

Transcript: Transmissions 6

A Reader-in-Residence conversation between Bruno Alves de Almeida and Rouzbeh Akhbari

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

gossip, character, Portuguese, possibility, strait, grandfather, guess, Hormuz, stories, idea, mutation, images, folkloric, book, thinking, born, talking, Damian, geography, travel

SPEAKERS

Bruno Alves de Almeida, Rouzbeh Akhbari, Laura Tibi

Laura Tibi 00:08

Welcome to Transmissions, a podcast at the Blackwood Gallery at the University of Toronto Mississauga. This podcast begins by covering "Burning Glass, Reading Stone," a series of exhibitions across four lightboxes on the UTM campus running from September 2020 through June 2021. As we come to the final segment of "Burning Glass, Reading Stone," we're confronted with the end of an eight-part-long series, reflecting on how the pandemic has reconfigured our collective lives. While we hear refreshing news updates on vaccine rollouts, and decreasing COVID cases, this series serves as a reminder for how the pandemic made apparent the social, economic and environmental disparities in our world. We can begin by acknowledging the land on which the University of Toronto Mississauga operates, acknowledging that this is stolen, exhausted, and occupied land that has been inhabited, stewarded, and cared for by the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently the Mississaugas of the Credit River, and that it continues to be the meeting place and home to Indigenous people from across Turtle Island. This podcast forms one part of our Reader-in-Residence program featuring a reader and an artist in question-driven conversation. In this episode, Reader-in-Residence Bruno Alves de Almeida will speak with Rouzbeh Akhbari about his work presented in "Tales from the Garden of Zār," part eight of the Blackwood's lightbox series. Through archival research and image making, this series explores legends of edible Earth in connection to paranormal activities in the Strait of Hormuz, a waterway between the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman. The strategic geography of the Strait fostered early economic and cultural exchanges which gave rise to stories and myths that Akhbari examines in his images. Rouzbeh Akhbari is an artist working in video installation and film. His practice is research-driven and usually exists at the intersections of storytelling, critical architecture, and human geography. And Bruno Alves de Almeida is an architect and curator whose practice explores the relation between social and spatial dynamics, and their influence in the shaping of our urban and natural environments. Without further ado, let's hear the conversation between Rouzbeh and Bruno.

Rouzbeh Akhbari 02:32

In astrophysics, "perturbation" is used to refer to the complex motion of a massive body subjected to forces other than the gravitational attraction of a single other body. The additional forces can include a third, fourth, fifth, external body's internal resistance, or the off-center attraction of an ovulate or otherwise misshapen body. Keeping in mind this definition, both for its literal meaning and as a metaphor, will be helpful in grasping the character's relations to the macro events described in our conversation and the project at large.

Bruno Alves de Almeida 03:11

One of the triggers for this series of digital images, the fictional critical novella, and the short film that you present at the Blackwood, that makes up this body of work, was the leather-wrapped portfolio that you found in your late grandfather's studio. And in particular, the extremely elaborate illustrations you found in it. You've become very interested in these drawings and thirsty for more information about them. And we can see a rendition of the drawing in two of the images you present at the Blackwood. I never met my grandfathers. They both died at a young age before I was born. So both my mother and father are paternal orphans. And this gives kind of a symmetry to both sides of my family, particularly in the centrality of the matriarchs. Both my grandmothers are called Maria, Mary, Maria Melia. And Maria [inaudible], and both had to create several children as young widows.

Rouzbeh Akhbari 04:23

Yeah, I mean, it's exactly correct that what initiated all my thoughts around the geographies that I'm exploring with this project, the narratives and the tensions that exists in these places were all finding this drawing in my great grandfather, Mahmoud Dehnavi's studio a few years ago, it was in 2017. And I mean, he was a well-known artist. He did a lot of metal sculptural work. But this drawing in particular is quite different from a lot of works that I've seen from him because unlike many things he did before where the tableau—or the object containing a part of a bigger narrative—this one really felt like a universe. It felt like he had brought together all these creatures, these kind of micro-narratives, micro-protagonists together, but he managed to put it all on a platform that's all encompassing. So for me, this idea of a very complex drawing as a universe became a site or like, a place to further engage with these stories. He did work in Oman at some point. And when I was talking to my grandmother, she was suggesting that maybe some of these ideas came to him around then. He was a gardener who was really interested in his little garden in his house, in Isfahan. And I remember most of the time, when I saw him, he passed away when I was nine, but as a child, most of the time that I saw him, he was really spending time in the garden and contemplating there. So for me, this geographical specificity that my grandmother put out, and his interest

