

★ BELIEVERMAG.COM ★ SUBSCRIBE ★ STORE ★ CURRENT ISSUE ★

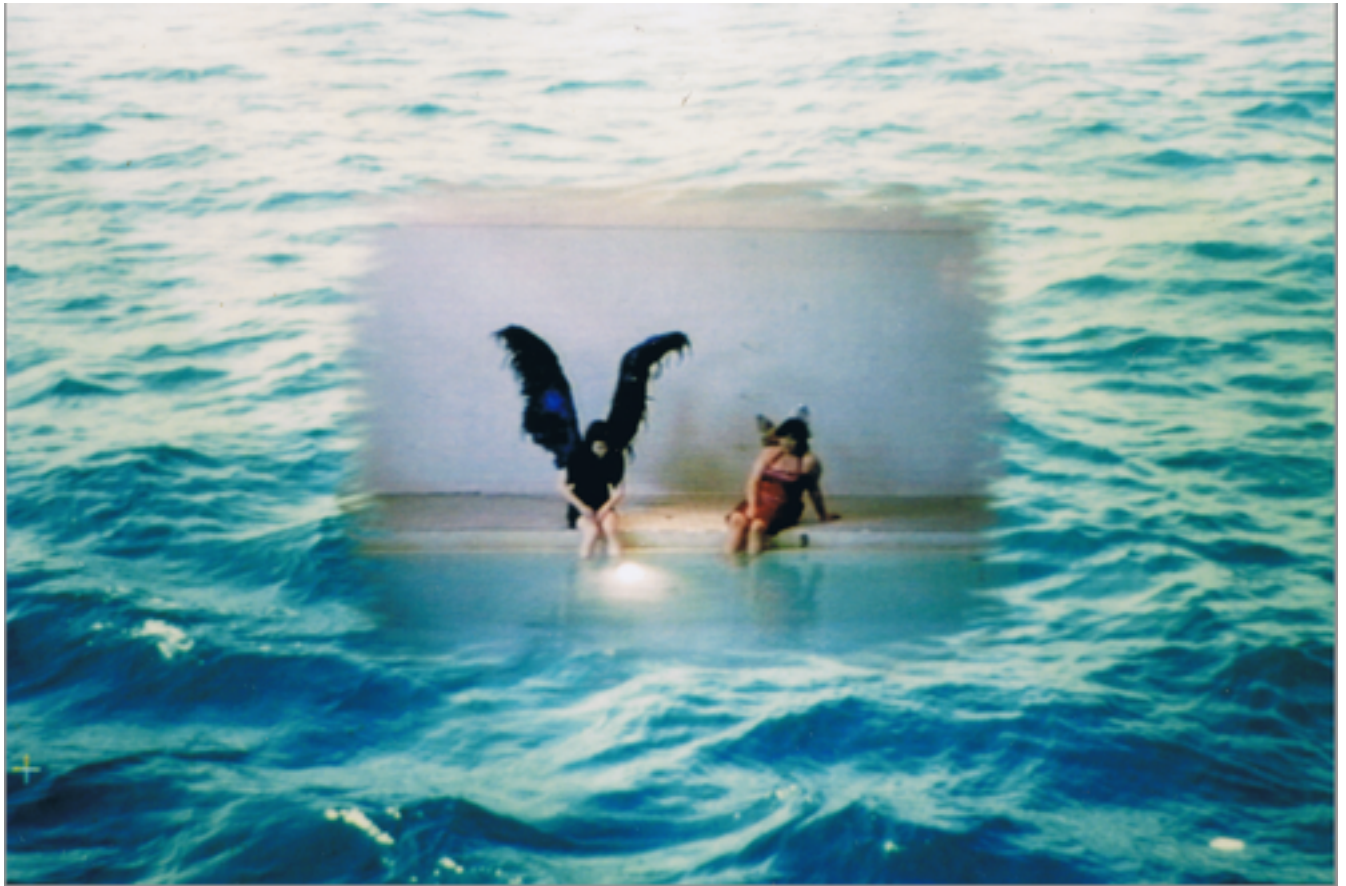
THE BELIEVER

Enjoy the special features below and please consider *subscribing to the Believer*.

