted by spots of blooming darkness that suggest the irrecoverable nature of any past paradise. This is most dramatic in the first image, in which a stern middle aged man, emerging from a stand of trees, raises his left arm in a bold fist only to be consumed from the chest down by a flowering cloud of chemical pollution – a *vanitas* image even more potent than the juxtaposition of young and old naked bodies.

Of course, while we cannot recover the past, nor any real or mythical state of perfectly harmonious coexistence, Thauberger's works demonstrate that we can, however provisionally, recover the *images* of history – which is all the more reason to be attentive in our documentation of the present. Furthermore, her works show that performance and representation not only mirror our real-life acts of self-presentation and role-play, but help to articulate those acts: to clarify their stakes and make their consequences and participants more visible and present. Some roles we must write ourselves; others are imposed upon us. Whichever kind we face, Thauberger's art reminds us that we do not mount the stage alone.