

PRATAP RUGHANI:  
*The Botanist*







Los Angeles  
Times

## PRATAP RUGHANI: *The Botanist, 2009*

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<b>Output title</b>	<i>The Botanist</i>
<b>Output type</b>	Artefact
<b>Output date</b>	2009

### Supporting Statement

The *Botanist* investigates and visually reveals a garden of plants native to the continents of Europe and North Africa, some now endangered. Rughani worked closely with the director Yto Barrada and was given complete autonomy for the camerawork. *The Botanist* was shot in Umberto Pasti's garden on the Atlantic coast south of Tangiers. Rughani made two field trips (six weeks) to research gardens and stories.

Rughani's contribution to knowledge was to devise a novel form of camerawork to give centre-stage to plants and planting. Rugani filmed at 'plant level', exclusively within the frame of one metre's distance to the ground. Rughani's camerawork departs from the conventions of garden documentary with its linear, presenter-led narrative. Rughani's filming does not follow Pasti's garden tour for his friends, and it is not synchronized with their conversations. Positioned edge of frame in the mid-ground/back-ground, human presence is de-centred; plants and their relationships were filmed in the foreground with varying depths of field. The camera work interleaves static, tripod-mounted close-ups with hand-held tracking shots, extending Rughani's thinking on the theory and practice of the long take.

Rughani led cross-cultural documentary seminars with Moroccan film-makers and artists in Tangiers-brokered by the Documentary Film-Makers' Group with EU support.

The final cut of *The Botanist* premiered at Modern Art Oxford (2009). Rughani's camera work was discussed in reviews.

### Hard Copy Evidence:

1. DVD: *The Botanist*, plus *Camera Discussion* commentary between Rughani and William Raban.



**Output:**

Right: stills from *The Botanist*. See **Hard Copy Evidence Item 1** for a DVD featuring the full film (21 minutes).

### Credits

Produced & Directed - Yto Barrada

Camera  
Pratap Rughani

Sound  
Faycal Al Gandouzi

Editing  
Youssef Barrada

Illustration  
Umberto Pasti

Animation  
Chris Lohouse

Transcription  
Jenna Kate Louise

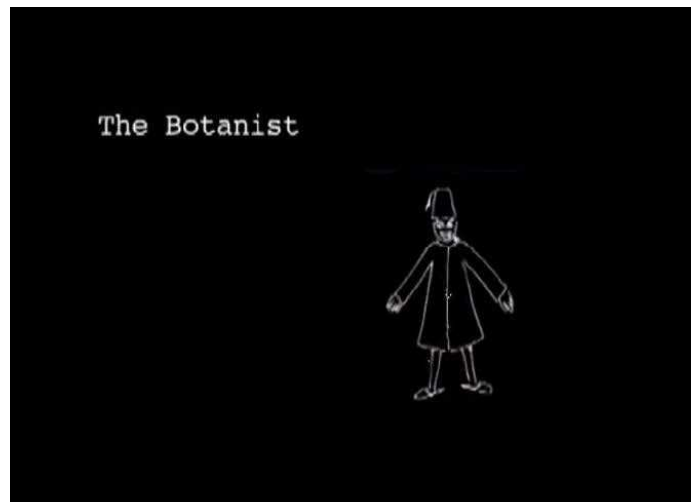
Subtitles  
Omar Berrada  
Elena Fertil





This page and next: still images from *The Botanist*, some of which indicate Rughani's 'plant level' camerawork.







**Process:**



### ***The Botanist* - Process Statement.**

*The Botanist* extends Rughani's long-standing documentary practice and research into inter-cultural communication and translates this into camerawork for an international gallery context.

*The Botanist* investigates and reveals the creation of a garden of plants native to the continents of Europe and North Africa, some now endangered. *The Botanist* emerged through a five month collaboration between Pratap Rughani and Yto Barrada at the Cinémathèque de Tanger (Tangiers, Morocco). Rughani worked closely with the director Yto Barrada and was given complete autonomy for the camerawork. The partnership emerged after Rughani led a series of cross-cultural workshops on embodied shooting styles with Moroccan artists and documentarists (brokered by the Documentary Film-Makers' Group with EU support).