in gardens and obviously, the reminiscence of the drawing to certain garden designs became very interesting for me. When I started the project, I was thinking about Hormuz and Oman, and really the southern shores of the Persian Gulf, within a historical context, and obviously, growing up in Tehran, and having read some of the historical narratives that exist around the advent of Shi'ism and the Safavid era in Iran, I knew that there was this point of interest in decolonial activities against the Portuguese at the time. So I decided to maybe take on this project from a historical archival perspective in Lisbon, and I spent a lot of time in between 2018 and 2019 in the marina museums, The Maritime Museum of Lisbon, looking at their archives. And automatically because of the presence of the British in the region, as well as the connections between the British and the Portuguese in terms of trade and military antagonisms, it automatically evolved to doing research in London at the maritime archives there as well. So the stories, the characters, this kind of personal interest in the drawing with my grandfather's interest and work in the region, automatically kind of scaled up into this historical and political presence of these colonial characters and actors in the Strait of Hormuz.

Bruno Alves de Almeida 07:50

Such an interesting man, your grandfather. After we had this conversation, I realized I didn't know much about my grandfather. So I did the same as you did, went to my grandmother who's still alive and she told me that both her and my grandfather, from my mother's side, were on the same boat when they moved from Portugal to Brazil in 1960. So yeah, Portugal is also in my story. But they didn't meet in this boat, but only years later. So my grandmother was traveling in the third class, and my grandfather was traveling in the second class, but apparently he spent most of his time in third class, supposedly because it was much more fun and the booze was cheaper. And the ship they traveled in was named Veracruz. Ilha de Veracruz or "The island of Veracruz" in Portuguese was the first name given by the Portuguese navigators to the newly discovered land on the northeast coast of what later became known as Brazil. And it's kind of funny that my grandparents were crossing the ocean like many colonial settlers did centuries before in a ship with such a name. And both of them were teenagers then and upon arrival in Brazil, my grandfather went to Rio de Janeiro and my grandmother went to Salvador. And they met only years after in Salvador at the Portuguese folkloric group where they both danced. The ranchos folclóricos—which is a very complicated name as they are called in Portuguese—are partnered dances, dances that are either performed in couples or as groups, and they stem from the country's rural areas and farming communities. And they include colorful costumes worn by men and women, guitar, accordion, and bagpipe instrumentals, but also finger snapping and circular movements. So, yeah, traditionally the styles of the costumes worn by the dancers were influenced by the region, and also the social system that the dancers belong to. And the most well known

variation of the dance is called Vira, which means "turn" and comes from the Minho region in the north of Portugal where my grandparents are from. And the Vira has a style that has been compared to the waltz. And I know the Vira was my grandmother's favorite. So I think this folkloric branch, was their way to still feel somewhat Portuguese in that radically different country. Soon after they met in Salvador, they got married, and my grandmother was 20 years old.