LOGGER

JUNE 16, 2014

"WE HOPE TO HOOK A BIG FISH, BUT WE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE MIGHT FIND."



An Interview with Filmmaker Nina Menkes

Avant-garde filmmaker Nina Menkes's works are as mysterious as they are powerful, surreal portraits of disconnected lives, uniquely composed of dream-like stills, gritty flashes of trauma and fury.

Since her 1981 debut A Soft Warrior, Menkes has created eight films (six features). Menkes writes, shoots, edits, directs and produces her work, frequently in collaboration with her sister, Tinka Menkes, who has appeared as the protagonist in most of her films, including Queen of Diamonds (1991) and The Bloody Child (1996). Menkes' films have toured the world, receiving rave reviews and many honors, including a Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, two Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, an Annenberg Foundation Independent Media Grant, an American Film Institute Independent Filmmaker Award, and two Fulbright Research Awards.

Menkes' current projects include Heatstroke, a "thriller slash psychological quest film," that takes place in Cairo, Egypt, and Los Angeles. Menkes described the script as prophetic, "interior and surreal," eerily mirroring the civil unrest which had, at the time of this interview, recently erupted in Cairo, where the US Embassy was attacked in a protest over an anti-Islamic film. She is also working on a film set in Jerusalem called MINOTAUR, based on the Greek Myth.

This interview took place over email and via Skype, where Menkes was sitting in a less than reputable hotel in Jordan, surrounded by what sounded like frantic street traffic.

—Mariko Tamaki

I. WORLDS OF THE IMAGINATION

THE BELIEVER: Okay, I'm just gonna let her rip.

NINA MENKES: Sure.

BLVR: While you're sitting in a hotel in Jordan.

NM: Yeah, I'm in a divey hotel. So.

BLVR: What makes it a divey hotel?

NM: I think it's two stars. But I'm moving tomorrow to five stars because I can't take it. I tried to save money, but I realized those days are over for me, the twenty-five year old backpacking days.

BLVR: Do you think someone meeting you as a little girl would picture you as a future experimental filmmaker?

NM: I don't know about experimental, but probably a filmmaker. I was always putting on plays. I had this witch school, and I was creating worlds of the imagination and acting them out, so it kind of makes sense that I became a film director.

BLVR: What kinds of games did you play as a kid? Were you one of those kids who made movies when you were little? Were you an amateur spy?

NM: It's funny that you mention "amateur spy," because I loved *Harriet the Spy*, and as I recall I did try to be like Harriet for a certain period of my young life: notebook and spying and all that. My targets never ended up being as interesting as Harriet's... but I tried.

As for making movies, negative: my mom found television abhorrent, and we never had one. Moving media images were not central to my childhood. I am still unable to watch TV; I have one in my living room, but the last time I turned it on (not counting DVD use) was on 9/11.

BLVR: I wanted to talk a little bit about chaos and order and creativity. It takes work to make art, obviously, but there's also the necessity of letting things take shape. How much of your work comes out of structure and how much of it is a surprise?

NM: The answer is kind of different for each film. The most extreme example of going with the flow was *The Bloody Child* (a film based on the true story of a U.S. Marine found digging a grave for his murdered wife in the middle of the California Mojave). I barely had a script for that film. I was out on location with the crew and a 35mm camera. I was really working off a sketch: the arrest of this Marine and some other things that were happening in Twentynine Palms. The structure of that film was discovered in a grueling editing process. It was most unexpected. That was an extreme example of discovering the structure in the editing. The other films stayed closer to a written script, although I have always said I truly experience all my films as a surprise when I see the rushes. It's always a little different than I thought it would be. I think my earlier films were more different than I thought they would be. I think that's just because I've become more conscious. It's also partly dependent on the technology. For *The Great Sadness of Zohara*, my sister and I shot the film on 16mm while we were traveling in Morocco. And we never saw a single frame of footage until we got back to LA a month later. So then it was like: surprise! You know, the whole experience of the film and the travel was one of fun and exciting adventure, and then I looked at the footage and it was really morose and alienating. And I was shocked, because I wasn't trying to do that. Compare that to HD, in which you shoot a scene and two seconds later you have complete replay. The loop is sped up with the technology, so you kind of know what you're getting. Still, when you edit all the images together and add sound, it's always a discovery.

