



Yto Barrada

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My first introduction to Yto Barrada was in 2019, when I was sent to Tangier to help write a guide to the city. I was struck by the restless whirl of this free-wheeling port town, and nothing stuck in my mind more than the Cinémathèque de Tanger. This art deco cinema sits at the heart of the city and has been lovingly restored to its original grandeur. But it's hardly a sacred temple of film; the cinema is a neighbourhood hub that bustles with local life even on a baking midsummer morning. It's the art house other art houses dream of being—beautiful, eccentric, and welcoming.

I soon found out artist Yto Barrada was behind the project. She was born in Paris to Moroccan parents, who returned to their hometown of Tangier when Yto was a child. She went on to study history and political science at the Sorbonne before spending a decade working with the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut. It was here that her artistic aspirations started taking hold, first with archival photography and later spilling over into film, sculpture, and textiles. A thread that runs through her practice is, in her own words, the theme of 'disobedience and insurrection', often exploring the postcolonial relationship between Morocco and Europe.

When I meet Yto for the interview, it's the morning after the night before and we sit with our knees tucked under us on the sofa drinking coffee and eating her sugar-crusted doughnuts. The previous day she'd thrown a lively garden party as a fundraiser for her new dye workshop and residency program, *The Mothership*, which is hosted at her Tangier home. Guests sat on hay bales, washing down grilled fish and doughy flatbread with cold lager from Casablanca, and were encouraged to explore the sprawling gardens, which are a rainbow spectrum of sunflowers, bougainvillea, cosmos, and hydrangeas amid unruly greenery, dotted with towering eucalyptus trees and neat vegetable plots. The garden tumbles down the hillside to a rocky beach, where the party ended with a sunset swim.



How are you feeling?

Good. A bit tired. We stayed up for a while after the party ended.

It must be amazing to wake up to those views of Spain and Gibraltar across the ocean.

When I was a child, we lived in the house up the hill from here. This was the gardener's house. He lived here with his family and animals and children. He still has a potager here—a vegetable patch. And he grows flowers here too. I used to come down here to sulk in the big Moreton Bay fig tree. It was my brother who spent the most time here, though. He's a horse person, so when the gardener started rehoming retired racehorses on this land, he was around a lot.

Older or younger brother?

Younger by 11 years. He was helping with the grill at the party yesterday. It was a family and friends affair. My mother was here too. It was a benefit party to fundraise to build a bigger space for The Mothership. Laila Gohar was in charge of all the food for the event and did an amazing job. Isa Rodrigues is also a partner in the project. She's a co-founder of the Textile Arts Center in Brooklyn where I was an artist in residence seven years ago. My daughters also went there for after-school classes and summer camp.



Who are you looking to attract with your residencies at The Mothership?

People who are specialised in the art and science of natural dyes, but casting a wider net to include anyone from musicians and cooks to gardeners and poets. The British arts organisation Artangel has been supporting the project, as well as the local non-profit Darna. They run programs to help women and young people get the training they need to find jobs. They run an overnight shelter and educational farm, as well as organising theatre and carpentry workshops. Their team actually helped build the wooden caravan in the garden.

I heard that was a present from your husband.

That's right, my 50th-birthday present. I got Sean a used Defender 90 truck and he got me a caravan. He based the plans on Roald Dahl's caravan.

You've also got an amazing treehouse.

We built it as soon as we moved in. One of Sean's friends, Roderick Romero, is a treehouse architect. If you see it from underneath, it's shaped like a raft heading to Spain. It's a powerful image given the deadly toll of emigrants in the Strait. Tangier has been, for years now, a jumping-off place for people trying to get to Europe. We all have this romantic view of the weather. But for a lot of people trying to emigrate without papers, a clear day is a death sentence.

A Raft, wasn't that the name of your recent show at MoMA?

Yes. It was an 'artists' choice' exhibition about pioneering French social worker Fernand Deligny. He worked in France in the '60s to create an alternative to the mental asylums of the day. The network of people and spaces he made for autistic children were called 'the Raft'. The aim wasn't to fix the children but to give them a life outside closed institutions. And most of these kids were non-verbal, so there's this whole thing about working with children who don't have a language. I looked at artistic forms and performances from MoMA's collection that discussed that question.



