

Her Serious Game: Video Works by Itziar Barrio
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Itziar Barrio's work has the wondering and intent gaze of a serious child regarding a world of brutal structures. The doggedness of her obsessions reflects an instinctive approach to themes of power and control, a refusal to let go of an idea or an image until she has gotten tired of it or somehow conquered it. Working from her drawings, she employs simple gestures, actions and figures to build up complex poetic structures, focusing on some intuitive interconnection of sound, image and movement, repeated, slightly altered, punned upon, and quoted back to itself.

Simple social interactions interest Barrio, and banal acts. The cartoon image of a woman throwing a stick to her dog in the video piece "I Coincide With You in the Other," at times reflects on the dog, at times on the stick, and the relation of each to an action that suddenly seems weirdly fraught. The constituent parts—drawings, gestures—are simple, even intentionally clumsy, all the while building up in the videos to compositions of intricate and rhythmic formality. Interspersed with the dog/woman/ stick interaction is the scene of a countryside made of stick-like trees from a dashboard as someone changes the radio dial. The dashboard, the countryside and the radio dial feels nostalgic, while the scene with the woman with her dog is awkward and alienating. What is the relationship between a woman throwing a stick to her dog, a stick, stick-like trees, a dashboard, a radio? As with modern poetry, the mood or intention behind the works is often more palpable than their meaning to the artist; that is, we know that these acts and images have a significance to Barrio that we don't know, but as they are braided together they become something else. The relationship between the two worlds, as the video moves back and forth between them, though mysterious, creates its own sentences, its own language.

Barrio uses music to add elements of beauty and menace to the videos in ways that can at times seem at odds with the images, at times capricious, as if to invoke the power of sound; snatches of music jerk the viewer from one emotion to another. Music in fact operates as a distinct element, sexy, haunting or furious, which Barrio manipulates with as much confidence as imagery and the passage of time. In "I Could Devour You" photos of soccer players and politicians are traced over in black by an unseen hand, obliterating their eyes and faces or overspilling wine glasses on a table. A man, Kepa Elgoibar, sings gloomily in Euskera, the Basque language, "I'm going to love you joyfully/ whether you want it or not." The song talks about a frightening and obsessive kind of love that is almost a threat, while the marks creeping over the images are like a mustache drawn on a poster, both taking away and in some way giving back the power of its idols. I draw on you because I can; I black out your eyes to show you can't see. But I love you because I cannot actually touch you. The movements of the unseen hand are playful and vengeful, angry and oracular; the gorgeous and strange song is its voice.

For most of "I Can't Even Hear You," there is no music at all, only the sound of crunching footsteps as a woman wanders through some brush. Intercut with her is another figure wearing a cardboard dog head, also in the brush, but frantic and struggling. The two figures encounter each other on the road, the woman examined all over by the dog-head creature. There is something magical about the mysterious connection of human and animal,

the wordless encounter that is imperfectly understood. It is the inversion of the woman throwing the stick to her dog, a moment that falls outside structured social interaction; the absence of a soundtrack from most of the video underscores the lack of manipulation in the meeting. Of all the video pieces, it seems the most charmed and meditative.

As part of her serious game, Barrio seems to always be asking “What if?” In “Let’s Rock,” she asked several people to interact without verbal cues. They sit on the floor surrounding a collection of beer bottles, having arguments in gibberish. They dance, make vomiting noises, then turn on one member of their party and beat him. Even in this existentialist evocation of the aggression and emptiness behind social interactions, there is something innocent and purposefully unrehearsed, as if reserving some part of the exercise for the open-ended pleasure of games and play-acting. The actors are amateurish and silly; they grunt, say “da da da.” The man that is beaten keeps saying, “No,” as if this is the one word he can’t give up, even in fun. But a game, in fact, is always real and serious within its own parameters. Barrio uses her themes to expand the “realness” behind play, and to playfully expose the world’s store of sadness and repression.