Rouzbeh Akhbari 10:51

Wow. What an incredible coincidence. Imagine being on the same boat traveling across the ocean, not even meeting, but then a romance initiating many years later when they meet. That's so interesting, this idea of complete coincidence. And I imagine they didn't know about this until later, they shared it with each other as like a piece of like a finding or something like that. That's really interesting. Well, this idea of folkloric dances and I guess cultural activities that allow one to feel connected to a distant geography is something that I almost instantly became faced with when I began doing my field research, because after doing the archival work, basically exposing myself to the narratives within these documents, I was interested in knowing the stories and mythologies that exist in the strait. So I went to Hormoz, I spent quite some time between the island of Qeshm and Hormoz as part of the archipelago at the Strait. And obviously, one of the most important or central activities, or folkloric activities that sailors there do is called the Zār, which is essentially a very complex kind of dancing ritual that involves percussion, and sometimes consumption of substances or like, hallucinogenics through smoking. And it's often done as a means of getting connected to the lost ones. So if the sailor, for example, has disappeared, they say the Zār which is, I guess, can be defined as some kind of an entity that is like a genie, like a jinn or something like that. It travels with the wind and brings certain unpleasant experiences or certain irregularities. So in this ceremony, you try to convince the Zār to leave whoever is having some kind of problematic experience. But the characters that usually talk about the Zār or or engage with this ceremony are called Baba Zār or Mama Zār, and they are usually older characters who claim to be able to communicate with these Zār entities and essentially travel or at least allow their imaginaries to travel on the winds where the Zār would go. And usually when a sailor goes missing, for example, the Baba Zār or Mama Zār would be able to tell you whether they're still alive or not. So they say, you know, I'm still seeing them on the horizon, they're out in the sea, so it's not time to mourn yet. When I was there, doing the research, I was doing the Muharram, which is a forty-day kind of mourning process for Imam Husayn, which is a third character or like the third Imam in Shia thought and belief. And that process of mourning is connected to, you know, a very complex set of political realities in Iran, considering that the Iranian government right now is a very strict Islamic regime. And their kind of way of playing Muharram and this character of Imam Husayn is a political means of really distinguishing

Shi'ism from other forms of Islamic thought in the Middle East, but also within Iran, you know, against secularism, against minorities, who are maybe Sunnis or Jews, or many other minority groups. So for me, it was really interesting to think about the Zār, and this idea of the wind that comes from the south—specifically they say the wind comes from Ma'rib in Yemen—bringing all these characters and being exposed to these stories within the context of this prolonged mourning, forty days of mourning for a character that has passed away over one thousand years ago. And I would say within thinking about these geographies, and of course, having done the archival research before in Lisbon in London, I obviously knew a lot of these legends, myths and folklore activities are connected to other regions. So one of the main questions for me when I was writing the book, or even creating these sets of images was how do cultural folkloric activities like this, especially dances and musical kinds of experiences evolve in different geographies and how did they come together? Especially in these shoreline communities, considering that sailors—being involved in trade for you know, centuries—really are actors that share their cultural tropes and bring them and spread them. So for example, the Zār is also a very common belief in Egypt and a lot of shoreline communities around the Indian Ocean. And there is something that really became kind of a question for me as to how does the Zār come about and whether these geographies are connected through some kind of a cultural, I guess, coincidence that later becomes that later evolves into a solid practice.

Bruno Alves de Almeida 16:32

It's very nice that the Zār is now in conversation, because I think it might come back later on. But before maybe you can help me with something. I think maybe, even though I haven't met either of my grandfathers, I did meet my great grandfather from my mother's side, so it kind of makes up for it. And we were born on the same day, different years, of course, but on the same day. Time coincidence? Time loophole? Maybe something that makes up for the fact that I couldn't meet my grandfathers. Maybe? Well, if we believe that apparently random status, chance, or disorder are actually governed by underlying patterns, and deterministic laws that are highly sensitive to initial conditions, one could say that such a future event is the cause of a past event, which in turn is the cause of the future event. I mean, this way of understanding cause and effect is actually confirmed by quantum physics, even though I'm far from being an expert on this. But the distinction between cause and effect in quantum physics is not made at the most fundamental levels. And so time's symmetric systems can be viewed as causal or retro-causal. And this idea of retro-causality means that an effect precedes its cause in time, and so a later event affects an earlier one. And I know this is complex, so we can break it down a little bit. So it's kind of a time travel reciprocity between cause and effect, which funnily enough, brings us to the grandfather paradox. Do you know it? I think we've discussed this before and you knew it. Well, it actually exists under this term,

I'm not making this up to fit my narrative. But the grandfather paradox is basically a potential logical problem that would arise if a person were to travel to a pastime. So the name comes from the idea that if a person travels to a time before their grandfather had children, and kills him—the grandfather— it would make their own birth impossible, so the time traveler's birth completely impossible. Yeah, it's a paradox, but I'm sure Resolve 6174— that you speak about in your novella—would make and would have all these answers for these human shortcomings and understanding time and space.

