



Nicola Atkinson.Davidson interviewed by Bob Collins

NESTA "INSPIRE ME"

NESTA fellow Nicola Atkinson.Davidson travelled to Bosnia in July 2004 to create a series of artworks entitled 'Terrible Beauty' to reflect the experiences of Bosnians today. During her trip Nicola created two video pieces which she shared with the communities she met. Her resulting work – two short films titled Pool and Storm – struck an emotional chord with those affected by the war, and represented a new creative step for her.

"I spent three days in Mostar and three days in Sarajevo. I'd never been to a place that had been recently traumatised by war. Someone prepared me for how hard it might be by saying that I'd probably be crying the whole time. But I stayed alert, and absorbed everything.

When I'm creating work like that, I'm in an extremely heightened state. It's unlike the way I am at any other time. Everything's stripped away and I feel almost vulnerable.

Part of my remit was to do a piece for the Bosnian communities. When you go somewhere as an artist, you go with trepidation, hoping to be inspired to produce the work. Essentially I was given the whole country as my canvas.

I decided I wanted to do something that bore a relationship to the war, but that was also forward-looking. I didn't want to ghettoise the notion of refugees. I wanted to find something universal in their experience.

I came across my inspiration totally by chance. I was videotaping all the time while I was out there. I didn't even know I was going to use the footage. But I was walking around Mostar the day after the Mostar Bridge was reopened, and I saw this pool of water and began filming it. A man walked past and threw his cigarette into it. As the water flowed it divided and rejoined again. It was like two people, or two hearts, becoming separate, and then reforming.

That was it. You see something, and then suddenly you begin to see it everywhere.

Water became my dominant theme. My second piece featured water and happened by chance too. I was filming my driver, Viteskic Samir, as we drove through a storm. He was singing an old Bosnian song, and outside you could hear the storm and see the changing landscape, with all these new buildings rising up next to the ones destroyed by the war. And surrounding it all was the permanence of the weather and the natural world.

I've always believed that capturing something in the corner of your eye is your true inspiration. Maybe you worry that the moment you've captured is too small to mean anything. But I had faith that even a single moment, like a point of light reflecting off a moving mirror, can be important.

I hoped that I'd created something that Bosnians would actually want to have and be a part of: something that had a weight of understanding to it, but which also conveyed that weight without making explicit reference to the war.

At first, using video felt risky. Video work is often only appreciated in a museum context. I showed it to people whose knowledge of video is from watching television and movies – they're much more critical of it as an art form. But they said "We've never thought about this, it's so unusual. It speaks to us completely". It was very important to me that they appreciated it. The fact that they liked it and understood it was amazing."