When was this house built?

In the '20s. The Scottish painter James McBey was living in the main house above, where my parents live today. That's why the house is called Villa Jalobey. It's a mix of his name and his wife Marguerite's maiden name, Loeb. He's buried on a bit of land just below the garden. He picked a lovely place to contemplate eternity.

When did you move in?

In 2003, with my husband—then boyfriend—Sean Gullette. The gardener had left and we started repairing the house. I turned the seed room into my office. We covered the central courtyard with plexiglass, which was a terrible idea because when it rained our dog hated the noise. But we've now replaced the plexiglass with these old wooden screens that Sean found at the flea market.

Can you find good stuff at the flea markets here?

Yes, most of the fabrics here are from the local flea market or leftovers from my parents' house. I even built the greenhouse using the old windows from their house. They replaced the original wooden ones with aluminium a few years ago because it was too draughty.



You mentioned earlier that the weather in Tangier has become more intense over the years.

That's one consequence of climate change. We get intense rainstorms. But this year there's been a drought in Morocco as well as forest fires near Larache. And there's terrible waste of the little water we do have.

I've noticed the city seems really dried out, but there are still these bright-green lawns with sprinklers around the city.

All the vacant lots have been transformed into lawns. It's an ecological disaster, bad for erosion and water consumption. But on the other hand, families love to picnic on them and children love playing on them. The city also trims the palm trees aggressively so they look like pineapples. I'm the worst person to go around the city with. I'm a terrible conservative when it comes to urban planning. Any wall, tree or hedge that changes upsets me.

It must have changed drastically since you documented the city in your Strait Project photo series.

Back then, Tangier was a sleeping beauty.



Cinémathèque de Tanger



Yto Barrada, A day is a day, 2020

Is that project what brought you back to Tangier in 2003?

For the Strait Project I was travelling back and forth to Tangier. That was before I moved back here properly. I came in 2003 to work on the Cinémathèque de Tanger. That was a full-time project. It used to show mainly Bollywood films, subtitled in Arabic and French. We went through a huge two-year renovation and added a screening room, space for the archive, offices, and the cafe.

How spontaneous was the idea to take over the lease? Had you had your eye on it for a while?

I heard about the lease being available and people were saying the theatre might be torn down. I thought the place was beautiful and unique, especially its location on the main city square. I'd seen centres of cities disappear and I'd seen them be restored. I thought an art house cinema would be a great way of doing that.

You were born in Paris. When did your family move back to Tangier?

When I was six. I went to the American school and then to the French school. After that I went back to France to study history, then political science at university. Then I went to live on the West Bank for almost three years.



What took you there?

That's a long story. But the politics, mostly. It was just after the Oslo Accords were signed.

Have you been back since?

Not since 1998. So I've never seen the wall.

Your father was a journalist. Did he work for newspapers?

Yeah, he was a student leader during the rule of King Hassan II—the Lead Years—and was in exile in Paris until the late '70s, where he was *Jeune Afrique*'s chief editor. He also had a TV talk show in Morocco. He's working on his memoirs now.

Did you want to follow in his footsteps ever?

That was one plan. But then photography took over. Then I discovered the possibilities of art from photography.

And your mother was a psychotherapist.

She was also a co-founder of Darna and led it for more than two decades. She just retired last year.



You've just published a book on the artist Bettina Grossman, who died last year after living much of her life at the Chelsea Hotel.

It's called *Bettina* and it's a huge labour of love that took a few years to produce. I'm so happy with it. It was designed by the book's co-creator, Greg Huber, who did an incredible job. It's the third book we've worked on together, but this one was the hardest because we've had to collaborate remotely over the past two years. It was tricky because making a book is such a physical, tactile experience.

Did Bettina get to see the book before she died?

Bettina did get to see the book. I was very proud of that. I brought her the dummy on her 94th birthday. She died a month later.

What did she think of it?

It was very important to her that the book be accessible, not too expensive. I know she thought it was too chic. But I think generally she was super happy that it came to life. Most of the text I wrote about Bettina for the book was about her smiling and saying, 'You think my work is going to all fit into just one volume?'

And did it fit?