BLVR: Can you see yourself being only a director and not an editor as well?

NM: No, because it's so fun! First of all, I love doing it. It's the most fun thing, so why should I let someone else do it? I like to do the camera work myself because I kind of *feel* it, you know, I don't articulate it, I feel it. It's the same with editing. If someone told me I could have five million dollars but someone else would get to run the camera, I'd walk away. I couldn't work that way. I can't think that way. I work through my hands, so I couldn't really tell someone, "do this" or "zoom in." Because it's not an intellectual process, it's an intuitive, spontaneous process.

II. ANOTHER FILM ABOUT BRUTAL VIOLENCE

BLVR: *L.A. Weekly* said you are one of the last "genuinely radical" filmmakers. That's a pretty awesome thing for someone to say about you. Do you see yourself as "genuinely radical?"

NM: It will sound very arrogant if I say yes, but I will, because some of my films, especially those I did with Tinka, are profoundly radical. There's nothing like them. I would say *Queen of Diamonds* and *The Bloody Child*, in terms of editing, are definitely radical films with no precedent whatsoever in the cinematic world. Some of the other films are a little less radical in that they can be traced to cinematic history. At the risk of tooting my own horn, I think the films are radical because they come from a place that is new and fresh inside myself, as opposed to responding to existing ways of doing things. I was never trying to be experimental or anti-anything; I was always trying to be real to things I was feeling. The films have a freshness, I think, which comes from the fact that they are their own things, and they're not trying to be or refer to anything else particularly.

BLVR: Violence is obviously a key issue in your films. How did you come to this subject for exploration?

NM: I never set out to explore it. I was stunned at my own interest in a way. I've worked from such an intuitive place that I never go out thinking that violence is an interesting subject, per se. A lot of times, images just come to me, and I start to piece them together, and when I see the film in the end I have to say "Oh my God, it's another film about brutal violence," and "where did that come from?"

A lot of where it came from is very personal. It's personal history that was mainly unconscious in me.

BLVR: Violence in your movies, especially in *Queen of Diamonds*, comes in from the periphery. It's down the hall and slowly creeps into your consciousness. The picture of violence you see in your films is never swash-buckling or glorious; it's always disturbing. It creeps in.

NM: It's there without being there. It permeates the atmosphere in a spooky way.

BLVR: That's a good word for it. Spooky.

NM: I definitely was not aiming for that, so on that level my films, especially the films with Tinka, which is to say most of the films, kind of stun me. You know: more alienated violence, wow, where is that coming from? I didn't know. It's taken years of psychoanalysis to get a clue.

BLVR: I was really drawn to the long shots in your films. They remind me of playing this computer puzzle game, *Myst*, that involves looking at a frozen screen for hours, trying to find the tiniest details, inconsistencies, in the images on screen. In your films, the audience really has to take in the whole moment. What is your curatorial process for these shots? Do you just drive around looking for pictures, moments? I picture you in a car with your hands held in a square looking for these stills.

NM: A lot of those moments are scripted, so, once it's scripted, you have to go find it. Magical things happen though, like the burning palm tree in *Queen of Diamonds*. I had actually seen a photograph by Richard Misrach of these California palm trees, in the desert, that were on fire. And I found out that these palm trees ignite spontaneously sometimes. So I thought, I've got to put that in there. We were driving around looking for a tree that we could burn. And we came across this lonesome tree in the middle of nowhere, near the Salton Sea. So we went to the local fire department. It turned out the tree was

scheduled to be cut down in two weeks, so I didn't have to feel guilty. And they said, we can come and burn the tree for you. It was \$5 for a permit to make a fire in an open space. So that whole scene was \$5. When stuff like that happens you feel like higher power is kind of arranging it.