Rughani made two field trips (six weeks) to research the culture and context of Moroccan botany. *The Botanist* was shot in Umberto Pasti's garden on the Atlantic coast south of Tangiers. *The Botanist* offers a strong but implicit cultural politics, realized through documentary poetics rather than a literal description of how the land is being re-shaped in the shadow of Europe. Colonialism is present as an undercurrent. We are geographically close to the point where Europe and Africa nearly touch and the cultural shadow of Europe is heard and occasionally revealed in the background. We hear privileged voices enjoying the garden yet their talk does not command the act of looking. The only words that we see written are on a sign that reads *iris tingitana*, the Tangiers Iris, named after this area and now one of the most endangered plants in the world,

Below: more still images from *The Botanist*



The enclosed DVD of *The Botanist* also includes the extra feature *Camerawork* discussion, a commentary on the film with Pratap Rughani and William Raban. See Hard Copy Evidence Item 1 (21 minutes).

underlining the environmental ethic of the piece. We are left with the words that the rare plants 'may want to disappear because they are disgusted'. The garden itself becomes a poignant symbol of the new power in the land. It can be looked at like a zoo. One can appreciate its importance in preserving many rare plants but it is also a comment on the impact of human activity where the Moroccan coast is being concreted-over with costa-del-sol type developments that threaten the very survival of rare Moroccan plants. The *Botanist* offers a more reciprocal relationship where plants look back. The play of human voices and plants' perspectives undermines the fixed subject/object relation as objects in the frame move between these poles creating a multiple perspectives.

In conversation with Professor William Raban, Rughani has discussed trying to interrupt the literalism of television convention that illustrates the plants under discussion, for example cutting to close-ups when a specific flower is talked about. Here, the editing of imagery is not ruled by their referents and the plants are not 'specified' and displayed as part of an empire of the European gaze. Instead the plants' perspectives silently lead. The human group has a lot to say but we never see them speak. There are references in the recorded speech to plants which drift through the soundscape but we do not see the faces that author the words. They are de-centred, sometimes appearing in the edge of frame in the mid-ground or background with plants in the foreground revealed with varying depths of field.



Above: iris tingitana sign mentioned on previous page

The idea to frame only part of the human body is designed to give a distantiated effect – a sense of cultures juxtaposed but held in a complex relationship, as much shot-through with disconnections as it is a celebration of creating the jewel-like garden space. Camerawork responds to the plants' shapes as objects to suggest edges for frames. The placement of human figures to unaccustomed regions of the frame (for example legs in the top third of frame) opens up a visual distance even as we are drawn in to hearing sound close-up through a mix of radio microphone and boom sound recording.

The camerawork has been widely discussed (see selection of reviews below) and was achieved by developing a series of undisturbed long takes as Rughani moved through the garden in different lights, following his responses to the location and its unfolding conversations. Camera responses are led by emodiment - physical and felt responses to listening - especially during the hand-held tracking shots and with a single echo of Monet's creation of Giverny in one shot.

The exploration of how an encounter is shaped by intercultural communication resonates with Rughani's study of Rasa theory which reflects on of the emotional tone of a work and its relationship to colour and pace in looking. The play of light, focus and arrangement of objects in frame can reshape an audience's path to identification to offer a more contemplative context.

Below: 'Monet's vision at Giverny' and an echo of its proportion in Tangiers in *The Botanist*. (bottom).





## MODERN ART OXFORD

Context:





The final cut of *The Botanist* (on-line edit by Rughani in 2009) was premiered on 18 April 2009 at the Transmission Interrupted season at Modern Art Oxford.

Rughani was responsible for overseeing the final cut for Modern Art Oxford and this is the authorised version that has received critical attention in the reviews below.

*Transmission Interrupted* looks at how contemporary artists disrupt prevailing forms of registering and representing the world. With contributions from over fourteen artists working internationally, the exhibition demonstrates art's ability to make visible and audible what remains unseen and unheard at a time when free speech and democracy are invoked as universal values to which we can all subscribe. Many of the works in the exhibition are poetic testaments to events and experiences that have a passing and, in some cases, recurring presence in the public domain.