There could be a few more volumes. We're still excavating her archive. But we'll see what the future holds. I'm just happy that this one is out. She was often overlooked by museums and curators, despite her work being so strong, so I hope the book will change how she's perceived. I think that, like for many women, the story takes over the oeuvre. Our goal was to re-establish her as an artist and not just an eccentric figure of the Chelsea Hotel.



How did you first meet Bettina?

My friend and neighbour Corinne van de Borch made a documentary about her called *Girl with Black Balloons*. She was always trying to get people interested in Bettina and her work because she believed both were extraordinary. Bettina had many champions before me. I started by including her as a guest artist in my exhibitions. Sometimes she would almost take over the whole space—which was our strategy when we had a show curated by Omar Berrada at the LMCC Arts Center on Governors Island. Literally two months before the show started, I had an epiphany. I thought, ‘I’m looking for a space to show her work. I have a space that’s mine’. Luckily Omar and the LMCC team were easily won over to the idea, they loved her work.

Was she pleased?

She said something funny. She said, ‘Just two months to do an exhibition, that’s impossible’. I said, ‘No, Bettina. I have two months to organise this. You had 40 years to make the work’. She laughed. She had a lot of humour, but very high standards. With the book, she was still working on things up until the last.

Did she stay in the Chelsea Hotel up until her death?

At the very end of her life she was living in a rehab home. Her health deteriorated. But she lived to see her work in MoMA. The next day she went to the nursing home and never went back to the hotel. She stayed there for the last six months of her life.

How did she feel about leaving the hotel?

She hated being away and wanted to return at all costs, but her health wouldn’t allow it. It was quite tough at the very end because she wanted to be with all her work. She ended up drawing and making notes on paper towels. She never lost her mental capabilities; she was very sharp, but her body was betraying her.

How did you go about selecting works for the book?

I would visit her and listen to her talk about her work. When we had the show, I started organising a bit of her immense archive—sorting out the prints, dusting off sculptures. I took my scanner over there and we would take it in turns scanning images—Gregor and I and my then-studio manager Marina Caron, who’s now a young curator and also Bettina-obsessed.



Was her entire archive in her room at the Chelsea Hotel?

Mostly. Some of it was in my studio. But her rooms were very crowded with all her work.

Did you photograph her in her room before she left?

I did. She was also filmed there the summer before she died. Two Belgian filmmakers made a documentary about the Chelsea Hotel, which Martin Scorsese executive produced, and Bettina's in it at the end. She steals the show of course. The documentary is called *Dreaming Walls*.

Has her room now been handed back to the hotel as a regular suite?

Yeah. That happened very quickly. The hotel is fighting to get the rooms back from all those originals living there. And Bettina was fighting back. She wouldn't allow them in the room. When she left, they were patient up until a certain point. And then they just took over without telling anybody. It was a race with my team making boxes and packing everything up. But as soon as I turned my back on Christmas morning, the hotel threw everything in the trash. It felt like her work was always under threat of disappearance. There was the fire in her studio in Brooklyn that destroyed much of her work in the '60s. And the hotel would throw away things she left in the corridor. It made her very vigilant.

Was she from Brooklyn originally?

She was born there in the '20s. She went to school there and then got a job as a textile designer. She worked for Knoll and many other places.

And then she lived in Europe before she came back to New York in the '60s?

Yeah, she travelled around a lot. She made stained glass windows in France, marble pieces in Italy. We're only unfolding Bettina's story now. Even after all this time, I can't say I know a lot. The initial urgency for me was that I wanted everything to happen within her lifetime. I was very pushy because I wanted things to happen while she was around. I wanted her to enjoy having her work looked at and getting that feedback — all those things which are essential. But now we realise the journey is just starting with her.

I read a quote from her saying, 'The only way you could do beautiful things ... is by isolating yourself from reality'.

In a city like New York, particularly a neighbourhood as busy as Chelsea, you have to isolate yourself to maintain a certain kind of focus and concentration. She had extraordinary drive. She worked very hard, and every bit of recognition she receives, she deserves. She wasn't a dilettante. Nothing happened by chance. I wish I had more time to work with her and interview her.