III. SPIRIT, HEART, EYES AND GUTS

BLVR: I'm an amateur urban witch, and I felt a lot of witchiness in many of your films. I know you had a witchcraft school when you were little. Can you tell me a little about it?

NM: I had this big imagination. I thought of other worlds, witches and fairytales. I made this witch school, and I made myself a spell book, which I think I still have. I recruited neighborhood kids to be apprentices. It was really great. It didn't last that long, but it was really special while it was going on.

BLVR: If you had a magic power now what would you want?

NM: That's too personal!

BLVR: Ok. Well, you could have one you really wish for, and a periphery power that would just be really convenient.

NM: Well, God, it's just such a hard question. What am I going to say, world peace?

BLVR: No, I mean something that you could do. Like levitation or telekinesis.

NM: Oh. Hmmmm. [Very long pause]

BLVR: I'm just going to assume you're such a practical DIY person that you're like, I don't need a super power: I write, direct and shoot all my own films.

NM: That's right. No, I mean, I think when we connect to our own internal spiritual power and don't get sidetracked by our addictions and problems and insanities, that's the best witchcraft. It's being in touch with our instincts on a spiritual level.

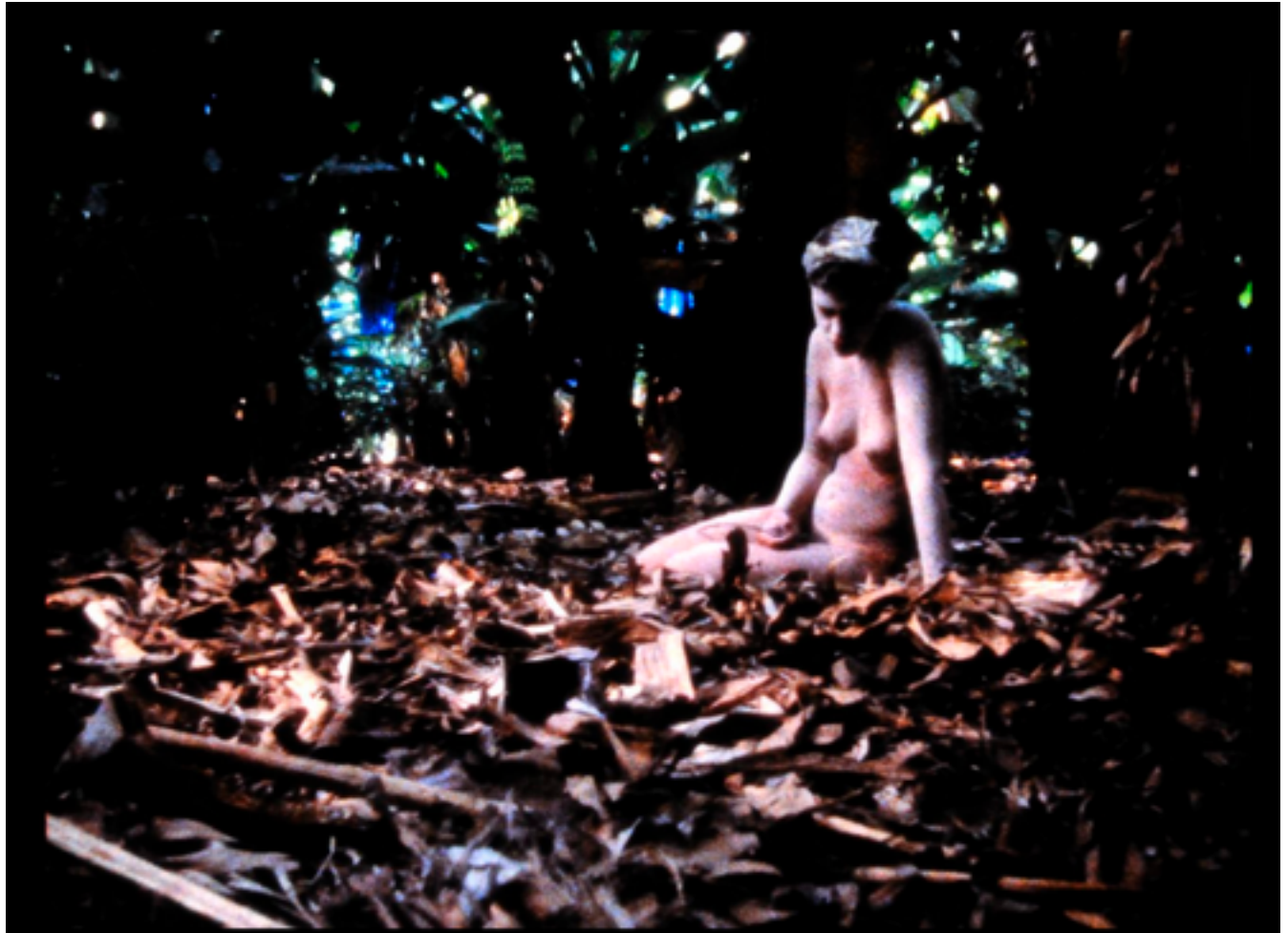
BLVR: Your retrospective is called "Cinema as Sorcery." How do you see filmmaking as a form or sorcery or witchcraft?

