

Biographies of Amos Gitai



AMOS GITAI
Esther (1985)
Rodaje entre las ruinas de Wadi Salib (Haifa)
Fotografía: Thierry Nouvrille

- DATES:** 4th February – 19th May 2014
- PLACE:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid
Sabatini Building. 3ª Floor.
- ORGANIZATION:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
- CURATOR:** Jean-François Chevrier
- CURATOR'S ASSISTANT:** Élia Pijollet
- COORDINATION:** Leticia Sastre
- RELATED ACTIVITIES:** Encounter 5 February, 7:00 p.m.
Sabatini Building, Auditorium
Amos Gitai in conversation with Jean-François Chevrier
- Film series 6-26 February, 7:00 p.m. Sabatini Building, Auditorium
Biography, history, territories
Nine films by Amos Gitai

Biographies of Amos Gitai can be regarded as a case study within the framework of inquiry proposed by the exhibition *Biographical Forms. Construction and Individual Mythology*.

Amos Gitai, born in Haifa in 1950, recently devoted two films to his parents, *Carmel* (2009) and *Lullaby to My Father* (2011). His mother, Efratia Munschik Margalit (1909-2004), was born in Jaffa to Russian parents. His father, Munio Weinraub Gitai, (1909-1970), an architect trained at the Bauhaus, fled from Nazi Germany in 1933.

Contemporaneous with this endeavor of the memory, the exhibition resituates the biographies in a constellation of characters that emerged and took shape in the course of various documentary investigations and fictions, beginning with *House* in 1980. These intersecting biographies are inscribed within a history and a geography, dramatic and sedimented. The geological and archaeological model of stratified terrain is recurrent.

The cinema is in itself a composite and hybrid art, a form of narrative that permits the assembly of certain *biographical elements*. In the same way, every moment in the exhibition itinerary is formed by materials (documents) reassembled around a sequence of film. Since his very first film essays, Gitai has used the recorded image and montage to question the link between biography and History, between individual itineraries and collective destiny. The lives he relates are routes of migration and dispossession.

The exhibition favors the documentary orientation and content of a prolix oeuvre. The outlines of that orientation were drawn up in the second half of the 1970s, when Gitai renounced his job as an architect to avoid contributing to the colonization of the occupied territories. From his training, Gitai has retained an interest in the spatial forms of sociality. For him, however, documentary cinema has always been a support for action in the public sphere, and above all a form of intervention in the political affairs of the Near East. His first fiction film, *Esther* (1985), inscribes the biblical legend within the reality and history of his native city, Haifa. The *dramatic* dimension of historical violence is interpreted through forms inspired by a distanced, Brechtian practice of theatre.

But violence is also exercised upon bodies in the everyday life of the peoples subjected to the barbarity of world economic disorder. Two films, *Pineapple* (1983) and *Bangkok-Bahrain* (1984), deal with situations of slavery that subsist for the benefit of a reinforced mobility and mobilization of labor on a global scale.

The artistic experimentation with biographical forms, autobiography included, should appear in the exhibition as the site of a critical reflection on the world. By placing his own biography in contact with the multitude of lives condemned to anonymity and silence, he actualizes the privileged posture of the “man of the world” (Baudelaire, on the “Painter of modern life”). He exposes himself to the critical gaze.

AMOS GITAI

Amos Gitai was studying architecture, following in his father's footsteps, when the Yom Kippur War interrupted his studies and it was the use of his Super-8 camera, whilst flying helicopter missions that led to his career as a filmmaker.

Based in Israel, the United States and France, Gitai has produced an extraordinary, wide-ranging, and deeply personal body of work. In around 40 films - documentary and fiction, Gitai has explored the layers of history in the Middle East and beyond, including his own personal history, through such themes as homeland and exile, religion, social control and utopia. His trademark style includes long takes with scarce but significant camera movements and a devilishly clever sense of humour.

In the late 70s and early 80s, Gitai directed numerous documentaries, including *House and Field Diary*. During the same era, Gitai received his PhD in architecture from the University of California - Berkeley. Following the controversial reception to *Field Diary*, Gitai moved to Paris in 1983, where he was based for the next ten years and during this period continued to travel widely directing such documentaries as *Pineapple* - a humorous odyssey about the growth and marketing of pineapples. He also made *Brand New Day* - a film that followed Annie Lennox and the Eurythmics as they toured Japan.

During this period he began directing fiction and historical films about the experience of exile. These films include the Venice critic's prize-winning *Berlin Jerusalem* and the extraordinary trilogy on the Jewish legend of Golem. In the mid-90s Gitai moved to Haifa and began the most fertile, productive period of his career to date. Over 10 years, Gitai made some 15 films, both documentary and fiction. The 1995 feature *Devarim* marked the return to his country and his reunion with the light and landscape of Tel Aviv. The first film in Gitai's trilogy of Israeli cities, *Devarim* was followed by *Yom Yom* (shot in Haifa) and *Kadosh* (shot in Mea Shearim, the Jerusalem district of Orthodox Jews).

