

Interview with Shelly Silver: “And then there’s the viewer’s relationship to it all, built through the focus and sensitivity of the filming and editing. Perhaps it’s my way of seducing the viewer into an investment analogous to mine.”

BY ROUVEN LINNARZ x JUNE 30, 2019 0



Shelly Silver is an artist whose works have been exhibited and screened all over the world. In her work she deals with global issues, the changing face of the world as well as the consequences of these developments for us and our relationships.

On the occasion of her latest film “[A Tiny Place That is Hard to Touch](#)” screening at Sheffield Doc/Fest we sat down with the artist about the film, its setting and the relationship of viewer and film.

[“A Tiny Place That Is Hard to Touch”](#) screened at
Sheffield Doc/Fest



“A Tiny Place That is Hard to Touch” is a beautiful and also contemplative film. What inspired you to make this film?

There are many ways to answer this question.

I found myself in Tokyo in the summer of 2018 as part of a residency with Tokyo Arts & Space. In the back of my mind was a small itch, too small to be called an idea, to make a story, which is to say a small fiction film. And as happens at the start of projects, I suffered resistance. How to pull a story out of thin air and shoot it in a period of less than two months? About what exactly? As my work always references the larger world and its trajectories, how to make the film resonate with this moment in time, when scientists are telling us that we’re living in the moment before the end of civilization, which is to say, the end of our world? Approaching these questions frontally would lead to the use of my nephew’s favorite emoji, that of one’s head exploding, so I did not.

I was in Tokyo ostensibly to research the changing situation for women, following up on my 1996 film **37 Stories about Leaving Home**, where a group of mothers, daughters and grandmothers talk of their experiences growing up in Japan. Twenty-three years later I found myself speaking informally, at kitchen tables, restaurants and bars, to friends and friends of friends, including some of the women from **37 Stories**. I noticed in many of their statements and stories, an undercurrent of anger that wasn’t present before, which surprised me, but shouldn’t have, as there’s such an outpouring of anger among women in the US as well. Their stories got stuck in my head.

And then it was Tokyo’s hottest summer on record, with a super moist, sensual heat. I would walk out of my apartment and the air felt solid, like a permeable wall. I became hyperaware of my skin, coated with moisture, the heat of my body and the bodies glistening around me. And so, the small wish to make a fiction film, the emoji of a head exploding, and the necessity for the film to be sensual, to have sex, got mixed with the fragments of lives I was being told.

I had a ritual – each morning I’d bike to my local McDonald’s, the only place open at 6am, order a coffee (100 yen) and in my pre-conscious state, write fragments of scenes. Then I’d head back and shoot on and off for the rest of the day. Somewhere in all this the project that would become **A Tiny Place that is Hard to Touch** was born.

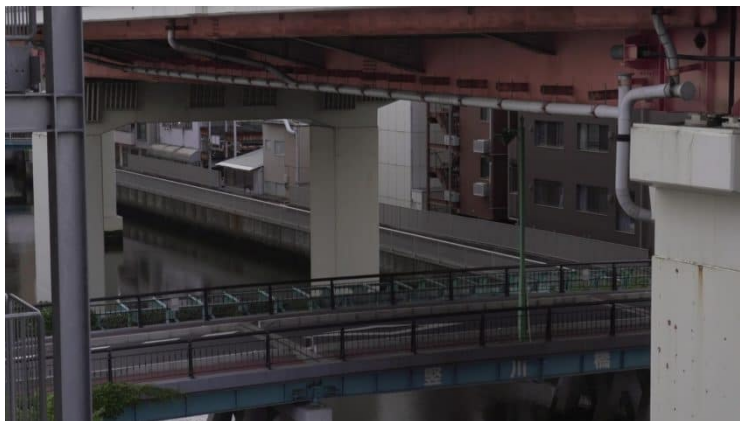


One of the film's topics is the possibility of creating a meaningful relationship with the world. How do you approach a difficult topic such as this, especially in the medium of film?

This is not the first film I've made where humans barely appear. I know this is an odd way to start answering this question about relationships. The two women carry the main story, and are connected to many of the other stories, but they are missing from the image. There are people, but they are seen at a distance, crossing a bridge, turning a corner, glimpsed through a window, nowhere near as central as the insects, the seagulls, the fish. The film is set in a man-made environment, largely without 'man'. Why is this? A statement? An ethical decision? The film rejected them. I intuited that to put them into the images would break the fragile structure I was constructing. Focusing on this urban environment, and the creatures, large and small that must fit themselves in, seemed a good place to question what we've built, and to get used to seeing ourselves as being part of a fabric of life, not it's center and destroyer.

