

# frieze

## Focus: Bouchra Khalili

The land and the sea; the mapping of clandestine journeys; the intertwining of personal stories and politics

*Bouchra Khalili lives and works in Paris, France. Her work is currently included in 'Mapping Subjectivity: Experimentation in Arab Cinema from the 1960s to Now, Part II' at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA; 'Roaming Images', the 3rd Thessaloniki Biennale, Greece; and 'Second World', Steirischer Herbst Festival, Graz, Austria. Forthcoming shows include 'Le Retour: 3ème Festival International d'Art Contemporain Alger' at the Musée National d'Art Moderne et Contemporain d'Alger; and 'J'ai deux amours' (I Have Two Loves) at the Cité Nationale de l'histoire de l'Immigration, Paris.*

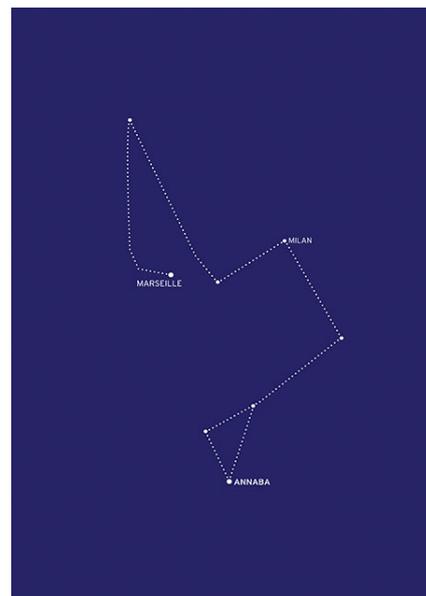
In *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984) the novelist José Saramago begins and ends his story with the same words and the same image of an elusive time and place: 'Here, where the sea ends and the earth begins.' The novel opens with an immigrant crossing an ocean and approaching a port, returning to his homeland on one continent from his exile on another. It concludes with the beginning of a different journey: a character poised on the edge of death.

The enduring image of a coast, a seam, the line between land and sea, is everywhere in the work of the Casablanca-born, Paris-based artist Bouchra Khalili. Virtually all of the videos, installations and works on paper that she has produced since 2006 explore a passage – across the Atlantic, around the Mediterranean, through the Bosphorus and the Strait of Gibraltar. The four videos in her series 'Straight Stories' (2006–8), for example, feature long, tracking shots hugging the shoreline of the narrow waterways separating Europe and Africa, and Asia and Europe. Khalili's camera never seems to dock or disembark. Instead, it traces a seemingly endless architecture of transit and transience: ferry terminals, boat stations, customs houses, boardwalks, gates and fences.

Just as Saramago's protagonist is, in effect, a phantom – the shell of a character, invented by the poet Fernando Pessoa as one of his many heteronyms, who must return home to wind down and disappear after the death of his creator – Khalili's

## About this article

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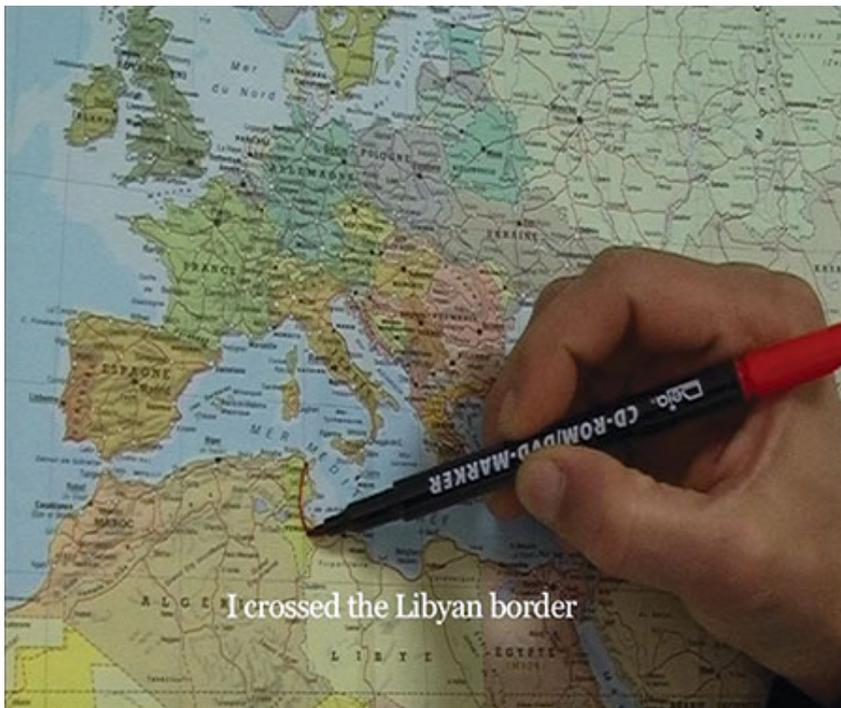