Rouzbeh Akhbari 19:24

Absolutely. I mean, the reason I became so obsessed with time and space, and essentially the research pivoted towards this astronomical and more science fiction approach was the experience of being in Hormuz in the settings that I described before. What you're explaining is yet another really fascinating coincidence. So your grandparents met on the boat, never actually, I mean, they didn't meet. They were on the same boat, they didn't meet and later on, they got involved romantically, got married, and talked about that as a coincidence. And then there's this other coincidence of your birthday being exactly the same as your great grandfather's. And these sort of coincidences have always really intrigued me, especially in religious and political thought, because growing up in Tehran, we had a lot of religious classes. And one of the main characters that is constantly fleshed out and talked about is Imam Mahdi, who is usually referred to as the master of time. So his title is the twelfth, Imam in Shia thought, and he is said to have disappeared. He went through some kind of an occultation. Once as a child, he disappeared, and then they say, he came back again, and went through another period of occultation, which continues to this day. So this you know, looking at it, whether as a legend, or as some kind of a political trope brings many questions about, first of all, fascination around this title, the master of time, and how there's this possibility of a time warp, or the play with time. So the character Resolve 6174, that is quite central to the book as this alien species that later on is found—I don't want to give it any spoilers—but later on is found to be the like great, great, you know, great grandmother of all of life on on Earth. That was very much an attempt on my part, to think about chaos theory and different understandings of time. Of course, again, going back to the early research in the archives, I knew that it is extremely important for sailors, to this day, but especially in the colonial times to have a very precise understanding of time based on one reference point. So you have Greenwich for example. And the more accurate your clocks are, the more accurate your positioning system is going to be. You would know exactly—especially in the context of celestial navigation—you would know exactly where you are, and you can calculate your speed and etc. So for Resolve, which is this character that very quickly becomes an AI and starts traversing around different galaxies. This idea of like existence within different timeframes becomes very central. And the way I developed the character, and I guess, for

me, my grandfather's drawing kind of became the universe of Resolve. So in the book I'm calling it "Melasurej," which is a substitution cipher for Jerusalem, of course, this character is kind of embodied, or like I imagine its universe, the host planet as my grandfather's drawing. Hence, in one of the images in the series, you see it as a lenticular—it's kind of in a binary star system. Once you walk by it, you can feel it as if it's rotating in that star system. But then this character Resolve becomes kind of like a, possibility in the storyline to talk about the philosophical concepts around chaos theory, around various understandings of time. And of course for me, it's very connected to other chapters in the story such as the child that travels with Diogo in the earlier chapters, and all of that. But just to elaborate a little on the chaos theory, and again, in the book, I'm talking about it in quite a political way. It's like the possibility of things having a very different end result if a very small change takes place in the earlier stages of a linear system. So in the book, you can see that chaos is for example, arguing that if they take action against the Earthlings, you know, life on Earth quickly, there is the possibility of wiping them out and, you know, erasing them as an imminent threat, but then there are multiple unpredictable consequences that are essentially impossible to know exactly based on mathematic results of chaos theoretical thinking. So for me, this idea of uncertainty, this, I guess, like the quantum entanglement that could take place between multiverses became something to, I guess, make sense some of these stories around [inaudible] for example, that I was hearing as a child, and then understanding how it was politically employed. Especially at the height of the colonial tensions in the Persian Gulf with the Safavids, and the Portuguese riots when the Safavids were forcefully also converting the Iranian population into Shi'ism and from the Sunni beliefs that they had before. So it's almost like an evolution of earlier religious thought into the realm of nonlinear thinking that allows for a lot of antagonism with people who are very linear thinkers, and they want exactly the right time in order to arrive in these geographies. I'm going to further in our conversation, I will open some of these, I guess, cryptic messages that Resolve sends to the humans but for now, I think that's a good intro to that character, and her interest in time work.

