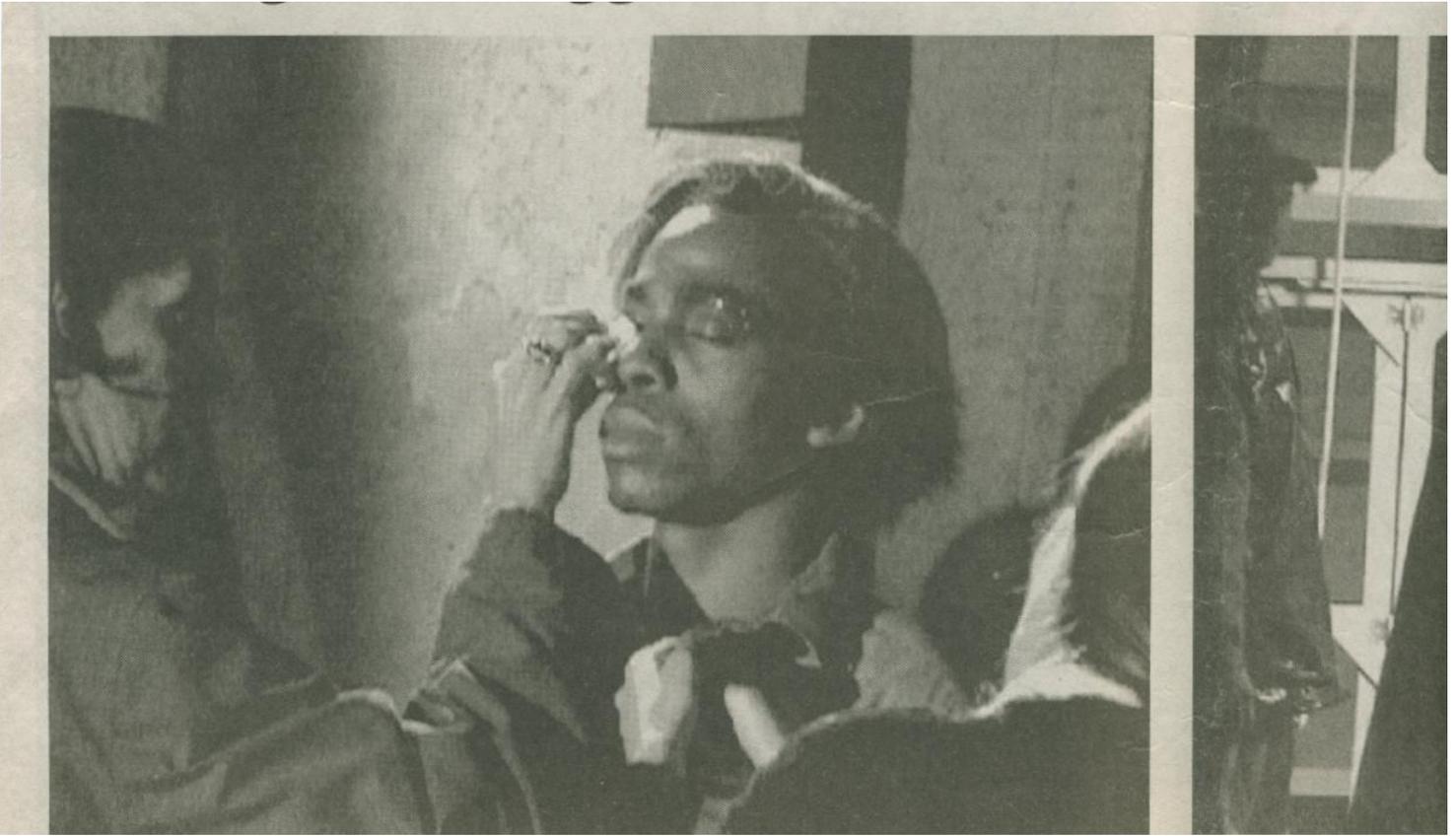


Getting Caravaggio From Video,



Images from "Irit Batsry: Set", a video installation in which Lázaro Ramos, left, is filmed playing a legendary drag queen in a Brazilian

By ROBERTA SMITH

The jury at the Whitney Museum of American Art knew what it was doing when it gave the Israeli-born film-video artist Irit Batsry the \$100,000 Bucksbaum Award for her work in the 2002 Whitney Biennial Exhibition. "Irit Batsry: Set," a show that is the culmination of the award, introduces a deserving winner and a profoundly imposing if initially unprepossessing work of art.

This wasn't entirely expected. The original announcement of Ms. Batsry as the winner was greeted with a collective "Who?" followed by a somewhat less collective "Oh, no, not more film and video!"

The joke was that the museum's survey would be renamed the Whitney Biennial Film Festival. The first Bucksbaum Award, handed out at the 2000 Biennial, went to Paul Pfeiffer, another video artist. But Mr. Pfeiffer's "Fragment of a Crucifixion (After Francis Bacon)" was among the 2000 Biennial's few real hits and truly original artworks. So Mr. Pfeiffer seemed an auspicious choice for the award, which harbors ambitions of becoming the American Turner Prize.

