This is a pre-peer review preprint © Harris, 2023. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in: Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ), The, Volume 12, Issue 1, Apr 2023, p. 126 – 132. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1386/miraj\_00110\_5.

Nira Pereg, Patriarchs

Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 29 October 2022 - 18 February 2023

Ayo Akingbade, Show Me The World Mister

Chisenhale Gallery, London, 10 November 2022 - 5 February 2023

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Recent exhibitions by Nira Pereg and Ayo Akingbade featured films which seem, at first glance, to share few similarities. Pereg’s exhibition, *Patriarchs,* at the Talbot Rice Gallery in Edinburgh, took as its subject Al-Khalil/Hebron in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and the everyday threat under which Muslims worship there. In her exhibition, *Show Me The World Mister,* at the Chisenhale in London, Akingbade’s attention was focused on the spiritual, political, and industrial landscape of Nigeria. Both artists’ work is marked by a deep engagement with places, the politics embedded in them, and the ways that they are constructed ‘out of articulations of social relations [...] which link them to elsewhere’ (Massey 1995: 183). The ‘elsewhere’ to which the places of these films are linked encompasses the local and global configurations of which they are a part, but also the here and now of the gallery in which they are viewed. Worlds apart though the subject matters may be, this focus on ‘place’—understood as the product of geographical, material, meaningful, and social processes (Gieryn 2000; Pred 1984)—makes it worth thinking about Pereg and Akingbade together. This review essay will do just that, taking each artist in turn, before turning to recent literature on place-based ‘atmospheres’ as a way of conceptualising these works and their presence in the gallery.

Pereg’s exhibition *Patriarchs* took its audience to The Cave of the Patriarchs. This ancient religious complex, in which Abraham is said to be entombed, is revered by Muslims and Jews alike. Located in Al-Khalil/Hebron, the site has borne witness to the bloodshed that characterises the Israeli occupation of the West Bank: in 1994, 29 Muslims worshipping during Ramadan were murdered and 125 injured in a massacre perpetrated by an American Israeli-settler. Following this, the Israeli state split the site in two. Bulletproof walls and checkpoints stand between Muslim and Jewish worshippers. Except, that is, on 10 occasions a year when, for 24 hours, one religion is granted access to the whole site to mark their holidays (Talbot Rice Gallery 2022). On these days, one religious group will pack away all their sacred artefacts and, following checks by an Israeli Defence Force (IDF) unit, the site stands empty for the briefest of pauses, before being repopulated by worshippers from the other side of this religious divide. This ‘absurd duet’, as Pereg calls it (TATE 2023), is far from an exercise in equality. Power rests in the guns of the supervising IDF.

The enactments and everyday negotiations that this blunt compromise engenders is the subject of Pereg’s two filmic place-portraits, which were on display at the Talbot Rice Gallery*.* In *ISHMAEL* (2015), the focus is the rhythm of an average day in The Cave of the Patriarchs*.* Across four screens, we watch the orchestration of the calls to prayer, the delivery of which involves a Muezzin having to cross from the mosque into the synagogue where the minaret, in a cruel quirk, is located. Locked gates and the IDF block his passage. As much as the work is about the religious rhythms of everyday life of The Cave of the Patriarchs, it is also about the power relations that structure them. We watch the Muezzin’s long wait for an answer to his knock on the gate that separates him from his religious duties; we watch as four or more heavily armed members of the IDF chaperone him as he carries them out. Pereg moves the action across the four wall-mounted screens of the work as if signing in the round, with the next call to prayer hot on the tails of the previous one. This creates a driving sense of repetition, and of the slow, grinding violence of everyday control.

The second work on show was *ABRAHAM ABRAHAM SARAH SARAH* (2012).[[1]](#endnote-1) This work consists of two films, installed at Talbot Rice life-size and opposite each other, that document the process of transforming mosque to synagogue and synagogue to mosque on two holy days in 2012. Similar processes of removing and packing away icons are made different by the religions to which the icons refer. The moving of heavy furniture, the definitive locking of doors, and the heavy silence of newly empty rooms comprises a soundtrack in which the human voice is largely absent. Camera shots are still and seemingly passive. The configuration of the installation creates a tension for the viewer forced to stand in between the two screens, and an incompleteness—the religious other always present in its absence. The viewer is forced to do the otherwise impossible and bridge these two social worlds. The films of *ABRAHAM ABRAHAM SARAH SARAH* do not leave the interior of The Cave of the Patriarchs, but the religious fracture that animates the action on-screen is only intelligible as one manifestation of the entrenched conflict that continues to rip through the Occupied Palestinian Territories. During the writing of this review, 12 Palestinian worshipers were injured during Ramadan when the Al-Asqa Mosque in East Jerusalem was raided by Isreali police using stun guns and rubber bullets (Al-Mughrabi and Abu Mayzer 2023). As the conflict endures *ABRAHAM ABRAHAM SARAH SARAH* accumulates ever more political resonances.