Adel Abdessemed's *Practice Zero Tolerance* (2006) a burned-out car fashioned from black clay is a mute witness to the riots that took place in the working-class districts of Northern Paris in 2005. Sisley Xhafa's installations and performances render visible experiences and relationships that are barely recorded. His live performance piece *elegant sick bus* (2001/9), which involves a group of men pushing a mirrored tour bus through the streets, draws a parallel with the burden imposed by tourism on local populations.

A number of artists in the exhibition offer meditations on fleeting realities in cities and their inhabitants, which are at odds with the impacts of globalisation and heightened public fears and prohibitions. Simryn Gill's assemblages of found materials to create replicas of our material world and her photographic projects eloquently map the in-between spaces of borderlands and margins. Jem Cohen's mesmeric film, *NYC Weights and Measures* (2006), documents New York street life at a time when filming in the city is becoming increasingly controlled due to national security concerns.

This richly textured and thought provoking exhibition, presented throughout Modern Art Oxford's galleries, also includes a programme of films, performances and interventions in the public spaces of Oxford. The accompanying publication designed by Åbåke features interviews with exhibiting artists and contributions from poet Mourid Barghouti and Human Rights scholar Thomas Keenan.

*Transmission Interrupted* is curated by Suzanne Cotter, Senior Curator at Modern Art Oxford, and curator and writer Gilane Tawadros.

Information from: <<http://www.modernartoxford.org.uk/whats-on/transmission-interrupted/about/>> Accessed 31 October 2013].

**MODERN ART  
OXFORD**



Images of *The Botanist* in situ at Modern Art Oxford in 2009.





Images of *The Botanist* in situ at Modern Art Oxford in 2009.

After shooting *The Botanist*, Rughani led workshops on embodied shooting styles with Moroccan artists and documentarists at the Cinema Rif (Cinematheque de Tanger) in Tangiers Morocco, brokered by the Documentary Film-Makers' Group with EU support.

More information on Cinematique de Tangier is available from: <<http://www.cinemathequedetanger.com/texte-22-3-2.html>>

Information on the Documentary Film-Maker's Group is available from: <<http://thedfg.org/>>.



**Reach:**

Los Angeles  
Times

Goldsmiths  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



### **Further screenings**

'Continental Rifts: Contemporary Time-Based Works of Africa'. 22 February - 14 June 2009. A film and video season at UCLA's Fowler Museum (Los Angeles). Information available from: <<http://www.fowler.ucla.edu/exhibitions/continental-rifts-contemporary-time-based-works-africa>> [Accessed 31 October 2013]. See website screenshot on next page.

Screening of *The Botanist* as part of 'Truth, Dare or Promise'. 19 April 2012, South London Gallery. Information available from: <<http://www.southlondongallery.org/page/3030/Truth-Dare-or-Promise/678>> and <<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/mediaarts/news/newsarticles/truthdareorpromiseconference.aspx>> [Accessed 31 October 2013]. See website screenshot on next page.

### **Paper/Talk**

'Truth, Dare or Promise'. Part of Making discussion. 15:00-17:00, 20 April 2012. Conference at Goldsmiths, University of London. Co-organised by Royal Holloway, University of London, University of East London and University of Ulster. Information available from: <<http://www.spotlight-goldsmiths.org.uk/2012/04/23/truth-dare-or-promise/>> and <<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/mediaarts/news/newsarticles/truthdareorpromiseconference.aspx>>. [Accessed 31 October]. See flyer on next page.

Top right: flyer for Truth, Dare or Promise at Goldsmiths.

Below left: Truth, Dare or Promise listing on South London Gallery website.

Below right: Continental Rifts listing on Fowler Museum UCLA website.



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Image courtesy Zineb Sedira

## TRUTH, DARE OR PROMISE

18-19 APR 2012, 7PM, £5/£3 CONC

This programme of films accompanies the *Truth, Dare or Promise* conference at Goldsmiths College on 20-21 April. It includes artists such as Adam Kossoff, Miranda Pennell, Eyal Sivan and Minou Norouzi. The films, selected by several speakers at the conference, are examples of the elisions and eroding boundaries between the definitions of film and art and the widening methods of exhibition.