*The Constellations Fig. 1, 2011, silkscreen print*

[Back to the main site](#)

subjects are ghostly. At once present and absent, they never appear explicitly on screen. We know their names – Magdalena, Anya, Ahmed, for example – from the title screens introducing ‘Straight Stories’. We learn their countries of origin in the three-screen video installation *Circle Line* (2007), with its soundtrack borrowed from a naturalization ceremony for new citizens in New York. We see their hands – sweeping, pausing and circling over maps – in the eight-screen video installation ‘The Mapping Journey Project’ (2008–11). But they exist primarily in voice-over narration, telling their stories of clandestine travel.

Readers of Saramago’s book must imagine a ship pulling into the port of Lisbon circa 1935: ‘You catch a glimpse of a high dome, some thrusting gable, an outline suggesting a castle ruin, unless this is simply an illusion, a chimera, a mirage created by the shifting curtain of waters that descend from the leaden sky.’ Viewers of Khalili’s work must likewise conjure the experience of crossing from Niger to Libya on foot, getting tossed around the Mediterranean on a plastic boat that runs out of fuel, winding around radar detectors to reach Sardinia, being smuggled across a border in the boot of a car en route to Barcelona, arriving, everywhere, to arrest, detention, asylum centres or forced return. In ‘The Mapping Journey Project’, however, there are no landscapes, skylines or architectural landmarks to anchor the works in place. Everything must be imagined from what the artist, quoting Roland Barthes, calls ‘the grain of the voice’ with which her subjects speak.



*Mapping Journey #2, 2008, DVD still*

To create ‘The Mapping Journey Project’, Khalili travelled to Marseilles, Ramallah, Bari, Rome, Barcelona and Istanbul – the arteries of trafficking and trade. She walked around each city with maps and a fistful of permanent markers in her bag. She didn’t go searching for her subjects but rather waited for an occasion to meet them. ‘Sometimes they find me rather than I them,’ she says. ‘The encounter occurs from the moment I accept to get lost in a city. And from that moment, there are lots of conversations. Sometimes they have nothing to do with the project. The approach I have developed over the years to avoid pathos and sentimentality is listening. I only ask a few questions, but they are always factual and precise.’

In each of the videos teased from Khalili’s encounters, the subject describes his or her journey and draws its shape. Some have the arc of the epic. In *Mapping Journey #5* (2010), a young man, dreaming of Italy, zigzags from Dhaka to Delhi, Moscow to Skopje, back to Dhaka and then, trying again, to Dubai, Mali, Niger and Libya, eventually washing up on the shores of Lampedusa, Sicily, five years later.

Other journeys are brief and stunted, such as the short, ungainly curve a young man follows from a fishing village in Algeria to a friend’s flat in Marseilles (where he is now stuck with no money, no job and no prospects), or the circuitous route another young man makes from Ramallah to East Jerusalem, a trip that would take no more than 15 minutes were it not for the distorted geography of occupation.

In the hands of another, less rigorous artist, Khalili’s material could easily become patronizing, riddled with bad politics and oblivious privilege. But her attention to form is crucial. The works are spare, precise and capacious, and yet so much remains unseen, relegated to a space of storytelling that touches harsh politics and demands both empathy and imagination in response. As such, the works are a challenge, like a sea of meaning to navigate, or a coast of understanding to reach.

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Page 1 of 1 pages for this article

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