

Jaddoland

Directed by Nadia Shihab, 2018, 90 minutes, color. Distributed by Grasshopper Films Educational, www.store.grasshopperfilm.com/jaddoland.html

NATALIE NESVADERANI & MIASARAH LAI

Cornell University, Ethnocine Collective
Brown Girls Doc Mafia, Ethnocine Collective

Jaddoland, directed by Iraqi Yemeni-American Nadia Shihab, opens on a suburban yard in Lubbock, Texas. In a wide shot long take, Lahib Jaddo, the filmmaker's mother, rummages through the back seat of a pale blue 1950s Ford Ranchero pickup. Jaddo draws out a parched animal skeleton and holds it up for her neighbors, a middle-aged white couple, to see. With surprise and laughter, they take turns guessing what it is, with the woman stating, "His teeth look like a squirrel." From behind the camera, we hear the filmmaker say, "I don't think that's a squirrel, it's too big." Loudly, the man then jokes, with his deep southern accent, "It's a Texas squirrel!" This scene between neighbors playfully calls forth questions of cross-cultural and familial relationships as well as themes of place and belonging.

Situated through the filmmaker's personal experience, *Jaddoland* is an intergenerational portrait of Shihab's Turkmeni Iraqi family in their diasporic Texas home. The film centers on the visual artwork and processes of both her mother, Jaddo, and her own. Resonating with autoethnographic traditions as well as slow and accented cinema, *Jaddoland* provokes formal and thematic questions of interest to anthropologists and filmmakers alike. What does a cinema of diaspora look like, and what does it feel like? What constitutes as home for those who have been separated from their families, distanced from their language, tribes, and ancestral lands?

Having received no formal filmmaking training, Shihab was self-taught, learning to shoot and edit in collaboration with her family while making *Jaddoland*. Currently, she is enrolled in an interdisciplinary MFA program in the Department of Art Practice at the University of California, Berkeley. Her filmmaking process is experimental, personal, and emergent through on-screen collaboration with her mother. Instinctually, Shihab relies on the trappings of slow cinema: long takes and an observational camera that leaves space for a ruminative mode

of spectatorship. Shihab enriches this style of filmmaking by embedding photographs, letters, home videos, paintings, video phone calls with family, and wartime archival news footage to demonstrate how the past and the present, both near and far, are emotionally and intergenerationally bound together.

Over the course of the documentary, Jaddo describes her family's move from Baghdad, Iraq, to Beirut, Lebanon, then to upstate New York, and finally settling in Lubbock, Texas. The subject matter and the director's archival strategy are reminiscent of what Hamid Naficy (2018) calls "accented cinema," an aesthetic response to the experience of displacement through migration or diaspora. Shihab's editing gives poetic primacy to movement, sound, composition, and color rather than a narrative thread. Her unique editing style echoes the proclivities of her mother's painting practice by calling upon the sounds and textures of her Texas home to create a sensory atmosphere around her family's story.

"I don't make art to make pretty things to hang in my house or to sell. I make [art] because it helps me understand my life," says Jaddo. Shihab's mother is a visual artist and professor whose practice expands across watercolor, mixed media, oil, and acrylic mediums. Her paintings center on women, the natural world, her Turkmen culture, and diasporic experience. Jaddo writes in her artist statement that she is "planting roots in a new world, while remaining inextricably connected to another."¹ In one of Jaddo's portraits featured in the film, a woman wears a bright red, shell-studded dress and a yellow scarf flowing over her hair. Her empty hands are open toward the viewer and her facial expression feels kind and quizzical. We learn that Shihab's grandmother, Najiba Sabir, was an *ikebana* (arranging flowers) artist, elucidating their position within an unbroken line of artist women.

Beautifully and masterfully, Shihab visualizes this inheritance throughout the film. In one scene, for example, Jaddo pensively paints inside her home studio, while Shihab is filming her mother from the yard outside. As her camera moves, Shihab's silhouette is reflected on the window over her mother's face. This reflection of daughter on window and mother through camera lens serves as a metaphor for how Jaddo's artistic practice maps onto her daughter's filmmaking process. Appropriately titled *Jaddoland*, we have entered a world created by Lahib Jaddo through the lens of Shihab's dutiful documentation of her mother's ritualistic daily painting practice.

At times, the film itself feels like a performance piece as this mother and daughter duo make art together in their mediums of paint and of film, respectively. Shihab's filmic portrait traverses Jaddo's paintings by complicating the question

of who is directing whom. In one scene, Shihab wears a *salwar* (billowing trousers that gather tightly at the ankle) and a deep purple scarf lined with bright beads as she stands in front of a brown sheet hanging in their yard. Jaddo instructs her daughter through the photoshoot, “I want to see some arms.” “More hearing, more seeing,” Jaddo demonstrates (Figure 1). As Shihab then poses for her mother, her autonomous reflective voiceover breaks into the scene:

Since I was a young girl I’ve been posing for my mother barefoot in the garden. I could always tell how she was feeling based on the poses she had me do. If she had me turning inward my pained body became a signal of her fragility. When she asks me to pose with arms outstretched and body opened, I can feel her strength.