**Wednesday 18 April**

*Imago*, Minou Norouzi, 2009, 8', DVD  
*Not Reconciled*, Jill Daniels, 2009, 41', DVCam  
*Riyadh Max Schleser*, 9' 30", Mpeg 4 mobile video  
*Why Colonel Bunny Was Killed*, 2010, Miranda Pennell, 27', HD / b & w  
*You made me love you*, 2005, Miranda Pennell, 4', DVCam  
*I Remember*, Minou Norouzi, 2010, 6mins, HD

**Thursday 19 April**

*Gilligan*, Daniel Jevesebury, 2009, 4', 16mm  
*Moscow Diary*, Adam Kossoff, 2009, 47', mobile video  
*Credit Crunch*, Gail Pearce, 2009, 5', MiniDV  
*Unseen Women*, Airmagh Gaoil, Jolene Mairs & Cahal McLaughlin, 2011, 26', MiniDV  
Work by Pratap Rughani

[More information about the conference](#)  
[Download Truth, Dare or Promise programme notes here](#)

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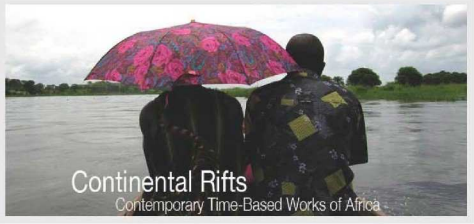
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## Continental Rifts: Contemporary Time-Based Works of Africa



### Continental Rifts

Contemporary Time-Based Works of Africa

February 22, 2009 to June 14, 2009

View video and digital film works by five contemporary artists with deep connections to Africa—Yo BARRADA, Cláudia

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## Reviews

**Rughani's camera work in *The Botanist* was widely discussed in reviews including *LA Times*, *XTRA Contemporary Art Quarterly* and *Leonardo Online*.**

Sharma Apama, Continental Rifts: Contemporary Time-Based Works of Africa - Review. *Leonardo Online*, July 2009. Available from: <[http://www.leonardo.info/reviews/july2009/sharma\\_continental.html](http://www.leonardo.info/reviews/july2009/sharma_continental.html)> [Accessed 31 october 2013].

*The film's cinematography is powerful and subversive. The low angle from which we can only access the visitors' feet in the garden emphasises the landscape and situates in the film's conversations a social and historical imperative. The viewer's attention is directed on the debate within the film from a camera position that undermines the sound conventions in mainstream and institutional documentary practice. The critical stance towards globalisation is not limited to the verbal discourse within the film, but it is embodied by the film's form that constitutes as a rigorous political gesture within film historically.*

Christopher Knight, Glimpsing Africa, minus adventure. *Los Angeles Times*, 11 May 2009. Available from: <<http://articles.latimes.com/2009/may/11/entertainment/et-continental11>> [Accessed 31 October 2013].

*Shot as a tour of plants and flowers in Umberto Pasti's lush garden south of Tangier. The camera is mostly pointed toward the ground, so we see only flora and shuffling feet, as a subtitled soundtrack drones on. Through it all I kept thinking of Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman, whose riveting 2002 video documentary on British horticulturist Veronica Read and her eccentric passion for the amaryllis engages similar themes of cultural displacement and loss.*

Claire Daigle, Continental Rifts: Contemporary Time-Based Works of Africa - Review. *XTRA Contemporary Art Quarterly*, Fall 2009, Vol 12 number 1. Available from: <<http://x-traonline.org/article/continental-rifts-contemporary-time-based-works-of-africa/>> [Accessed 31 October 2013].

*The film involves a tour of the garden of Umberto Pasti, novelist, expert on Islamic ceramics, and passionate amateur botanist. In his garden in northern Morocco, he cultivates threatened local species. The garden itself is the main subject of the film, shot from the low viewpoint of plants and shrubs. The human actors, a small group of visitors to Pasti's refuge, are seen only from the neck down. Pasti's hand reaches to caress the petals of a flower while he narrates the appearances and near disappearances of various plant species in the region, both native and imported. Simultaneously, Morocco's history of social and cultural exchange is allegorized. Speaking of a rare iris, he describes a poem he wrote mourning the fact that if a rare flower exists in a singular location, it seems always as if a road is destined to be built on top of it.*







