

Rosalind Nashashibi Reflects on Community Relations

By Louisa Elderton

Using film, photography, painting and printmaking, Rosalind Nashashibi's practice explores affective relations and the intricate connections that can be established within communities. In her exhibition of new paintings at New York's Grimm Gallery, the artist paints her immediate surroundings, sumptuous colors reflecting a sense of local luminosity and darkness. In this interview she discusses with Louisa Elderton her interest in community building, her own experience of motherhood, and the myth of the nuclear family.

LE: Your new body of work looks at community building. What was the starting point for exploring the affective potential of relations in today's society — or the lack thereof? For you, what are we with and without community?

RN: My new films are not so different from my old films, in that they have been about communities from the very beginning. The first 16mm film I made was "The States of Things," 2000, that showed a church hall jumble sale, and I went on from there looking at many communities or group activities — the crew of men on a cargo ship, a large extended family as a community living in Nazareth, more recently a matriarchal compound built by Vivian Suter and Elisabeth Wild in "Vivian's Garden." The focus is relations between people and places that inevitably build into a community system even if the number of participants is small. So my subject hasn't changed but now my focus is also my *own* situation.

The self-reflection started when I moved back to London as a single mum in 2016, moving closer to my own family and searching for an alternative to the nuclear family model; a consumerist model that I feel is exhausted, which has strung out parents, both working full time to pay the mortgage and childcare and still feeling poor and guilty of neglecting family, has left children without a variety of adults to turn to in their lives, and has isolated older generations and single people. I do realize that for some that model was a route to freedom, for escaping from your home town, oppressive family or community or whatever holds you back — so I'm not rubbishing it completely, but I think we need to reel back from it now and think of a wider set of relationships and sharing homes, cars and childcare.

LE: Why did you choose a non-linear narrative for your new three-part film, the first of which you exhibited at the Witte de With earlier this year? Perhaps after post-modernism and the exploration/interweaving of time, identity, consciousness (and so on), linearity is redundant: do you think that's true?

RN: I couldn't say that linearity is redundant. However much we play with narrative forms, however we distance ourselves from it, storytelling happens anyway and stories make linear patterns. I think I'm more interested in how that happens, and speculating about its absence. How would we communicate with one another without linear time? What could we share? That is the subject of Ursula le Guin's story that I based this work on. In "Part One: Where there is a joyous mood, there a comrade will appear to share a glass of wine" we talk about linear time in relation to romantic and possessive relationships that affirm linearity, with ideas such as love begins and it ends, as if love is a finite capacity that can run out, and the thought-convention of waiting for love to come to you or to leave — all this within the scope of adult partnerships. On a wider idea of a more general affection for others, thinking of our position in community, there is something different at work — one feels one's status is also changing, and you can't help projecting into the future and past with anxiety and hope. Linear thinking persists, but

there is also potential for acceptance of different time speeds and frequencies in the wider group, that there could be continuing relationships through many generations, death and birth, and this feels cyclical rather than linear.

LE: How do you approach painting in relation to your films? What can this medium enable in contrast to video — such a time-based medium. Do they ‘do’ different things for you as an artist; do they come from the same place?

RN: Over the last five years I’ve shifted my attention to painting, to looking at them and to making them, after some time of wishing I had that daily practice in my studio in London. I like that the work develops under my hand, and moves faster, and that I can have the paintings around me once they are done. Also, going back again to the linear question, I like how time is unmarshalled when looking at the painting, that it doesn’t march forwards. Then on the other hand, in films I still love to manipulate time.

LE: Can you elaborate on what interested you about using Ursula Le Guin’s “The Shobies’ Story” as a reference point for your latest work?

RN: This goes directly back to the linearity question yet again, but to begin, in her story, a group of people are brought together by a union of planetary governments to test a new form of space travel; one which has never been experienced by sentient beings before. This new technology removes linear time temporarily so that the crew can be in two places almost simultaneously, without the disastrous time delay back on Earth. In this way the dire consequences of travelling at near light speed up to this point are avoided, that is, those back home experiencing a much longer time period than you, and ageing or dying out back on Earth before your mission is complete. However, the effect that the loss of linearity could have on the traveler is completely unknown.

An important aspect of this story is that, before becoming a crew, the nine participants, ranging from small children to septuagenarians, must live together for a month on a kind of honeymoon, establishing crew mentality, before the risky journey can take place. Work had to be done on human relationships through conversation and co-habitation, before the scientific work they were employed to do could take place. This may seem simple, but it is also radical.

LE: Your paintings create a mood of interior domesticity (running taps, parted curtains, a shape reminiscent of a wine glass), and everyday natural forms (leaves, fruits, animals, water). Was this contrast of interior and exterior spaces a conscious decision?

RN: No not conscious, my sources are quite immediate surroundings — a collage or drawing by me or one of the kids, a painting in an exhibition, a place I have been or a photograph, a word puzzle in a book — then the motifs take on their own significance and recur in other paintings, always in relation to the one before. Sometimes, as in the films, it’s about catching a moment where things become luminous or darkened.

LE: In the past, you have considered the work of Chantal Akerman, who explored the role of motherhood in society and such gender politics. As you have touched upon earlier, you have also made compelling work that uses Elisabeth Wild and Vivian Suter as its subject — their fluid relationship, trading the roles of mother and daughter. Your recent film includes you with your children, as well as close friends who you consider to be extended family. It seems that the thread traversing these bodies of work is one of motherhood, relations, and also how we are shaped by our surroundings, our circumstances. Would you say that resonates with you as a

reading? If so, how do you think the role of motherhood has changed in society, for better or worse?

RN: I guess that question of the role of motherhood loops back to my answer to the first question — the nuclear family and so on. The idea of developing community relations is interesting to me, inter-generational and local if possible. As a mother, as an artist who travels for work, and after several years as a wife moving cities following her husband's job moves, I didn't have a community. I wanted to change my situation and to do so I took inspiration from friends like Vivian Suter, and I brought my work and my life closer together, I opened the channels between family and my work, and tried to bring what was a relationship of compromise and conflict closer to one of power and stability.

One more thing on this subject, (and by the way I don't feel I have achieved this community or even that it necessarily can exist, as I've never attached to any group, and only observed them from afar, so it's quite possibly a fantasy that is keeping me on track!); if we build a community of same-generation people with similar interests, surely our place in that community will always be vulnerable, be contingent on keeping up those interests, and will end when the interests move on. I'm thinking about the longer term now, and building something resilient.