As Shihab’s narration unfolds, our awareness shifts from Shihab’s camera, actively taking photographs in the shoot, to Shihab’s own camera lens, positioned just behind her mother. Shihab’s and Jaddo’s artistic lenses are intertwined, and in this scene, the space between their artist bodies collapses in their shared project of calling upon and co-creating their family history.

Shihab identifies *Jaddoland* as a personal documentary. It is also evocative of autoethnographic cinema through its exploration of personal and familial experience, self-reflection in voiceover, cinematic reflexivity, and pacing. *Jaddoland* also has



FIG. 1

strong thematic, aesthetic, rhythmic resonances with the films of Chantal Akerman.

For example, in one scene, Shihab reads in Arabic a letter written by her grandmother, addressed to her daughter and grandchildren during a nighttime car ride on the open road. “Why haven’t you written? My hope is that good things keep you from writing. We worry about you and all the heavy responsibilities you carry, raising your children alone. ...Write me your news and tell me everything about my grandchildren.” This scene calls to mind Akerman’s *News from Home* (1977), in which a young Akerman, herself visually absent, accrues long shots of 1970s New York City paired with her nondiegetic reading of letters from her mother. Written from far away in Belgium, her mother’s words are increasingly anxious and remain unanswered by the filmmaker. For Akerman, home is elusive and lonely, where long-distance family relationships are marked by absence, pain, and longing.

In *Jaddoland*, home is ubiquitous. Even in the post-9/11 United States, a political climate that is unwelcoming toward people with roots in the Middle East, Shihab and Jaddo find home in the mountainous Texas landscapes, the dolma they prepare and cook together, and the stories they co-create through their shared artistic practices. Shihab’s approach to personal filmmaking is one that finds home by making home, bringing into focus one of the film’s central offerings: an ontology of diaspora as one in which home is not fixed in time and left there but, rather, constantly found and collaboratively reproduced.

Current documentary films, and there are many, depict migrant stories either in the context of crises or migrant flight, or the tribulations and celebrations upon arrival to “safety” in the West. Documentary films such as Hernan Zin’s *Born in Syria* (2016), Rokhsareh Ghaemmaghham’s *Sonita* (2015), Ai Weiwei’s *The Rest* (2019), and Morgan Knibbe’s *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* (2015) are just a handful of refugee documentaries that seek to make the Other relatable, and thus deserving of Western rescue from strife. While such documentaries provide counternarratives to mainstream discourses that criminalize migrants, they also flood viewers with images of perpetual violence brought upon Brown and Black communities. It would be a disservice to position Shihab’s film within the numerous current documentaries about migrants, as Shihab’s work falls outside of this paradigm altogether. In an interview with the World Channel, Shihab reflects, “Growing up, there were almost no stories I saw being made about women of color, by women of color. I never really saw experiences on screen that felt familiar to my inner world. I think stories

FIG. 1 Lahib Jaddo (left) instructs her daughter, Nadia Shihab (right), how to position her body during a photoshoot that Jaddo will use as inspiration for her paintings. Film still from Nadia Shihab’s *Jaddoland*. Image courtesy of Nadia Shihab. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

like this help move us from token representation to authentic representation.”²

Jaddoland's expansive aesthetics creates new spaces for diverse audience reflections about how identity and culture are not only inherited but re-created and co-created across geography and time. Shihab's film is celebrated, having received The Independent Spirit Awards' Truer than Fiction Award, among many other acknowledgments, screenings, and prizes. This reflexive documentary would be a thought-provoking teaching tool in undergraduate and graduate-level anthropology courses on migration, diaspora, and American/Arab-American anthropology, and in film production courses concerned with reflexive, personal, and autoethnographic filmmaking.

Notes

1. <http://www.lahibjaddo.com/artist-statement>.
2. <https://youtu.be/P3hjrabs8Og>.

References

- Akerman, Chantal, dir. 1977. *News from Home*. Brussels: INA, Paradise Films.
- Ghaemmaghani, Rokhsareh, dir. 2015. *Sonita*. New York: Women Make Movies.
- Knibbe, Morgan, dir. 2015. *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning*. Amsterdam: Cinema Delicatessen.
- Naficy, Hamid. 2018. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- WeiWei, Ai, dir. 2019. *The Rest*. AWW Germany.
- Zin, Hernan, dir. 2016. *Born in Syria*. Paris: Java Films.

Dislocation Blues

Directed by Sky Hopinka, 2017, 17 minutes, color. www.skyhopinka.com/dislocation-blues

SANDER HÖLSGENS 
University of Groningen

Sky Hopinka's *Dislocation Blues* is a short film that gestures toward the ethical implications of constructing a collective identity. Recorded over the course of three week long visits