Like Pereg, Akingbade similarly produces seemingly observational films, which emerge from subjecting the everyday social life of particular places to an historical and political lens. The seemingly observational nature of her work means discussions of Akingbade’s work often characterise it as a troubling of the distinction between documentary and non-documentary (Folawiyo 2022). She has a documentarian’s interest in places, their social lives, and histories, but trains her attention on the affective attachments that make a place meaningful for her and for others. *Deadphant* (2020), for example, is a portrait of Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre in London shortly before the mall closed after 55 years. Shot on grainy Super-8mm film, the whir of the camera all but masks the sounds of the shopping centre. Analogue’s inevitable march towards disintegration weighs heavily on the film, as the passing of time weighs heavy on this dying place. ‘My exploration is always the city and how people feel in it’ she has said, ‘it’s enchanting’ (Whitechapel Gallery 2021).

Two more recent films premiered at London’s Chisenhale Gallery while Nira Pereg’s exhibition was in Edinburgh: *The Fist* (2022) and *Faluyi* (2022). These films comprised the exhibition *Show Me The World Mister*, which will tour to Spike Island in Bristol, the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton and the Baltic in Gateshead throughout 2023-2024. These works show two sides of Akingbade’s practice, *The Fist* being a non-fiction ‘intimate portrait’ of a factory in Ikeja, Nigeria, while *Faluyi* is a narrative film set in the Idanre Hills of south-western Nigeria, in which the protagonist, Ife, ‘embarks on a meditative journey tracing familial legacy and mysticism within ancestral land’ (Chisenhale Gallery 2022). Installed on opposite sides of the dimly lit gallery, and screened sequentially, the viewer watched the films from either side of an angular contraption of aluminium, steel and polycarbonate that split the gallery (a former factory itself) in two. If ‘place’ is ‘space’ filled with meaning, then we can see *Show Me The World Mister* as a genre-hopping study of this process in the Idanre Hills, Ikeja, and Nigeria more broadly.

Of the two films, it is *The Fist* that speaks to the interests of this essay and offers a comparison to the work of Pereg. LikePereg’s works in *Patriarchs*, *The Fist* has a singular focus on one place: the first Guinness factory built outside of Ireland and the UK in the Ikeja Industrial Estate, Lagos, which services Nigeria as the brand’s second largest market. Since 1962, shortly after the Nigerian independence movement led to the formal end of British colonial rule, the factory has been churning out the British-owned ‘national’ drink of Ireland. Guinness is a slippery national symbol for Ireland, the Guinness family having been Unionists, and the history of the drink is one of a brand ‘in pursuit of its own mythic story’ (Simmons, 2006). The subtext of this story, however, is deeply colonial. Ireland and Nigeria live with the legacies of British Imperialism from opposite sides of the Global North/South divide, which splits the owners of the global means of production from the workers whose labour powers it. The Guinness factory of *The Fist* is an example of the persistence of imperial power—the profit it produces following the old colonial route back to London. The relationship between ‘power, history, and labour’ is, in Akingbade’s own words, central to her practice (Chisenhale Gallery, 2022). Guinness is the perfect avatar for this. It is both commodity and symbol, a stand in for the myths and icons that make up the cultural battleground of national identity, and the colonial haunting of these stories.

*The Fist’s* camerawork is restrained, much like Pereg’s, with mid-shots of workers and machines interspersed with close-up details of signs or smashed bottles on the floor. Brief flashes between scenes interrupt the viewing experience, and at other times the film stock deteriorates, reminding us that Akingbade has again chosen to shoot on analogue, this time 35mm film. The 24-minute film follows roughly the rhythms of the working day: workers clocking in, morning team-talks and prayers, production lines and break times. Like *ABRAHAM ABRAHAM SARAH SARAH,* the audio track is largely devoid of the human voice, buried as it is beneath the sounds of machinery. Unavoidably, the film has something of the ‘how it’s made’ about it, indulging our fascination with the tide of activity that deposits commodities in our hands without leaving a trace of their production. Akingbade’s camera makes of the Guinness factory a whole world, a total system of labour and things. Nowhere is this more suggestive than in the shots of machinery, in which the the piled-up boxes and blinking lights of machinery take on the appearance and aloofness of a cityscape.

The subjects of Pereg’s and Akingbade’s films are vastly different. Nonetheless, many of their artistic choices—the pared back use of the human voice; still, relatively long shots; an observational focus on people and their actions; unwavering interiority—are similar, and bring to mind other films like Cao Fei’s *Whose Utopia* (2006) or Ben Rivers’ *Sack Barrow* (2011), as well as sharing something with the ‘sensory ethnographic’ tradition of filmmaking (Nakamura 2013)[[2]](#endnote-2). More broadly, however, they share an interest in portraying places as they are experienced in the everyday, in which complex political histories and manifestations of power are embedded in routine social lives. The films, then, can be characterised as portraits of places’ atmospheres, of the experiential world that is created by the geographical, material, and meaningful social processes that make places what they are. Akingbade makes this intention clear in her reflection on the process of shooting *The Fist*. She writes: ‘There were lots of different rhythms and energies across the space which felt important to capture. When I was shooting the film with Pierre [Robinson] – the cinematographer – we had lots of discussions about the atmosphere in the space, and how to capture that’ (Chisenhale Gallery, 2022). Similarly, although in reference to different works, Pereg has spoken of how her artistic choices are guided by the ‘atmosphere’ of places that she takes as her subjects (Barkai 2019: 243).

