



## HORIZONS OF TRANSCENDENCE

The horizon is a primordial image. Human beings have seen them for as long as we have existed on earth. The term comes from the ancient Greeks, who used one of their words for limit (*horizein*) to designate the line between earth and sky. To look at the horizon is to see directly that we dwell *in a world*, but also that something *transcends* it. And yet, because the horizon can only be seen in the distance, and because it is often obscured, it is necessarily in the background of what is present to us. Indeed, the concept of horizon has, in modern times, come to mean something like *background* or *range* or *field*, as when we speak of a horizon of possibility or of events as unfolding within a horizon. Horizons thus serve as a reminder that all things are perceptible only against a less evident, but no less potentially visible, background.

If there is one, common visual motif in the pieces gathered together at the Koffler Gallery for this exhibition of Isabel Rocamora’s film work,<sup>1</sup> it is the image of a uniformed body performing choreographed movements against a stark, horizontally-oriented background (often with an actual horizon in the frame). In *Portrait in Time and Gesture* (2005), we see a full body shot of a woman in a dark gown performing in front of a bare, efflorescent, stone wall; at the core of *Horizon of Exile* (2007) are scenes of two women in black robes and head-coverings whose choreographed movements are set within vast desert landscapes; meanwhile, *Body of War* (2010) presents groups of male soldiers fighting and training in sparse beaches, plains and concrete runways; *Faith* (2015), finally, depicts three men in vestments enacting their respective prayer rituals against austere, desert mountain ranges.

By going to these barren spaces, Rocamora’s films withdraw from the worlds we habitually inhabit and foreground the presence/absence of our backgrounds. In doing so, however, they are not simply escapist or otherworldly; they do not aim at a protected stasis beyond the turmoil of the world. On the contrary, these films engage deeply with many of the most pressing issues of our times: female identity, the status of women within authoritative societies, masculinity and violence, the conflicts among the Abrahamic monotheisms, the place of religion within modernity, and the possibility of cosmopolitanism. If these films retreat from the world, then, it is a *conceptual* retreat. Unlike, say, Cindy Sherman or Suzy Lake, who catalogue different identities held by women over time, show how these are a construct of representation, that such representations are internalized by women, and that this process casts doubt on the existence of any “true self,” Rocamora is more concerned with what the world and ourselves must be like in order for these processes to occur. Her works strip the world and its subjects of some of their defining and confining traits (retreat from Latin *re-trait*) in order to disclose something about their natures: that they do not *have to be* the way they are, that they have it in themselves to be otherwise.

This kind of conceptual retreat is evident in embryonic form in *Portrait in Time and Gesture* (2005). Calling itself a portrait, the film itself adopts certain techniques and features of classic portraiture: its subject is framed frontally, at eye level, and stares directly into the camera.<sup>2</sup> However, where classic portraits bring forward (*por*) the traits of their subjects (*trait*), as if the traits *were there*, inhering in the subject’s being, Rocamora’s filmic portrait largely strips her subject and her world of their identifying traits and, instead, brings



forward what is, in a sense, *behind* their identities: the temporal, performative and omissive nature of identity (time and gesture). The *mise-en-scène* and sound design deprive us of any but the barest identifying traits. The subject’s full body coverings suggest she’s religious, perhaps an Orthodox Jew or a Christian nun, in what could be a place of prayer or worship (distant church bells can be heard). It is tempting to see her, as feminism long regarded devout women, as simply oppressed by patriarchy.<sup>3</sup> But the cinematography and editing disclose something different. The film consists exclusively of two identically framed, superimposed shots. In each shot, the woman appears translucent as she performs a distinct series of movements. The two shots combined produce a single choreography, within which the woman both departs from and returns to herself, appearing at times pious, reverential and fearful, as well as irreverent and defiant, only occasionally leading to the appearance of unity, opacity and full presence. As much as her identity is bound to her background, who she is, fundamentally, is the rifts and the gaps, the act of performance taking place, within herself. Following philosopher Judith Butler’s theories on gender,<sup>4</sup> we might say that even for this devotee to be subservient within patriarchy, she still must perform a *role*, even if she, in part, internalizes and identifies with it. But if the role must be *performed* and *identified with*, then it is not endemic to who she is.