Bruno Alves de Almeida 25:52

Yeah, and continuing in untangling time and entangling multiverse universes. Listen to this. The day on which my great grandfather and I were born was 27th September. Make sure you put that on your calendar. He was born in 1917. And I was born 70 years later. And 27 September is a very meaningful day of the year in Brazil, because it's the day of Saints Cosmas and Damian. Saints Cosmas and Damian were two Arab physicians in the town of Cyrrhus, a city in ancient Syria and were supposedly twin brothers and early Christian martyrs. However, in Brazil, their story is marked by religious syncretism, of course, and syncretism—so this mix of religions—is a legacy from the era of slavery, in which the African slaves in order to worship their divinities and deceive their owners, began to associate the

saints of Catholicism with the orixás, and the orixás is a concept similar to those of deities in traditional religions. Thus, the orixás, Ibejis, sons of Xangô, and Iansã were associated with Saint Cosmas and Damian in Catholic belief. And in Brazil, the twins, twin saints are regarded as protectors of children, and 27 September is commemorated in Bahia, both by Catholics and Candomblés [inaudible], let's say, by giving children bags of candy with the Saints' image printed on them, and also offering them typical foods such as Caruru, this Brazilian food made from okra, onion, shrimp, palm oil and toasted nut—delicious. And the ritual consists of first offering the food to seven children that are no [older] than seven years old. And only after all children have finished can the guests enjoy the food that is being offered. And I don't recall ever doing or witnessing this ritual while living in Bahia, but I do recall the importance of Saints Cosmas and Damian on my birthday, and somehow throughout my life, I've always felt I have an extra protection or edge because I share the birthday with these two entities.

Rouzbeh Akhbari 28:48

That's completely crazy. I mean, just since we're talking about mathematics and chaos theory, and all of that, just the coincidences of September 27—so 1917, 1987, 97 children that are not older than seven years old. It's already feeling like you're making this up, but, 70 years, 70-year, difference age gap. Yeah. Incredible. And I guess that's really exactly when you think about chaos theory and quantum entanglement possibilities that such imaginaries can afford us, in like a political sense, is exactly this idea that you never know what the end results would be. And what coincidences can cause in terms of fueling myths or gossips and how that gossip can later evolve into something that becomes, I guess, a platform for taking solid or concrete actions. Just hearing you and myself talking about these coincidences, I can't help but think about Yuval Harari, who really talks quite a lot about the role of gossip. In his book "Sapiens," he talks about the role of gossip in, in the creation, or like in the cause of a cognitive leap, or some kind of a revolution. It's that, I mean—imagine the apes, for example, having been having developed some kind of, I guess, through a mutation, some kind of a possibility, to narrate threads around them. So before they would just like, you know, scream and run away from the threats, but at some point, a mutation allowed them to narrativize the threats, and give it, I guess, evil characteristics, or, you know, say that—not only alert each other about the position of the threat, but give it an identity, and like narrativize it. And that is what ends up causing, you know, a multitude of developmental leaps. Because now they have the capacity to, I guess, gossip amongst each other for the threats, and that automatically pushes them to cause or form groups and become a society essentially. So just this idea of gossip, or like something that happens by accident, or like a mutation that later becomes a source of a myth or a legend, and that evolving into a whole set of sociopolitical thoughts is really interesting. And I think, an important adhesion that brings some of the works in the series together as well. I mean, since we're talking about Hormuz, and the identity of the

place as like a Strait that's even I mean—especially today because of oil, and how much resources pass through it. But also for centuries, it was a trade-centric geography, was a place that a lot of commodities would be going through. And that automatically gives rise to an internationalism, like whether you like it or not, you're going to see a lot of foreigners, you're going to see a lot of actors in the place that are there to engage in commerce. And that automatically brings a lot of their stories. So this hybrid internationalist position automatically or I guess, kind of naturally evolves into a very fascinating set of gossips. And for me, I guess, throughout the research process, both for the development of the book and image series and film, my exposure to these gossips was actually through social media, because on Instagram and places like that, you actually get so much coincidental information that later becomes again, one of these nodes of mutation that goes beyond. And this idea of mutation is like—mutation as the message, like the mutation is the message—is something I mentioned clearly in the book. And that's something that I'm very interested in, in terms of how obviously on a genetic level mutation can become the very message and how that can possibly be a form of interstellar communication between species and this idea of reproduction. Like, because when you're engaging in commerce in such an elaborate way, of course, there's this internal long-term desire to reproduce, I guess, as a society, as a nation, as an individual. So to fuel this reproduction, one is engaging in a variety of, I guess, commercial transactions. And for me, obviously, thinking about this within the context of capitalism—Resolve's voice around mutation being the message, and her obsession with "panspermia," which is a concept that if alien species do exist, their best way of preserving themselves is to keep reproducing themselves. So like encoding their genes into bacteria and sending them across the universe. I started kind of using Resolve's character as a point to critique this aspect of political thinking around time, time-travel, and panspermia, and things like that.