Do you think you'd enjoy sequestering yourself away at the Chelsea Hotel to make art?

Artists all need somewhere to hide. Whether it's in your studio or working in the kitchen at night. Or even working in a crowded cafe where you feel anonymous. The best work is done in spaces of isolation.

Where do you go when you need that kind of space?

It's hard because it used to be Tangier! But now I've turned it into a place for everyone to come and create. I like working in the early mornings, though. As a gardener, the early hours of the day are my sanctuary. Thoughts are clearer even if I'm half asleep.

Now that your book on Bettina has been published, what's your next big focus?

I have a solo show at the Stedelijk in Amsterdam in October, and then it travels to Bielefeld in Germany. It's a mid-career retrospective; it has a lot of different series from the last 20 years and also some new film pieces. I'm also busy having board meetings to find a new director for the Cinémathèque.



Things must have been tricky for the Cinémathèque during the pandemic.

Yeah, it was closed for a year and a half. We want to rethink the space a bit post-Covid to offer a bit more than we do currently. I'm dreaming of things like regular poetry readings, live music, and drawing classes in the cafe. I want to organise bingo games there, have visiting cooks help us create menus. I want it to be more of a place where the community can greet visitors, either from Morocco or abroad. We've always been about more than just films, but I want us to engage more with what happens in Tangier.

I have a Cinémathèque T-shirt that I was wearing recently in Paris. People kept stopping me to say how much they loved the cinema. It was sweet, but a bit annoying because it was about 40 degrees and I was running across the city trying to catch a train.

I love that. I wish all those people would buy one for a friend, to help us fix this post-Covid budget hole!

Did you have a favourite cinema growing up?

There was one called Cinéma Zahwa in Rabat. I used to go with my cousin. It was really cheap and each ticket got you entry to two different films. So you'd go and see a Western back to back with a karate film, for example.

How would you describe the programming today at the Cinémathèque?

Classic and world cinema with a special awareness of local production and art films.

But the screenings are only part of the project, right?

There are many different ways we keep the local community engaged. There's the café, and we organise classes and workshops. Last year we also launched Qisas, which is a three-year program that teaches teenagers about filmmaking and photography. They make films, meet filmmakers, and learn how to read images.

It seems like the Cinémathèque has already been a launch pad for a lot of people's careers.

We've had so many talented young people work with us here over the years. Our family tree is quite large and it's constantly growing and putting down new roots in different cities. It's always heartbreaking when someone leaves, but that's part of our growing network. They keep a strong relationship with Tangier and the Cinémathèque community, so we have a lot of people leaving and coming back with festivals, things like that. From projectionists to assistants, filmmakers, and programmers. One of the first interns I got was Dorothy Allen-Pickard. She was 19 when she came to the Cinémathèque and she's now working as a filmmaker. Other early interns were students at Columbia University. A professor had heard about the Cinémathèque and told the students about it. That's how I got Simona Schneider involved. She's doing a PhD at Berkeley now. She built the Cinémathèque with me. And when she left she spoke Arabic and French.



Is it hard to keep the plates spinning when you're working on so many different projects?

I find it a bit strange when people ask me things like that, because they're not lots of different things. They're different ways of working on the same thing. The Mothership and the Cinémathèque are obviously linked. One is a garden and one is a screen. They're different spaces, but they're working towards the same goal. The main thing I'm interested in is feeding the critical mind. More unity, more critical thinking, and more care.

How does that kind of critical thinking apply to The Mothership?

It comes down to looking at things like soil types and land ownership. Learning to work with compost. That took me most of summer. I'm now a master composter and I want to train more people. The Mothership is also about taste and beauty. Growing your own food. It's about doing things yourself and working against the commodification of everything. Making our own things that are beautiful and strong.

It's empowering.

I don't like the word empowering. These words are so loaded. What I mean is autonomy, using our brains. Taking time to see things, to work together. That's what these places are for. These projects are also about having artists lead change. We're not experts in many things, but we have a lot of ideas. Artists should be trusted a bit more. Our big competence is not being realistic, and I think that should be a more highly sought-after quality.

The ability to dream.

It's not about dreams. I'm not being sentimental. I'm dead serious. It's not just dreaming. It's dreaming and doing.