Rocamora continues this examination of female identity and conceptual withdrawal, in an even more cinematic manner, in *Horizon of Exile* (2007). In this dual channel film, the actual exiles of four women – two Middle Eastern and two Latin American – inspire a filmic journey from city to desert. Like *Portrait*, *Horizon* gives just enough detail to



imagine its subjects’ identities as bound to specific (though not specified) places and histories: a city, a bedroom, particular clothing, distinctive accents, traditional cuisine. Being exiled from those worlds is naturally a painful experience of loss and self-alienation. Voice-overs describe calamitous departures, what was left behind, what little was brought along. The first performative sequence, accompanied by a mournful solo on a wind instrument (a *duduk*), shows two women in black gowns and hijab-like head-coverings slowly rolling across desert landscapes, as if bound to the earth, while their limbs reach upward, yearning for something beyond. The desert here is transformed from being a historical site of culture and identity to being an image of loss, desolation and worldlessness.

As *Horizon* unfolds, however, the desert’s significance again changes. We move, in a kind of dream or myth sequence, to a volcanic landscape of scorched earth with active geysers and shrouds of steam. This scene of inhospitable wasteland is also a site of primordial energy, of genesis, of rebirth. Stripped of their worlds, these women are also disburdened of the forms of oppression endemic to them. One of them recounts how, in her homeland, women were not allowed to make their own decisions, were told how to dance, what to wear, that “our existence is wrong, being a woman is wrong.” Coming from such a world, exile becomes exodus and ecstasy (from Greek *ek-stasis*, “standing out”), loss an opportunity to gain oneself. In the ensuing performative scene, the women now make gestures of rising up, of defending themselves and fighting back, of sloughing off, of Bernini-like sexual and spiritual ecstasy, of firmly inhabiting their bodies, and of moving confidently toward a future.



Rocamora invites a further broadening of this conceptual exile by the immersive nature of *Horizon*’s dual screens. Analogous to the women in the film, the viewer, whether male or female, is enveloped in the horizons of the film. But standing between the two screens, in a kind of no-man’s-land, the viewer stands out (*ek-stasis*) in an exilic space. And, as in the film, this desert space between the screens offers the opportunity to reclaim one’s agency: one may look where one likes, creating one’s own edit, as it were.

If *Portrait* and *Horizon* give us worlds whose horizons originally enclose the lives of their respective women, *Body of War* (2010) turns its attention to one of the features of our world that enforces this enclosure: male violence. But, even here, Rocamora’s approach is to find, behind this aggression, the possibilities for other, non-violent ways of being. The film, which has recently been exhibited at Toronto’s Scotiabank Nuit Blanche (2014) and as part of the Venice Biennale (2015), among other contexts, presents a single act of deadly hand-to-hand combat, followed by moments of the training that make such violence possible. The implication is clear: what appears natural and spontaneous is, in fact, learned and performed. The soldiers are like the architectural ruins around them: structures made to appear monolithic, but which are, in fact, constructions that can be deconstructed. However, rather than stop at the postmodern argument for social construction, Rocamora’s focus again is on what is lost, effaced, and suppressed in such processes: individual autonomy and one’s bond with the other. A series of voice-overs from former and serving soldiers explain that killing in battle “was not my choice,” that one is a “cog in the machine,” that



whether a soldier thinks a war “is right or wrong is almost irrelevant,” that in combat with an adversary “you don’t see the face,” and even that there are “no faces.” As in *Horizon*, the face is effaced. The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has described how the human face transcends, is not reducible to, the horizons within which it appears, how it imposes the ethical injunction “thou shalt not kill,” and how all acts of violence are conditioned by, because committed in defiance of, these facts.<sup>5</sup>

The stunning climactic scene of *Body of War* has two soldiers re-perform the deadly fight from the film’s opening in acted-out slow motion, rendering their once-violent gestures as nearly tender, intimate acts of care. Their movements are accompanied on soundtrack by Arvo Pärt’s sacral choral work, “Kanon Pokajanen” (The Canon of Repentance), based on an Eastern Orthodox prayer, restoring to them a sense of transcendence. This scene, of course, never happens “in reality”; it is neither before nor after the actual fight. The face-to-face relation it reveals, rather, occurs “within” or “behind,” in any case at the same time as, the hand-to-hand combat of the opening. Like the non-regimented, fluid movement of the waves that overflow their coastlines, and like the abyssal darkness of a bunker’s mouth into which the camera travels at the film’s end, *Body of War* discloses, within the world of violence, what stands out of, what transcends, the strictures of its horizons.

