

DOC NYC Film Festival 2022: Part 3

Kash Kash and *Robert Irwin: A Desert of Pure Feeling*: A movie immersed in social life and one that drifts away from it

Erik Schreiber
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This is the final article in a series devoted to the 2022 DOC NYC Film Festival, which took place from November 9 through 27. Part 1 is available here, and Part 2 here..

Director Lea Najjar has made a promising feature debut with *Kash Kash—Without Feathers, We Can't Live* (2022). Her subject is a group of young, working class men who seek refuge from the turmoil of daily life in Beirut by climbing up to their roofs and playing a game with pigeons.

In the game *kash hamam*, each player lets his flock circle above his house and tries to capture his opponents' pigeons. The birds are tractable and loyal, and one player says that he prefers them to people. The game brings the players a meditative calm but not a lasting escape from Lebanon's economic and political disaster.

The players discuss the latter without prompting. A common complaint is the constitutionally mandated sectarianism that cripples Lebanese political life and deliberately aims to divide the working class along religious and ethnic lines. One player, a fisherman, says that despite following the leaders of their respective sects, people remain hungry. Pointing to his sons, who are college students, he asks, "Why are they here working with me? Our government is not taking care of them."

The desire for unity is widespread. Interviewed by a television crew, one man says that his pigeons are of different colors but manage to fly in the same direction. He does not want to have to hide his cross when he goes into another neighborhood, nor does he want the Shiites to have to hide in his neighborhood.

The players also struggle with Lebanon's economic crisis, which the World Bank warns could be one of the worst in the country's history. As the lira plummets, corn (which the players feed their pigeons) becomes seven times more expensive. One young man is concerned about the cost of a dental filling that he needs. This mass impoverishment

provokes large antigovernment demonstrations and chants of "Thieves! Thieves!" Riot police hurl tear gas at the peaceful protestors. The general feeling is that the entire ruling class and political establishment must be replaced.

This point is driven home when a horrific and preventable tragedy strikes. The film captures the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion of August 2020, which caused at least 218 deaths and thousands of injuries. One player walks through the rubble of his home, which has been all but destroyed. Significantly, the fisherman says that the explosion was worse than anything he'd seen during the Lebanese civil war. For these workers, the government's responsibility for this catastrophe is self-evident.

The men featured in the documentary have correctly identified the social layer causing the country's misery and show strong inclinations toward solidarity. Yet their sense of resignation is palpable. Pessimistic about the prospect of social change, some people seek individual solutions and move to Germany or France. The most desperate jump to their deaths from high rocks in the Mediterranean.

The absence of a broad-based socialist, internationalist movement in the region is palpable. Its burning necessity jumps off the screen.

Director Jennifer Lane provides a portrait of a contemporary American installation artist in *Robert Irwin: A Desert of Pure Feeling* (2022). The film examines Irwin's life and work in detail but does not ask the questions that would lead to a deeper understanding of either. Though informative, the film is largely uncritical and accepts Irwin on his own terms.

Irwin was born in Long Beach, California, in 1928: one year before the Great Depression began. He took his first job, a paper route, at age six. If he or his sister wanted to go to the movies, they had to earn the price of tickets themselves.

Yet from early on, Irwin apparently showed no interest in the social forces influencing his life. As a teenager, he was “unaware” of World War II going on around him, a contemporary observes. He skated by in high school, learning to dance instead of studying. After serving in the US Army, Irwin trained to be an artist, he says, “like you would train to be a plumber.” He taught himself art history by looking at books that contained reproductions of paintings but no text.

Irwin’s early work included minimalist paintings of horizontal lines, canvases carefully dappled with tiny dots and painted aluminum discs. He later abandoned painting and made a series of clear acrylic columns, then installed scrims in galleries to affect the play of light. Subsequent works incorporated elements of the outdoors, and others were landscape projects.

Uniting Irwin’s *oeuvre* is his making an overall lack of a conscious method into a program, so to speak. He claims to see each work as posing questions to which he tries to intuit answers in the next work. Equally or more important is Irwin’s focus on perception and the viewer’s immediate experience. His preoccupation is “how we organize our consciousness,” but he is uninterested in the social factors that affect our organizing principles. Though voluble (and sometimes tedious), Irwin studiously resists communicating important ideas through his work.

The film emphasizes Irwin’s individualism (he succeeded in alienating his wife and many of his friends), but he reflects a broader artistic trend away from social and political engagement in the postwar period. For historical reasons, Irwin and his minimalist and conceptual artist contemporaries, like the pop artists before them, passively accepted the current political order and sought simply to record reality, rather than interpret or change it. Rejecting art’s most transformative possibilities, Irwin limits himself to fleeting impressions and bare, abstract ideas. The resulting work is neither rich nor challenging.

The film shares some of the weaknesses of Irwin’s perspective. At the beginning, it places Irwin in his social and historical context, but the outside world falls away from the director’s attention as Irwin drifts further from it. We get little sense of the larger developments in society, art, culture or technology beyond those in which Irwin engages directly. It is almost as though Irwin’s work is *sui generis* and self-sufficient. It is neither of these things, and this is not the most fruitful approach to understanding an artist and his work.

Finally, a politically significant incident that occurred during DOC NYC this year deserves comment. As part of the festival, the organization Ukraine Friends presented a

screening of *Freedom on Fire: Ukraine’s Fight for Freedom* (2022), which was directed by Evgeny Afineevsky. Ukraine Friends is linked to the United States Agency for International Development (AID), which has long worked with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Freedom on Fire presents a false, chauvinist view of the first six months of the war between the far-right Ukrainian government (backed and armed by the US and NATO) and the oligarchic Russian regime of President Vladimir Putin. One of the documentary’s cinematographers is Dmytro “Orest” Kozatsky, an open anti-Semite, admirer of Hitler and member of the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, which is now part of the National Guard of Ukraine.

The screening was followed by a question-and-answer session in which the fascist Kozatsky participated as an invited guest. During this session, a young woman stood up to denounce Kozatsky as a neo-Nazi, as well as the decision to invite him to speak. Two men quickly grabbed her, tried to knock her phone out of her hand and violently pushed her out the door. When another audience member stood up to denounce Kozatsky, he received the same treatment.

DOC NYC officials cannot claim ignorance about Kozatsky’s reactionary politics. His sympathies are publicly and widely known, and Kozatsky has posted pictures of himself wearing neo-Nazi paraphernalia on social media. By giving Kozatsky a public forum in which to air his views—and by silencing those who denounced them—the DOC NYC organizers have participated in the promotion of the proxy war that the US government is waging against Russia in Ukraine and helped to whitewash the ultra-right Ukrainian nationalist forces.

Concluded.



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