

Agnès Varda at Musée d'Ixelles

FASCINATION WITH THE 'REAL'

Potatoes are for Agnès Varda what madeleines were for Marcel Proust's protagonist Swann. One imagines each little adult potato bite transporting her back to her Ixelles childhood, which could explain why tubers, especially heart-shaped ones (a Belgian icon), are so prevalent in her work. Her best known tater story, *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000) is an eye-opening account that begins with Millet's painting, but soon captures people gathering hoards of potatoes missed by harvesters, and then tracks a wide range of people gleaming foodstuff and resources around France, a subject she would revisit two years later.

'Patatutopia,' on view here, is a three-channel video featuring taters germinating in various stages of overgrowth and decay, while hundreds more slide down a chimney, piling up on the floor before spectators, who themselves are standing amidst a sea of sprouting spuds. This installation, which premiered in 'Utopia Station' at the 2003 Venice Biennale, originally prompted her to don a potato costume, exhibited here, taking on the role of a circus Barker to lure viewers to see her 'side attractions.' (Varda's self-deprecating humor is seriously Belgian). Offering an even earlier tuber precedent, this exhibition presents a film clip from her most famous film *'Ni Toti Ni Loï'* (1985), where men dressed as 'spud studs' chase a frightened Mona, the teen adventurer played by Sandrine Bonnaire. Even 'Quelques veuves de Noirmoutier' (2006), her 15-channel video installation that explores widows in mourning obliquely references taters, since this Brittany isle is renowned for *La Bonnotte*, the world's most expensive potato.

Beaches figure prominently in Varda's work, as



Agnès Varda, *Cinq rêves et un piquet*, 2012, photographie © agnès varda

a clip from her autobiographical film *'Les Plages d'Agnès'* (2008) attests to childhood trips to various Belgian resorts. In 2006, she exhibited a beach shack made from the stock footage of 'The Creatures,' filmed on Noirmoutier forty years earlier. This exhibition's most interesting work is *'Les étangs d'Ixelles'* (2016), a trompe l'oeil pond, whose form melds memories of her childhood backyard pond to those of the nearby park. Even though one realizes immediately that it's just a translucent photograph stuck to the floor, this uncanny scene strangely moves and undulates, making it simultaneously cinematic and experimental. Additional childhood memories abound. Her childhood tricotin, which girls use to knit

bracelets, or dolls' hats and muffers, reappears in life-size as *'La Tricotine'* (2016), which sports a gigantic multicoloured tail. Heirloom armoirs display Queen Astrid-era royal-mania, collected by her French-born mother, while family photos and post-cards featuring famous Belgian paintings are posted on antique screens across the gallery.

After studying art history at the Ecole du Louvre, Varda took night classes in photography, which somehow prompted her jump from wanting tohibition features several of her first photographs, shot in Portugal, Marseille and China in the late 50s in a starkly realist style. In a black and white interview from the early sixties available online,

we witness Varda struggling to describe that era's fascination with the 'real,' made manifest by the media's liberal use of documentary styles and easy newsreel access.

While Nouvelle Vague cinéastes like her sought to wrest film away from cinema's former obsession with distracting fantasies and delusional premises, they often found themselves in direct competition with the *Mad Men* and politicians who figured out how to manipulate media to fabricate realities, further distorting truths that haven-taken documentarians decades to disentangle. Even though more than half of Varda's full-length films are fictional accounts, she is typically considered a documentarian. Not only do her tales typically describe events that seem real, but she typically films them, while live events unfold around, lending such scenes a heightened sense of veracity. Rather than using nonfiction to expose lies, as documentarians often feel compelled to do, Varda moves in the opposite direction, introducing new realities that reveal otherwise hidden truths.

A case in point is *'Ulysse'* (1982), for which she supposedly tracked down a man and his father thirty years after she first photographed them on an Egyptian beach to ask them what was happening in her photo. Are these two men really the same two whom she met thirty years earlier or does this premise lead us to believe so? Indeed, Varda's feature films and documentaries can be seen as the guiding influence on contemporary artists like Omar Fast, Renzo Martens, Walid Raad, and Christopher Williams who routinely explore the fiction/nonfiction border. Like Varda, their works employ the tropes of nonfiction (film stills, news reels, compelling stories, or authoritative narrators) to create new accounts.

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Agnès Varda *'patates & compagnie'* until 29 May, 2016 at Musée d'Ixelles, Jean Van Voelsenstraat 71, Elsene. Open di-20 van 9h30-17 u. www.museedixelles.ijsnet.be