NM: I see my films as being primarily about, as well as agents of, transformation. I also feel that I channel and/or conjure my films as opposed to "write and direct" them.

I've never wanted that "written and directed" credit; it feels all wrong to me, despite the fact that I do write and I do direct. My sister and collaborator Tinka once said that a good script is bait: we go fishing with it, and we hope to hook a big fish, but we don't know what we might find. In other words, it's not so

much that I control the movies—more that they appear in front of me, as if they are independent agents or spirits.

"Witch" is also a clear title for a creative woman, especially one that deals with Other Realms. And as women we don't have too many models of feminine creative power. At least, certainly not when I was growing up; it is better now, somewhat. Which reminds me: I played the character of the Bloody Child (the spirit) in a Shakespearean theater production of Macbeth when I was six years old—my mother was friends with the actors, and my whole family ate dinner with the production 'on the house' thanks to my work—but anyway, the point is, I was already part of the Witchy World very young.



BLVR: Are you a feminist filmmaker?

NM: I am surely a feminist filmmaker, but not because I set out to become one, or am trying to make any kind of statement. Rather, it's inherent in the act of expressing myself, as a woman who is deeply alienated from mainstream cinematic structures of seeing. I express myself and am instantly feminist. But I wasn't aiming for that, ever.

My only real purpose is to show what I feel and what I see, with the maximum clarity and precision I have at the time the work is being made. My private perceptions naturally intersect with larger social and

political questions. We all know by now what was articulated so simply and beautifully by feminist theorists in the '70s: the personal is political.

BLVR: What's next for you?

NM: Right now I'm working with producers Brad Gilbert and Mike S. Ryan, and Gus Van Sant as executive producer, on my new project *Heatstroke*. It's a kind of thriller slash psychological quest film set in Cairo, Egypt and Los Angeles. Of course with recent events [the attack on the US Embassy in Cairo], which, by the way, all prophetically appear in my script, Cairo is feeling a little bit dangerous right now; we might have to shoot somewhere else.

The film is about the West Islam crisis through my perspective, which is very interior and surreal, and through the lives of two women.

I'm also working on a film set in Jerusalem called *MINOTAUR*, based on the Greek Myth. Tony Copti is producing, and Svetlana Khodchenkova, who was the Viper in *Wolverine*, is playing the sorceress Ariadne.

BLVR: What do you think your films illustrate in terms of your relationship to the world around you?

NM: The world is mystical, mysterious, powerful, brutal and awesome... it has a surreal logic, and moves in patterns, some of which can be unearthed and illuminated—on condition that I am listening—with my spirit, heart, eyes and guts on a single axis (with thanks to Cartier-Bresson).

[*See more of Nina Menkes' work.*](#)

[*See *Dissolution and Phantom Love* streaming for free.*](#)

<http://logger.believmag.com/post/88954439054/we-hope-to-hook-a-big-fish-but-we-dont-know-what-we>