

Graciela Martínez-Zalce-Sánchez*

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE “PARADISE”?

Interview with
Matilda Aslizadeh

MATILDA ASLIZADEH is a Canadian visual artist who uses media like video, animation, and photography to re-signify the narratives that are the basis for today's thinking.

Resort, the work this interview deals with, is a video projected on a panoramic screen that literally envelops the viewer, a metaphor for the isolation we live in today without realizing it, which establishes limits and borders between ourselves and others; in other words, between ourselves and our fears.

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All photos, courtesy of the artist.



GRACIELA MARTÍNEZ-ZALCE: *Could you please tell us about the genesis of your piece of art, Resort? Can you share the most important formal characteristics with our readers?*

MA: Unsurprisingly, the idea behind the piece originated while I was visiting a large resort. I was struck by how the landscaping and design of the facility reflected an idealized view of nature, with plants in perpetual bloom and animals living peaceably side by side, and how this idealized view had so many precedents in both religious and secular concepts of paradise/Utopia. I became interested in the destructive aspect of this desire for a perfect space. In a literal sense, real ecosystems and people are displaced in order to create these contemporary resort spaces, and, on the level of ideology, that push for perfection generates a vast array of small and great acts of violence and exclusion.

In terms of the formal characteristics of *Resort*, it consists of three video channels projected on a circular wall and blended to create a seamless cinematic image. The video image is created by collaging a combination of actors shot against a blue screen, location footage, and a wide range of found/archival stills and moving imagery. For me, the visual style collapses non-Western and pre-Renaissance painting traditions with narrative cinematic conventions. There is also an immersive aspect to the video that envelops the viewer in its world, much as the characters in the narrative are immersed in the resort.





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GMZ: At first glance, *Resort* makes us think of what “exclusive” means. Were you addressing, in first place, a question of class? Class related to what?

MA: Yes. Both the narrative arc and the collage aesthetic of *Resort* emphasize how class is increasingly transcribed in spatial terms, with the primary indicator of privilege being access: access to sustenance, access to pleasure, and access to safety.

Furthermore, the world of *Resort* mirrors the neoliberal present where there is simultaneous erosion of class consciousness and escalation of economic inequality. The characters, whether they are consumers or laborers, are neoliberal subjects operating under the belief that they are individual agents with ultimate responsibility for their happiness and well-being. It is this belief or narrative—the pursuit of happiness—that sustains the resort.





GMZ: Inside the resort, your characters are confined. Can you talk about the sense of borders in your work?

MA: The border in the film physically marks the threshold between the ideal space of the resort and the space outside, which is full of violence and disaster. It's also a metaphor for the historical tendency in Western philosophical thought to divide the world into oppositional binary concepts (good/evil, civilized/savage, rational/emotional) and to define progress as the eradication or containment of the perceived negative term in the binary relationship. It's precisely this tendency to separate and isolate that which is perceived as desirable from that which is perceived as undesirable —as opposed to acknowledging their complex, interconnected relationship— that engenders violence.

The border is omnipresent in *Resort*, but it is never explicitly policed or enforced: it is simultaneously internalized and psychological as well as external and literal.

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GMZ: Do you see yourself as part of the science fiction tradition in the dystopian sense?

MA: I would locate *Resort* within the generic boundaries of dystopian film and literature, particularly the literary tradition of dystopias that appear Utopian at first glance. However, I think there is greater moral ambiguity in *Resort* than in the classics of the genre, because it eschews the plot structure of an individual caught in the machinations of a powerful state. The resort in my film is more like a corporation and everyone holds a share in it.

I have also described *Resort* as science fiction in the past, but I'm now leaning toward the term "speculative fiction," coined by Margaret Atwood to describe her novels set in the future, since it contains less emphasis on crises caused by technological shifts and more an exaggeration of aspects that are already present in the contemporary political landscape.

GMZ: As you know, in Mexico the wall is a vivid and ominous topic; it's surprising for a Mexican viewer to recognize the wall as a protagonist in a Canadian work of art. Can you talk about the border you are creating a metaphor about?

MA: Actually my interest in borders is at least partially influenced by the time I spent in San Diego completing my master's of fine arts. There, I was introduced to a range of artists and thinkers who interrogated the concept of the border. I began the MFA program in 2000, which coin-

cided with InSite, a visual arts festival that commissioned site-specific work in the San Diego/Tijuana border region. So, my first introduction to San Diego was inextricably linked to its relationship to Tijuana.

There have also been other borders in my life and family history. My family emigrated to Canada from Iran after the Islamic Revolution, so the stresses of managing our relationship to various national boundaries—getting out and getting in—very much marked my early childhood. Going further back in history, my family were ethnic minorities in Iran, and my father's side is from New Julfa,

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the Armenian Quarter in Isfahan, established in 1606. This was a geographically contained area that simultaneously permitted the preservation of a distinct identity and religion. Finally, in Canada, I grew up in a fairly affluent neighborhood in the 1980s, adjacent to two indigenous reserves. Despite the absence of a physical border, there was little interaction between these two spaces (Thankfully, this is slowly changing.).

So, to answer your question, I am referring to all these personally experienced borders, as well as the most politically charged ones —Gaza, for example— and finally to the most apparently banal ones, such as gated residential communities. **MM**

The reader can see the full *Resort* video at the following site: <https://vimeo.com/matildaaslizadeh/matilda-aslizadeh/video/157336197>.