The primary relationship of the film is between the two women, the translator and the researcher, with their movement between attraction and repulsion. We don't see them, which is not to say that images aren't formed. But just as our relationship to the American researcher is informed and limited by the fact that she is filtered through the Japanese translator, our relationship to both women is changed by the fact that we never see them, we see, rather, the world, or if one wants to be more human-centric as it is a person telling the story, the world that surrounds them, the world that they see.

And then there's the viewer's relationship to it all, built through the focus and sensitivity of the filming and editing. Perhaps it's my way of seducing the viewer into an investment analogous to mine. I'm making a filmic place, with concentration and care, for the viewer to spend time next to me, where they too can build a sense of this place and story in its complexity, which may not be my complexity.



That is an interesting concept. Could you explain this further with regards to your film?

Time, language, movement, the viewer must actively piece these together from shards of sound and image. I see the opening scene as a way of preparing the viewer for what will come later, setting up a framework piece by piece that will help them read/navigate the rest of the film. Even though the opening images were filmed from more or less the same location, my apartment building's third floor outdoor walkway, it is a challenge to build a coherent space out of them, to know exactly how they spatially and otherwise fit together to create a bigger picture. This challenge will continue, in one way or the other, throughout the film.

Of course, the most direct and familiar way into this web of relations is through the first-person narration of the translator, carried by the tenor and vibrancy of the actress Saori Tsukuda's voice, as her character tries, except when she does not, to make a connection with the American researcher. This connection is threaded, detail by detail, into time and place, this apartment, this city, this summer. Later we find out about the difficult history her family has to this neighborhood, a history that both women, Japanese and American, are in quite different ways implicated. This makes another historical, cultural and visceral connection.

And then there are the strange stories that punctuate the film, that the translator tells the American, in a strange act of seduction. There are six in all, and they have a science fiction, crash and burn feel. It is here that the end of the world is approached most directly, tied to tropes of brutality and tribalism that are all too familiar in present day life, with more than a whiff of the magic quality of fairy tales, that aren't tethered to intellectual, religious or scientific authority. The stories describe a secondary world that is terrifying and liberating in its ability to present an end game or a magical way out.

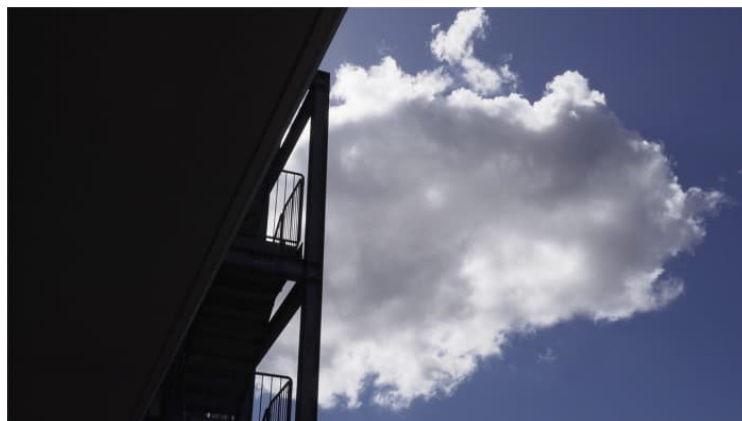


One key element of the film is its sound design. How did you come up with the music and sound design for the film?

In film, it's sound far more than image, that subconsciously constructs believable space. Projected images are flat, even though we can *read* them in dimension – sound, in cinema or nature, comes to meet us, adding dimensionality. Almost all of my films privilege sound, probably due to my long history working in video – I started when the image was resolution-wise, goddamn awful. The aggressive part of television, till recently, has been its audio, following us from room to room. It's easy enough to watch television without image, cooking, cleaning, but hard without sound. That's why commercials are so sonically abrasive.

When I'm editing a film, I can't understand its structure or rhythm, without editing sound in conjunction and as closely as I do image. Unlike other filmmakers, I need to work on all aspects of a film at once. There's no asking a composer to score the film later, it must be an integral part of the film from the beginning. Unlike the sanctity of straight cuts, organizing one image followed by another, my audio is most often multi-layered, getting more complex over time.

One of my last films, **A Strange New Beauty** (2017), was a kind of conceptual horror story. The images were placid, some almost without movement, the violence comes from its aggressive sound track. To construct this, I would at times play a clip at 10% speed, or accelerate it 5000 times, layering these unlikely tracks to form a soundscape, familiar and strange. **A Tiny Place** wasn't quite as extreme, but I did pull out the stops for some of the translator's stranger stories.



Even though the film tells the story of two women and their relationship, the images show Tatekawa in Tokyo. What fascinates you about this place and why did you want it in the film?