Bruno Alves de Almeida 34:24

Gossip, storytelling. Well, I think the Zār comes back here—not through gossip, but through—maybe through a little bit of gossip, I think around in my family. But through a story that my mother told me that makes me think that maybe my date of birth is more connected to Saints Cosmas and Damian, rather than to my grand, great-grandfather's birthday. Well, maybe everything is connected. So my mother told me the story that when she was pregnant with me in Salvador, she went to a birthday party where all of our family and friends gathered. And all of a sudden one of the sisters of my mother's godmother, incorporated a spirit. And that woman was known to be [a] medium and, you know, gossip around the family, of course. So I believe no one was shocked, that everyone stopped and paid attention to her, also in respect of the presence of a higher entity. And she was behaving child-like, and especially having a good time, of course, since there were many sweet treats to eat in the party. And

eventually, she came close to my mother and pointed at her belly with interest, as children normally do. And after a moment of fascinated observation, she told my mother that she would give birth to a baby boy, something which my mother disregarded, because by then everyone was speculating that it would be a girl due to the pointy shape of her belly and, you know, justified by all other sorts of popular beliefs and myths. But then the spirits, told my mother that she would not only give birth to a baby boy, but also that her son would be born on the Spirit's day. So the woman said, he will be born in my day (or the Spirit said). And by then everyone had realized that this entity was Cosmas and Damian due to the child-like behavior and the eagerness for candy that this entity was showing. So at that point, my mother, kindly thanked them and processed that information with disbelief, I think. She still believed it would be a girl, and that the birth was due to November. So there was no way her kid would be born on Saint Cosmas and Damian's Day on September 27. Well, that happened. So I was born premature with seven and a half months, very frail and tiny. But with the help of an incubator, I survived.

Rouzbeh Akhbari 37:21

Incredible. And I guess this idea of spirituality or like a medium, or someone who was possibly accessing gossip and narrative in a way that others can't, is very easily discredited. And understandably so because there's, you know, scientific and observational ways of understanding how things should work—like your due date. But again, through coincidence and this idea of possibility for chaos, something happened that was completely unexpected. I guess, in some of the historical work that I was doing, looking at the archives, something that totally caught my attention—and again, kind of became my obsession—was this illustration that I found of a, it's actually attributed to an unknown author. So there is someone who has traveled to all the lands that the Portuguese has colonized and portrayed them in their kind of cultural context. So their fashion whatever, kind of, I guess, superficial visuals, they could find. They just like, stereotype them, essentially. But specifically, the illustration in the codex that was related to Hormuz was unlike any other ones. It wasn't showing, you know, specific typologies or like taxonomies of the colonized subjects, but rather, it was showing a Portuguese family that was sitting around the dinner table, half-submerged underwater. And underneath it says, "because the weather is very hot, the locals purposefully flood their homes." And that's kind of a divine gift or some form—it's speculated that it's some form of a divine gift, helping the colonizers keep cool in such a hot landscape. Obviously, I became totally obsessed with that and to understand it scientifically would I guess be quite simple. It's like, sure, your house is hot, you just flood the courtyard and allow that to be a form of relief. But me, being very interested in gossip and possibilities of speculation, I started thinking and linking some of the, I guess, resistance and political activities at the height of the Safavid turns towards Shi'ism and their interest in grabbing the archipelago and the Strait back from