Rocamora examines the relationship between transcendence and antagonistic borders very directly in her most recent work, *Faith* (2015). Where *Body of War* makes concrete reference to several real world conflicts (World War II, Bosnia, Iraq, Israel), but in this plurality generalizes its significance, *Faith* situates itself squarely within the fraught relations among the Abrahamic monotheisms of Jerusalem. A three channel work, *Faith* presents on separate screens an Orthodox Jew, a Greek Orthodox Christian, and a Sunni Muslim, the frames of the screens serving, preliminarily, as borders between them. The men perform their morning prayers in the Judean Desert, each at a site significant to his tradition. As in Rocamora’s other films, identity here is bound up with the places and worlds one occupies. This binding of one’s identity to an exclusive place risks excluding others: within each of their frames, no others ever appear.

Instead of this commitment to, or faith in, one’s own tradition, *Faith*, in its *mise en scène* and cinematography, deliberately troubles the differences between these identities. The compositions of the frames, the colour palettes, and even the actual gestures are uncannily similar. Running through each frame, and therefore *across* their borders, is a horizon line, which has the effect of joining these men, as well as the viewer, in the same horizontal, worldly space.

As limits, horizons divide. So, even if these acts of faith transpire within the world’s horizons, they inevitably enact and invoke something that transcends them. The men and their actions are represented by Rocamora with utmost respect and sympathy, the astonishing 21-minute-long takes with which their prayers are captured parallel, in the camera’s stillness and “floating” feel, the transcendental dimension of their acts. This parallel is reinforced by the fact that, as one watches *Faith*, the backgrounds, with their hazy skies and monochromatic landscapes, often seem to recede and efface themselves. The austere landscapes in the backgrounds of these frames thus come to function, as they did for many ancestors in the Abrahamic religions, as a retreat from the world, a removing of traits. Like the gaps within the self in *Portrait*, like exile,

like the face, faith stands out of its horizon, breaks from places of attachment, de-territorializing these men, exiling them. The moment of faith, then, when these men are not simply identified with their segregated worlds, opens the possibility of facing and addressing each other. In the powerful ending of the film, all three men emerge from their absorption in their prayers, peaceful and disarmed, to look directly – horizontally – at the viewer. Given that, in this moment, we are all on the same plane, it follows that we could all just as well be looking at each other, face to face. In this way, Rocamora suggests that faith may not only cross the horizon line between the earth and the beyond, but the borders that divide our horizontal planes.

#### Mark Cauchi

<sup>1</sup> Isabel Rocamora has produced a number of film works beyond those included in this show, as well as other non-film work. For more information, see her website: <http://www.isabelrocamora.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Rocamora’s own statement about the film references Russian photographer, Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii (1863–1944): <http://www.isabelrocamora.org/home/FilmTv/Portrait>.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that many, more recent feminists have taken a different view of religious women. Until recent times, the sisterhood offered Christian woman one of the few possibilities in society to lead an intellectual, autonomous, non-familial, non-hetero-normative life. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). For a similar situation in Islam, see Saba Mahmood’s discussion of the contemporary women’s Mosque movement in Egypt, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Subject of Feminism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard E. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), ch. 7.

**Isabel Rocamora** (b. 1968) is a British-Spanish artist filmmaker. Her practice originated in performance, with live works commissioned by institutions such as the Arts Council of England and the Victoria and Albert Museum (1993 – 2003). Awarded internationally, her films have been exhibited at CCC Strozziina, Palazzo Strozzi, Florence; the National Museum of Photography, Copenhagen; the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Israel; the Austrian Cultural Forum, New York; and the Bologna Museum of Modern Art, among other venues. Current shows include the Musée de la civilisation, Québec; MUNTREF Museum, Buenos Aires and this solo show at the Koffler Gallery. Rocamora’s work is in several international collections. She lives and works between Edinburgh and Barcelona, and teaches film practice at Edinburgh Napier University. She is represented by Galeria SENDA. [www.isabelrocamora.org](http://www.isabelrocamora.org)

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## koffler gallery

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# ISABEL ROCAMORA

## TROUBLED HISTORIES, ECSTATIC SOLITUDES



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