When it came to buzz, the choice of Ms. Batsry more or less had none. Her videos and occasional installation pieces had almost never been shown in New York (although she has lived here since 1983), and her contribution to the 2002 Biennial had almost zero impact. "These Are Not My Images (Neither There Nor Here)," her beautiful but overly arty 80-minute feature in the show's film and video section, was shown only three times in the Biennial's 10-week run. (It will be screened a fourth time on Feb. 2 at 8:30 p.m. at MoMA Gramercy.)

A nervier, sexier choice for the second Bucksbaum

Award might have been the young two-man collective Forcefield, whose multimedia installation took up a lot of gallery space and polarized opinion. (I hated the noise and flashing lights but loved the knitted garments.)

I doubt that I'm the only one who stands corrected. Ms. Batsry's current exhibition, which has been organized by Lawrence Rinder, curator of contemporary art at the Whitney, unveils "Set," a seemingly modest but ultimately consuming video installation. Its superiority to "These Are Not My Images" suggests that it is some kind of breakthrough for the artist.

Its physical components are simple enough: a dark room punctuated by the light of five smallish screens leaning against the walls with little clumps of equipment in front of them. These include miniscreens of Plexiglas that reflect the projected images onto the walls, recreating them as distorted, phantasmagoric ghosts. Amid a constant play of searing lights and velvety shadows, the work creates a Caravaggio-style surround of silent, shape-shifting images and images-within-images. It is a journey to several hearts of darkness: cinematic, social, personal and artistic.

A video installation about the making of a real film about a real life, "Set" throws a fistful of themes at us as we move from screen to screen, watching a young actor and film crew at work on a movie set. These include masquerade and illusion, social difference and conflict, religious art and ritual, artistic collaboration and individual expression.

The work revolves around the magnetically androgynous face and considerable stage presence of Lázaro Ramos, a handsome young actor, as he stars in "Madame Satã," the award-winning film debut of the Brazilian director Karim Aïnouz. Mr. Ramos plays the role of João Francisco dos Santos (1900-76), a legendary inhabitant of the Lapa, the impoverished bohemian quarter of Rio de Janeiro.

The child of slaves, dos Santos was a thief, a prostitute, a street fighter, a female impersonator and

With Several Hearts of Darkness



Photographs by Irit Batsry / Whitney Museum of American Art

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is filmed playing a legendary drag queen in a Brazilian movie. At right, crew members set up an outdoor night scene for the movie.

His life in prison and was equal parts Robin Hood, Josephine Baker and Mack the Knife. Madame Satã was among several flamboyantly imperious persona he created for himself, this one inspired by his admiration for Cecil B. DeMille's 1930 film "Madame Satan."

Shadowing the director, cinematographer, cast and crew, Ms. Batsry spent two weeks videotaping Mr. Aïrouz's set. From this she extracted 43 minutes of videotape, which play simultaneously in six sequences, ranging from 2 to 20 minutes each, on the five screens. There is also a kind of mysterious come-on projection, visible from the street and the lobby, playing on the museum's bridge like entrance.

It would be a limitation if Mr. Aïrouz's film, which

A movie about a Brazilian drag queen becomes the subject of a museum installation.

Stephen Holden called formidable in his review in The New York Times last summer, were required viewing for Ms. Batsry's work to be effective. But it is not. In an age when popular films routinely offer audiences fragmented, postmodernist narratives ("21 Grams" is among the current examples), the mind goes to work. It is quickly apparent that the scenes are related, that we are watching a film being made and that each bit of narrative sustains multiple readings.

Proceeding from left to right, the screens move from fact through process to fiction; from the mundane details of makeup, through the elaborate mechanics of staging and lighting, to the intensity and illusion of performance.

Mr Ramos is the lure. In the first two screens his

eyes are closed and his beautiful black face is being daubed by a white hand holding a white tissue. He is being made up, but he could be having blond, sweat or tears wiped away, he could be the object of some ordeal, maybe even Christ on the cross.

The longest sequence, subtitled "Setup," shows people moving in a smoothly running display of teamwork. Distances are measured, ladders come and go, a pristine bounce board for light is clamped in place. The action moves between vast indoor spaces and the street, where a nighttime tracking shot is being set up. The crew dons anoraks as rain starts to fall. This sequence plays as landscape to the portraiture of Mr. Ramos's makeup scenes. The still life, on an adjacent screen, is a nearly immobile shot of a solitary bounce board, whose steady, glaring white surface assumes an emblematic, unearthly aura, like a pure shining shield or banner.

The work's final and most beautiful sequence, subtitled "Reflect," shows both Mr. Ramos and his character in performance. In one scene he appears in makeup and a sparkling choker, dancing suggestively in a café. In others, haughtily furious, he defends himself in nasty confrontations that sometimes turn violent as the images jump and roll exaggeratedly. Sometimes the camera draws back to reveal that the scenes are being screened on a monitor: these are the daily rushes and someone off-camera is operating the remote: fast forward, reverse, freeze.

With antecedents like Jean-Luc Godard, Michael Snow, early Peter Campus and Joan Jonas and contemporaries like Catherine Sullivan, Isaac Julien and Jeremy Deller, Ms. Batsry operates in the gap between fiction and documentary. In "Set" she takes us into that gap to experience for ourselves a complexity that is as psychological as it is painterly, as literary as it is spatial. She displays an unusual ability to draw rich pictorial, symbolic and poetic resonances from the nuts and bolts of filmmaking, and she shows a sure grasp of the inextricable unity of form and content, or structure and meaning, that is scarce in contemporary art.