

VALENCIA, SPAIN

## Isabel Rocamora

SALA PARPALLÓ

An anonymous woman wearing a long black head scarf that covers her entire body slips into elegant white shoes as she prepares for a journey from a large city to a mysterious place devoid of physical human presence, populated instead with potent memories. The voyage is imaginary, but the circumstances surrounding it are real: Isabel Rocamora's masterfully crafted dual-channel projection *Horizon of Exile* (all works 2007) is based on the life stories told to her by several Kurdish and central Iraqi women living in London. The work is magical realism at its best, an engaging travelogue into the past in which reality shimmers like a gentle mirage, while the action keeps moving back and forth between an arid desert, geysers, a salt marsh, and finally a lake, in which we see one of the characters floating. In actuality, the magical site is the Atacama Desert in Chile, where the twenty-one-minute video was shot, but the specific location is registered only through the tangential presence of two elderly women from the area who unexpectedly



Isabel Rocamora,  
*Horizon of Exile*,  
2007, still from  
a two-channel  
video installation,  
21 minutes.

appear in the middle of the video, one of them briefly speaking in Spanish about her life and the fading aspects of memory.

Standing between the two facing projections produces a sense of being caught between two mirrors, captured in a *mise en abyme* multiplying one's perception to infinity. Two young women (played by Camila Valenzuela and Paulina Garrido) engage in an oneiric journey through time and space, while the camera focuses on the movements of their bodies rather than showing them participating in any particular action. They defy gravity and float in slow motion, performing a mesmerizing ballet; their movements are simultaneously smooth and awkward, conveying a sense of corporeal and mental freedom but also creating the impression of being severely constrained, as if the women had been scarred by some painful experience. That's when the world of magic takes on political overtones. In a suggestive "dance," Rocamora's characters become vessels of memory that carry traces of violence, such as female circumcision, which is "reenacted" through the contorted motion of their bodies. We witness jarring violence that is both physical and psychological and that, as a result, produces a double sense of alienation and effacement—from the real world but also from the world of dreams. In a rare moment in which silence is broken, one of the characters observes: "Our existence is wrong, being a woman is wrong." Otherwise, the accompanying dialogue is reduced to a few short sentences read off camera, as if words were insufficient to articulate the uncanny experience captured in the video.

Rocamora's interest in the life experiences of exiles and emigrants is undoubtedly rooted in her own history, given that she left Spain for the United Kingdom at the age of eighteen. Still, *Horizon of Exile* (accompanied in Valencia by two series of film stills—"Passage to the Self" and "Retreat from the Self"—presented in a separate gallery) communicates the artist's willingness to move beyond topicality. Her video-dreamscape, which sets off the austere physical beauty of the two women against the poetry of a barren landscape, maps out a disquieting site of anxiety that is magically universal in its resonance.

—Marek Bartelik

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