the Portuguese. So thinking about the flooding of these landscapes, I was speculating about the possibility of, like, infrastructural sabotage—the idea that the locals can be tampering with the underground water cisterns, the canals, and the tidal forces between the Sea of Oman and the Persian Gulf as a means of essentially making life difficult for the settlers on the islands. And that became one of the main, I guess, inspirations for one of the works that is in the series now. But also in one of the chapters in the book where there's this character who ends up, who is Imam-Qoli Khan, is a historical character who took over the island from the Portuguese under the order of Shah Abbas, the Safavid King. But when I was going through the documents that exist around him, specifically, this book that I found in the British Library in London, they talk about a lot of kind of blind spots, or—I mean, it's not a historically accurate document, it's an illumination or like a manuscript telling the tales of Imam-Qoli Khan, who was like a very favored soldier of the Shah, he was born as a slave in Georgia and kind of forcefully converted to Islam, brought to Isfahan and then became a very important officer that helped the Safavids reconquer the islands. But he was later, after Shah Abbas's death, [he] was later kind of targeted as an enemy by the survivor of the Shah and later executed. So this manuscript really goes deep into some of the blind spots, or like the dark spots of his life, and how there are multiple possibilities around spiritual characters that fall on his bad side, or there's possibility that he did something wrong on the island, or like, maybe there has been some jinn or like, something that's ended up causing his demise so fast, because he was like the most favorite and then all of a sudden, he falls on the wrong side of history and is executed along with all of his clan. So again, thinking about this idea of perturbation, something that's in a body in proximity or exposure to other bodies, once it becomes I guess a three-body problem, or more. Like once there's a possibility of complexity, things become unpredictable. And for me, looking at the history of the region, looking at these archives, and gather[ing] documents through the metaphor of a three-body problem, through chaos theory, became an interesting way of understanding all of this.

Bruno Alves de Almeida 42:50

I love how you make connections, and how you inhabit these regions, and the narratives of the regions that of course, belong to many places at once, in this hybrid internationalism that you were talking about. Well, by now, as you know, I was born in Brazil, in the city of Salvador, on—which day?

Rouzbeh Akhbari 43:16

September 21st–27th.

Bruno Alves de Almeida 43:19

Good. And I was born to, I was brought to Portugal by my parents, of course, when I was four years old, and I was raised there. And since then, I've lived in many other cities and have returned to Brazil, this time to São Paulo, where I lived and worked, before coming to the Netherlands, where we both find ourselves now. In chapter six, "Binary Trial," you end your fictional, ficto-critical novella, mentioning the character S, who was born in Iran in 1990. She first arrived in Canada on a student visa in 2010 and became naturalized—a naturalized citizen on August 15, 2019. At heart, she remained a foreign national. And this feeling of being a foreign national is also something kind of embodied in me. How is it for you?

Rouzbeh Akhbari 44:24

I mean, that's a very interesting reading, or a very specific reading of the book, which is obviously connected to a lot of my personal experiences. And this idea of a foreign national, I mean, the term itself is quite confusing, because there's as if there's a nation that one either belongs to or doesn't, but it is possible to argue that within cultural spheres, especially, having talked about this kind of context of internationalism, so far, there is the possibility of defining oneself closer to a certain linguistic exposure, or something like that. So the definition beyond ethnicities, but rather in cultural spheres. So that part of the story, which I guess we haven't actually discussed that much so far, is one of the three parallel timelines where the narrative is happening. And this one is the contemporary one, very much inspired by the political situation when I was doing the fieldwork in Hormoz, which was last year, in the fall and winter. My research actually came to an abrupt closure after the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, committed that heinous crime of shooting down the Ukrainian airliner that was going from Tehran to Kiev with a lot of Canadians and other nationalities on board. And that's very quickly evolved into, you know, a very tragic, and I guess, criminal form of—an ongoing criminal investigation against the Iranian regime so far. But under that context, and of course, in such heightened moments of tension politically, militarily, and these confrontations, everyone who doesn't belong or has the possibility of being targeted, will be talked about as a spy. So specifically in Iran these days and more ongoingly but also at the time, when I was doing this research, dual citizens can be targeted quite easily, and kind of spoke about as spies or engaged in some kind of espionage activity. And this paranoia—this like constant fear that as an artist, as a researcher, storyteller—you might be targeted quite simply, as unfortunately many people have in the past. And then that kind of ruining your life for the rest of your life essentially. So I really allowed this paranoia, this fear, that I was having to come through this story. And this idea of romance like between Khorshid and Rahzad, this character S is the last name of Khorshid was also very kind of central to my own experiences at the time. So there's this idea of very easily for working in, in a site like a gallery or any environment that is close to a sensitive, you know, government's location, one might be