This return to his country is also a travel back in his own history: Gitai directs *Kippur* (2000), a feature film based on his war memories. *Eden* (2001) and *Kedma* (2002) follow, and both take us back to the creation of the Israeli State, to display its origins, its historical and ideological grounds. With *Alila* (2003), Amos Gitai films again the present of his country, observing the contemporary Israeli society through the destinies of the inhabitants of a building in Tel Aviv. *Promised Land* (2004) and *Free Zone* (2005) also depict the current state of the country and the whole area. Together, they form the two first parts of a trilogy on frontiers, in a region where their settlement is a dramatic stake.

News from Home / News from House (2006), his latest documentary film, carries on the investigation about the history of a West Jerusalem house and its inhabitants, which Amos Gitai begun in 1980 with *House* and pursued in 1998 with *A House in Jerusalem*. Gitai's work has been the subject of major retrospectives, notably at the Centre Pompidou (Paris), NFT and ICA (London), Lincoln Center (New York), Berlin's Kunstwerk, and cinematheques in Madrid, Jerusalem, Paris, São Paulo, Tokyo, Toronto.

Biography, history, territories

Nine films by Amos Gitai

This series spans more than thirty years of activity by Amos Gitai, beginning with *Architecture*, a short film from 1978. This film, made when the filmmaker still planned to pursue a career in architecture, already contained signs of the critical dimension that would be confirmed in his later documentaries. Gitai became a filmmaker when he made *House* in 1980. With its return visits and continuations in 1998 (*A House in Jerusalem*) and 2005 (*News from Home/News from House*), this film can be likened to a coming-of-age novel of an architect-filmmaker. It tells the story of a dispossession, from the vantage point of the house's former owner, a Palestinian forced to leave in 1948. The current circumstances of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are seen in the builders' living and working conditions in 1980.

For Gitai, the present is inscribed in a time period and also in a *historical stratum*. The blending of these two approaches, which constitutes the principal strength of his documentary films, is also seen in his fiction works, such as *Esther* (1985), *Kippur* (2000) and *Carmel* (2009). Long sequence shots, which express a kind of continuity, are inserted into a montage of fragmentary and at times dissonant shots. The story, with its biographical or autobiographical content, encompasses and overcomes the documentary/fiction distinction upon which cinematic discourse still rests and which Gitai takes apart.

House illustrates that the dramatic processes of documentary film are analogous to the constructive methods of an architect. The construction of the film responds to the transformation of the house. The quarry from which the Palestinian workers extract the stone is an allegorical place. The power relations characteristic of the world of labour are related to a situation of political domination, based on the appropriation of territory.

Produced in Israel by a television network, the film has never been distributed in that country. But *Field Diary*, shot in March of 1982, just before the war with Lebanon, did lead to a climate of hate, as Gitai described it, that prompted him to take exile in France. *Pineapple* and *Bangkok-Bahrain* were made from this position of distance. The two films use investigative reporting practices and constitute a diptych on the networks of exploitation and servitude at the international level.

The central question explored by Gitai's work, and found throughout the nine features and the short film that make up this series, is the construction/violence relation, particularly vivid for an architect-filmmaker in a country in which territorial conflicts are always accompanied by acts of construction and destruction. Constructions appear as the response to or the prolongation of violence. Like violence, construction is material, physical yet it also has a symbolic dimension. That is why his films are an ensemble of elements that take on meaning in the course of a story, inside a film or from one film to

another. Gitai is an architect-filmmaker, but he is also a biographer-filmmaker. His life is one of the biographies that make up an open-ended *opus*, an *opus* under construction.

6 February, 2014 - 7 p.m.

House

1980, original version with Spanish subtitles, 51'

Architecture

1978, original version with Spanish subtitles, 13'15

11 February, 2014 - 7 p.m.

Field Diary

1982, original version with Spanish subtitles, 83'

12 February, 2014 - 7 p.m.

Pineapple

1983, original version with Spanish subtitles, 78'

13 February, 2014 - 7 p.m.

Bangkok-Bahrain. Labour for sale

1984, original version with Spanish subtitles, 78'

17 February, 2014 - 7 p.m.

Esther

1985, original version with Spanish subtitles, 97' Courtesy of the Institut Français

18 February, 2014 - 7 p.m.

A House in Jerusalem

1998, original version with Spanish subtitles, 85'

19 February, 2014 - 7 p.m.

Kippur

2000, original version with Spanish subtitles, 120' Courtesy of the Institut Français

24 February, 2014 - 7 p.m.

News from Home/News from House

2005. original version with Spanish subtitles, 97' Courtesy of the Institut Français

26 February, 2014 - 7 p.m.

Carmel

2009, original version with Spanish subtitles, 93'

*The exhibition biographies of **Amos Gitai** has enjoyed the cooperation of the **Embassy of Israel***

*The organization of the encounter between Amos Gitai and Jean-François Chevrier has enjoyed the cooperation of **illycaffè***

For further information:

PRESS DEPARTMENT

MUSEO REINA SOFÍA

prensa1@museoreinasofia.es

prensa2@museoreinasofia.es

(+34) 91 774 10 05 / 06

www.museoreinasofia.es/prensa