This focus on atmospheres offers a route to theoretically conceptualising their work. Atmosphere has been at the centre of a growing body of theoretical work, following on from philosopher Gernot Böhme’s call to make atmosphere the foundational concept of a new aesthetics (Böhme 2017). Böhme theorises atmospheres as ‘spatial bearers of moods’ which shape social action and meaning making (16). He writes that atmospheres ‘fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze’ (12). In positing atmosphere as a foundational concept of a new aesthetics, Böhme is calling for a return to the sensuous in how art is theorised and understood, in an attempt to row back on the intellectualism and hermenutic tendency that he diagnoses as a negative attribute of artistic scholarship. In so doing, he is deeply influenced by Walter Benjamin’s familiar concept of ‘aura’ (Benjamin 2008 [1936]). Böhme, however, takes his aesthetic theory further than the work of art. He builds a general theory, in which ‘the primary “object” of perception is atmospheres’ (2017, p. 23). It is this move, from the aesthetics of artworks to the aesthetics of everyday life, that has made his work so popular with social scientists who, in the wake of the affective turn,[[3]](#endnote-3) seek to conceptualise the lived experience of places (Kuruoğlu & Woodward 2021; Simpson 2015; Sumartojo & Pink 2019). Social theories of place have long been sensitive to the political, economic, or material processes through which places are forged; a focus on atmospheres emphasises how these same processes fill places with certain qualities of feeling.

Although Akingbade and Pereg may not be refering to this body of work in their appeals to atmopshere, it is nonetheless useful for understanding what they do. Both artists present the places in their works, whether The Cave of the Patricarchs or the Guinness factory, as ‘spatial bearers of mood’ (2017: 16); that is, the effect of their films is not to convey information about a place so much as to convey a quality of feeling within it. This is not such a huge departure from dominant theories of embodied film spectatorship which focus on the haptic qualities of film and its ability to induce a seemingly precognitive sensory closeness (Marks 1999). However, thinking through atmospheres calls less on corporality than it does on spatiality. This also helps us to understand their works as political. As Böhme and subsequent theorists make clear, the production of atmopsheres is not neutral (Böhme 2017: 23; Borch 2014). Atmospheres can either be deliberately produced to service certain political ends, or they can be the experiential correlate of the social and power relations that shape places. In *ABRAHAM ABRAHAM SARAH SARAH,* Peregchoses to document the everyday enactments of Israeli power in the West Bank, and the ways that this shapes and contorts the social experiences that happens there. Although the film is framed only indirectly by violence and death, which is an ever-present reality in Palestine, it captures the atmospheres of threat and containment that is, for the Muslim worshippers in these films, an affective mode in which life is lived. To say that *The Fist* is atmospheric is to say that it invokes the sense of the repetitive, oppressive grind of factory-line work, but that this heaviness is made lighter by the sharing of prayers and the passing of time together. *The Fist* is political not only because it lifts the curtain on global chains of commodity production and their colonial lineage, but because it ushers its viewers into the affective places that these chains produce as they wrap around the world (Böhme 2017: 12). Pereg and Akingbade do not use the evocation of atmospheres to simply represent their places of interest, but to comment on them.

*ABRAHAM ABRAHAM SARAH SARAH* and *The Fist* show places caught up in local and global politics, but they also link these places to their viewing contexts, i.e., the gallery space. Indeed, part of the political commentary of the works takes its power from this connection. The British exhibition contexts detailed here adds a sharpness to the colonial and geopolitical subtexts of either film. Both Pereg and Akingbade make concerted efforts to connect the ‘here’ of the exhibition to the ‘there’ of the films: Pereg implicates the viewer very physically, forcing them to stand between the screens; Akingbade, more subtly, nods to the history of Chisenhale gallery by building the viewing structure out of materials that reference its past life as a factory. However, as the artworks move to different exhibition contexts, they will take on different resonances—*The Fist*, for example, in moving from London (Chisenhale) to Bristol (Spike Island), travels from the centre of imperial administration and capital to a centre of imperial trading. In other words, the atmospheres of the films do not inhere solely on the screen, they also inhere in and respond to the gallery space. This is the starting point of Böhme’s theory, after all: to bring back into focus the site-specificity of aesthetic experience by positing artworks as producers of atmopsheres. In conjuring up atmopsheres of elsewhere within the gallery, artists’ moving image also produces new places—atmospheric places, animated by here, there, and the links that connect them.

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1. At the time of writing this review in April and May 2023, this work, which is in the Tate Collection, was also on show in Tate Modern’s The Tanks in London. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Researchers working in the ‘sensory ethnography’ tradition tend to attempt to convey the aesthetic or multi-sensory nature of their field sites in their research outputs. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The affective turn marked a move in social research towards the body, and the production of feelings and emotions through both social and intimately personal processes. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)