targeted very, very simply and put through trials and possibly executed. So a lot of these dates that I'm working with in the book, for example, the date S is executed is actually related to ongoing kind of news that you would receive. For example, Khorshid is executed on June 20 2020. And that's the day the Iranian regime executed Mahmoud Mousavi Majd, who was apparently working for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard very closely to Qasem Solaimani, the commander of their foreign forces, and kind of randomly accused of being a spy and executed very quickly without access to fair trials. So this idea of espionage, and the possibility of being torn, or like ripped from your rights as a human quickly became very central. Of course, in the "Binary Trial" chapter there is this critique towards Canada, and specifically, Bill C-24, which was passed in 2014. I think about a week after I became a Canadian citizen. Under this bill, anyone accused of terrorism charges—which is a very vague and broad definition—has the possibility of being considered a citizen of another country, and deported immediately if they have any of these terrorist charges. In the book, I talk more in the details about what other conditions would qualify someone to get their citizenship taken away from them. But in this binary trial Khorshid is being ripped of her rights as a Canadian citizen, and at the same time, kind of being targeted for being a dual citizen in Iran at the same time. So there's this like in betweenness, this idea of being a foreigner in every context, which I think juxtaposes interestingly, to this early internationalism that I was talking about with the past timelines in the book. I would say this idea of espionage is really a theme that runs through the project, like the artworks as well, like this, the miniatures and how they're contextualized, in relation to the image, the overexposed image of the Strait, and the ships that are kind of passing the Strait. And also, in connection to like ongoing mythologies that are taking place on the islands. Like this idea that, for example, the Zār and jinns and all these characters and entities that fly with the wind, are told that these days, you can actually see them, because of these blinking lights over the horizon. I mean, it's gossip. It's something you see on social media. It's something I came across myself when I was doing the field work. And clearly, these are actually drones. They're American and Iranian drones that are flying over the Strait, and they're very much surveilling the entire passages that take place over here. So very old legends and mythologies are evolving to become reality, because the technology is allowing for them to become reality, essentially. And that's why I think more and more of the work went towards this realm of science fiction in order to see what threads we can pull in order to—in a way make sense of mythologies turning to realities, or like gossips becoming mutation, becoming a step towards concretizing cultural activities.

Bruno Alves de Almeida 51:37

And what's next for you? Where will you be foreign?

Rouzbeh Akhbari 51:43

That's a very good question. For now. I'm in the Netherlands, I will continue to develop this project and side projects that are coming out of it in Portugal. So I will be in Lisbon for a while. And I plan on really allowing these stories to take me anywhere that they can. So I'm planning to be on the other side of the Strait of Hormuz in Oman over the next couple of years and see where that would take me. One interest that I have now in these like hybrid international sites is linguistics. And there is a village on the south part of the Strait whose it's called Kumzar. And their language is really such a fascinating mix of multiple languages: Portuguese, Arabic, Farsi, English, and it's one of the endangered languages around the world now, and only the people in that village still speak it. And it's like a 500-year language that is completely unique to a geography that is special for these sailors and everyone to be there. So I'm hoping that I can go to that village and see where things can evolve from there. Wow, amazing. Well, in the meantime, meet you in Portugal in the summer. And we're going to work on that Portuguese. Yes, yeah. Perfect. Thank you.

Laura Tibi 53:22

Thank you for listening to Transmissions, a podcast of the Blackwood Gallery. The Blackwood Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the University of Toronto Mississauga. For more information, including installation images, essays, and videos, visit the Blackwood website at blackwoodgallery.ca

