



Border Crossings

NICO ISRAEL

GIBRALTAR, THE OCEANIC STRAIT that forms a narrow passageway between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, has long been a microcosm of the world's major geopolitical conflicts, as the cultures it both separates and holds in uneasy proximity have vied for control of its waters and the surrounding territories. Among those who have claimed dominion are the Arabs, who named the two-and-a-half-square-mile rock that creates the strait *Gibel Tariq*, after the eighth-century general whose military victory paved the way for the taking of Al Andalus; the Spanish, whose fifteenth-century *reconquista* led to both the rise of a great colonial power and to the expulsion of Muslims and Jews; and the British, who have held possession of the rock and parts of the strait since the early eighteenth century.

For the past eight years Yto Barrada, a young Moroccan-born photographer who was educated in Paris and New York and lives and works in Tangier, has been documenting this strait, as well as everyday life on the landmasses that abut it, especially on the African side. Fittingly, given her intercontinental background, her career has been on the move, taking her from small group shows throughout Europe to larger group shows at London's Hayward Gallery and New York's International Center of Photography, to solo exhibitions this year at Paris's Jeu de Paume (Site Sully) and at the venerable nonprofit space The Kitchen back in New York. Yet, as is appropriate for an artist whose name in Spanish means "barred"—the predicament faced by the vast majority of Africans who wish to enter a recently but uneasily unified Europe—her work is often concerned with stasis and unbridgeable divides.

Holes, ditches, and impassable roads permeate Barrada's photographs, literally harrowingly in the case of *Landslip*, 2001, which depicts a megalithic site in the north of Morocco. In the background, trees dot a picturesque field of green rolling hills, while in the foreground, a large gash of earth disgorges great quantities of mud. In *Colline du Charf*, 2000, an ugly dirt road bisects what is supposed



Opposite page, from left: Yto Barrada, *Colline du Charf*, 2000, color photograph, 31 1/2 x 31 1/2". Yto Barrada, *Container I*, 2003, color photograph, 23 1/2 x 23 1/2". Yto Barrada, *Landslip*, 2001, color photograph, 23 1/2 x 23 1/2". Yto Barrada, *Wallpaper*, 2001, color photograph, 23 1/2 x 23 1/2". This page, left: Yto Barrada, *Man Sitting*, 2001, color photograph, 31 1/2 x 31 1/2". Right: Yto Barrada, *The Magician*, 2003, still from a color video, 18 minutes.

to be the tomb of the strong and bloodthirsty giant Antaeus, of Greek mythology. On one side of this dividing line, modern housing developments squat, banal but menacing. On the other: again, mud.

Barrada's portraits, like her riven landscapes, subtly express vacancy, violence, and longing—"lives full of holes," as she calls them. A young man sits alone on a stoop on Casablanca's Boulevard Mohamed V (*Man Sitting*, 2001): His jacket and sporty running shoes would not be out of place on the streets of Marseille or Brussels, but behind him are barred windows; next to him, a barred kiosk. Even the diamond-etched sidewalk in front of him suggests imprisonment. In *Sleepers*, 2006, we see bodies sprawled in the grass in Tangier's public parks; it's hard to tell whether these dormant figures are in the midst of a nap or if they've been felled by a sudden blow. And in *Factory I*, 1998, shot in North Africa's free-trade zone, rows and rows of workers in green uniforms and surgical caps peel prawns for shipment to Holland.

Fraught exchanges between the continents appear throughout Barrada's work, especially as she limns the documentary and the conceptual. *Last Days (of the International Zone)*, 2006, is a grid of archival portraits of Moroccan police officers, all taken on the fateful day in 1958 when the departing French and Spanish ceded control of Tangier to them. Elsewhere are more abstract images: rust holes in the top of a shipping container, shot from underneath to reveal sky (*Container I*, 2003); a bare wall on which the outlines of the artist's closely hung family pictures are clearly visible, hinting, perhaps, at the notion of a personal network dispersed across borders (*Family Tree [Photographs Removed for Cleaning]*, 2005). A series of photographs of elegant little piles of packs of Marlboros on wooden crates (*Crates*, 2006) will evoke potent if uncomfortable memories for anyone who has visited the region; the archetypically American cigarettes are hawked individually (and illegally) by street vendors, for pocket change.

These works poetically suggest not only the inequalities of the Europe/Africa divide, which seems reflected in landscapes, buildings, faces, and city streets, but also the desire that freely flows across that divide. When Barrada photographs a generic-sublime wallpaper mural of an Alpine scene complete with snowcapped mountains, pine trees, and lake, revealing, front and center, a small rip along the seam (*Wallpaper*, 2001), it's as if she's saying this image of Europe is as sutured together as was, and is, Europeans' image of North Africa—whether that image is of an erotic dreamland à la Flaubert's Carthage (or Paul Bowles's or William S. Burroughs's more recent inversions of this fantasy) or of an economic basket case that generates xenophobic demands for all borders to be sealed.

Photography seems precisely the right medium to express this tension between opening and closing, yearning and loathing—the sense of history flashing up in a moment not of danger, but of boredom. And yet Barrada's works, across media, sometimes hint—anything but mawkishly—at a kind of possibility of transcendence, or at least at something resembling hope. In the video *The Magician*, 2003, an elderly man who calls himself Sinbad of the Straits performs a street-level magic act in which, among other astounding feats, he makes Ping-Pong balls emerge from his mouth and puts a chicken to sleep. The magician's chatter-filled performance is as dubious as the wallpaper image of snowy mountains, but, as his young male assistant looks on with a peculiar expression blending awe and ennui, the viewer can't help wanting the illusions Sinbad creates to become reality: abracadabra! Likewise with politics: What at first appears absolutely impossible—overcoming a difference, bridging a treacherous strait—seems possible, if only for a fleeting instant, through art. □

NICO ISRAËL IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AT HUNTER COLLEGE, NEW YORK. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)



Yto Barrada, *Last Days (of the International Zone)*, 2006, black-and-white photograph, 31 1/2 x 39 1/2". Portraits of Moroccan police officers taken in Tangier in 1958 on the occasion of the departure of Spanish and French security forces.

Yto Barrada, *Plate Tectonics Explained to Children*, 2005, color photograph, 31 1/2 x 39 1/2". A wooden model designed by the artist for use in demonstrating how the continents initially fit together as a primal "supercontinent."





Clockwise from top left: Yto Barrada, *Crates* (Figure 4), 2006. Yto Barrada, *Crates* (Figure 3), 2006. Yto Barrada, *Crates* (Figure 1), 2006. Yto Barrada, *Crates* (Figure 2), 2006. Four color photographs, each 15 3/4 x 11 3/4". From the series "Detail," 2006-. Mobile stands used by Tangier's cigarette vendors.



Yto Barrada, *The Smuggler (Steps 1 to 9)*, 2006, color photograph, 57 1/2 x 44". A woman displays the textiles she smuggles into Morocco from the Spanish enclave Ceuta.



From left: Yto Barrada, *Sleepers (Figure 1)*, 2006. Yto Barrada, *Sleepers (Figure 2)*, 2006. Yto Barrada, *Sleepers (Figure 3)*, 2006. Yto Barrada, *Sleepers (Figure 4)*, 2006. Four black-and-white photographs, each 49 1/4 x 49 1/4". From the series "Public Parks," 2006-. People napping in public parks in Tangier.



Yto Barrada, *Family Tree (Photographs Removed for Cleaning)*, 2005, color photograph, 31 1/2 x 39 1/2". A wall from which the artist's family photographs have been removed.