At first, I found the place austere, with few trees, small businesses in squat post-war buildings next to newly-built ubiquitous rectangular apartment building like the one I was staying in. I wasn't particularly drawn to it, Tatekawa just happened to be where I had been put. But perhaps there's no such thing as an interesting or uninteresting place. Over the course of many decades I've learnt that filming is a process of search and discovery, often taking numerous attempts.

For me, it's also a strangely collaborative act – I go out into a place, waiting for it to speak to me, the final images also hold my response, representing particular points of view, mine and the camera's. In Tatekawa, people would approach to ask what I was doing or tell stories or point things out, and then I'd turn the camera there. I became familiar, that strange foreign woman filming in noon day sun. Regardless that it was 100 degrees day after day, that the camera and tripod were heavy.

My first way in was through water. The apartment was on a river, really a canal, topped by a highway, and many things flowed by my windows. Through this day to day practice of shooting I discovered the time of day when the light hit the water so as to enable me to see the fish frolicking below; that the summer fireworks brought a several-day harvest of dead fish of all sizes; that a canal that appeared dead, opaque, a carrier for flotsam and jetsam, held not only death and garbage, but life.

One of the first days, I filmed the dark water from the third floor. When I looked at the footage that evening, I couldn't believe I had recorded a stingray going by. A stingray! What was invisible to my eye was visible to the eye of the camera. It was the best kind of fishing. After that I was completely taken.



Your film also explores the connection between medium, viewer and narrator at some points. Is there such a thing as truth in a relationship almost exclusively based on perception and subjectivity?

What else is there in relationships but perception and subjectivity? Scientific evidence? Facts? And these two words are somewhat different, perception and subjectivity. Subjectivity is clearly connected to a subject. We hear the Japanese women's point of view, what she wants to tell us anyway, and we must pick our way through her truth and lying, the clues in her pauses, to reach a broader less tethered truth, which is anyway a constructed fiction. Perception can mean awareness of something through the senses, again, a subject's senses, but also through interpretation, comprehension and observation, individually or on the part of a group. Thus, perception could be subjective or veer towards what we imagine to be a kind of objectivity.

Truth. What to do with this word? It's always been a pesky word which currently grows ever more so. I'm reminded of Jean Rouch, who coined the phrase 'cinema verité,' meaning the truth of the camera in its unique ability to instigate, change, bring out a particular truth that wouldn't be possible without this lens-based box for recoding. And then cinema verité got hijacked into meaning just the opposite, a camera that merely observes without changing, akin to 'a fly on the wall', as if...

I evade this documentary argument by making fiction. The images I film are a kind of document of this time and place, this is what happened at a certain time on this road, the stingray did swim by, but I resist the word documentary, coined to stand for a 'genre.' Perhaps I'm playing with the genre, but finally working outside its constraints. Fiction that might resemble documentary, but fiction nonetheless.

I've been reading the Scandinavian poet Inger Christensen. In her beautiful essay, 'The Condition of Secrecy,' she writes, 'Maybe poetry can't tell any truths at all. But it can *be* true, because the reality that accompanies the words are true This secret-filled correlation between language and reality is how poetry

becomes insight.' She continues, 'In order to raise the inner world to the outer we have to start in the outer, start in all that's visible.' Perhaps I am attempting to conjure a truth in a similar way. And now I will proclaim, hidden at the end of this paragraph, my desire to not only approach a reality, with image, sound time, but to actively change that reality — to work towards imagining a different future.



What can you tell us about future projects you are working on?

I am currently in Berlin editing a film, **Girls/Future** (working title), that I also shot in 2018, inside The Museum of Fine Arts Leipzig/MDBK. The base of the film is interviews done with girls between the ages of 7 and 19, as they react, as experts, to the collection on display. The art shown in the MDBK is no different than that shown in virtually all Western historical art museums—even as there's no lack of women and girls depicted in paintings and sculptures, male artists are responsible for almost all the art shown. Although this is never stated, we see the history of the world, civilizations, culture from a male perspective, from their individual and collective subjective point of view. How does this change our perception of history that museums purport to represent? This idea came to me the first time I visited the MDBK and wondered how my teenage self would have seen the collection.

As I start editing the film, diving into both the artworks and the girls' statements and reactions, the question I raised in the first paragraph of this interview comes back to haunt me, as it will for all films I make going forward. How to make a film during a moment which looks to be the moment before the end of the world? For **Girls/Future** all I can say is, 'I'm working on it.'

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ROUVEN LINNARZ

Ever since I watched Takeshi Kitano's "Hana-Bi" for the first time (and many times after that) I have been a cinephile. While much can be said about the technical aspects of film, coming from a small town in Germany, I cherish the notion of art showing its audience something which one does normally avoid, neglect or is unable to see for many different reasons. Often the stories told in films have helped me understand, discover and connect to something new which is a concept I would like to convey in the way I talk and write about films. Thus, I try