

# frieze

## *The Kitchen, New York, USA*

In Andre Téchiné's film *Changing Times* (2004) a Frenchman visiting Tangier is with a former girlfriend when her car breaks down in an isolated waterfront area. As they walk along a cliff they are startled to encounter refugees camped in the trees, waiting for an opportunity to cross the Strait of Gibraltar - a shining, deceptively benign-looking ribbon dividing Morocco from the shores of Spain. When the man says, 'This is the last stop before Paradise', his remark reflects the magnitude of the strait's promise of salvation, but he is surely aware of the danger in store for the 'burnt ones' who try to traverse it. Téchiné addresses barriers, real and imagined, between North and South with quicksilver camerawork

that echoes emotions at stake in his narratives. But in photographer Yto Barrada's mournfully claustrophobic 'The Strait Project: A Life Full of Holes' (1998-2004) it is the absence of such fluid movement that is most acutely felt. Stillness and stagnation pervade the series, which attempts to evoke Tangier as a city consumed and hollowed out by the desire to escape.

Just as the Sonoran Desert has been a deadly lure for countless Mexican 'illegal' immigrants looking for greater economic opportunity in North America, so the Strait of Gibraltar, closed since 1991 to passage by Africans without visas, has a larger-than-life presence for those suffering globalization's fall-out. Noting that in both French and Arabic the word for 'strait' connotes constriction or distress, Barrada has written, 'I try

to expose the metonymic character of the strait through a series of images that reveal the tension - which restlessly animates the streets of my home town - between its allegorical nature and immediate, harsh reality'. Barrada herself was born in France, to Moroccan parents, and can travel freely. Like other photographers who navigate both European and non-European cultures, she favours 'inventories and typologies' in an effort to avoid the picturesque, but her approach is decidedly dark and emotionally and politically engaged. Although they may seem at first glance intentionally banal, her unspectacular images of subjects such as abandoned construction sites or objects at a flea market are more metaphorical than distanced.

Many of the photographs are square, a format that encourages a sense of stasis even in images that capture motion, as in *Ceuta Border - Illegally Crossing the Border into the Spanish Enclave of Ceuta* (1999). Movement is more palpable in *Le Détroit - Avenue d'Espagne (The Strait - Spanish Avenue, 2000)*, an overhead shot of pedestrians trying to cross a wide street. The centre of the image is taken up by blank asphalt, while the people - at the top of the frame a group of women, at the bottom a young man holding a large model ship that obscures his face - seem pulled toward the edges by centrifugal force. A figure for the strait's psychological and metaphysical power, the street, whose very name evokes Europe, is mesmerizing in its emptiness and resembles a rushing river. Several photographs depict walls; one simply shows wallpaper with an alpine scene. Less resonant is a shot of the sky seen from inside a rusty container.

Whether sitting, playing, embracing or eating, many of the people depicted seem to sink into the images as if into quicksand, dead weight in Barrada's careful compositions. A few, on the other hand, seem weightless. Faces are often hidden, suggesting numbness, loss of agency or a will to depart or disappear: a plastic bag blocks the face of a factory worker lunching in a sterile, fluorescent-lit canteen; a girl playing jacks faces a tiled wall, her back to the photographer; two girls form shadowy, gesticulating silhouettes in front of an illuminated advert for a cruise ship. The show included a pair of videos; in the more poignant of the two, *The Magician* (2003), a man styling himself 'Sinbad of the Strait' performs with slapdash flair, half-heartedly hiding the artifice behind his tricks.

Photographs from Barrada's 'Bus' series (2003) depict details of brightly coloured logos on buses that travel between Morocco and Europe. A commentary by two local boys accompanies the images. One vehicle 'goes directly to Portugal, non-stop. Nazarenes, old and young. Parks in front of the shrimp factory. One guard, but since he's in charge of the whole area, he can't see everything all the time. Climb in the middle under the floorboards. Those who have papers go inside the bus.' In their words the suffering that is never directly represented in the photographs is hard to miss.

Kristin M. Jones

Yto Barrada  
*Le Détroit -  
Avenue d'Espagne  
(The Strait - Spanish  
Avenue)  
2000  
Chromogenic print  
60x60 cm*

