Wild Imaginings

Artist Breda Beban has been called 'the diva of Balkan spirit', for her explorations of politics, geography and love. In this exclusive interview, Beban discusses immigration, art without borders, and her attempts to infiltrate Tate's permanent collection with her latest show, Imagine Art After.

It is perhaps fitting that when I ask Tate Britain staff where in the building the exhibition Imagine Art After may be found, I am met with bemused looks. This is a hidden, easily missed exhibition, which seems to remain invisible even to those who work alongside it daily. Unlike the high profile Turner Prize: A Retrospective and Millais exhibitions on show alongside it, Imagine Art After did not offer the viewer an obvious inlet. Spread across several floors, and unheard of by many of the Tate staff, this was a show that – fittingly for its themes of migration – demanded that viewers travel in search of it.

Having found the exhibition's three locations within Tate Britain, however, I was rewarded for my efforts. In an age where immigration is such an influential topic, it seems that there is no better time for such an exhibition. The artists involved are Nigerian, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Iraqi and Albanian, and thus their artistic concerns are as diverse as their respective heritages. Senayt Samuel's *Rooted* (2007) presents an intriguing insight into her experience of migration. Samuel, who settled in London in 2002, returned to her native Eritrea for the first time in ten years, to explore her notions of home. The unframed photographs she presents here allow us to share her viewpoint as she photographs old friends and relatives. Each photograph is accompanied by a short text revealing Samuel's thoughts as she works. By sharing her view through the camera lens, alongside this dialogue, Samuel reveals a landscape of some of the characters she left behind. Fascinating insights into people's reasons for wanting to move, or their decisions to remain in Eritrea are uncovered. For some, there is the acknowledgement that to grow up is to leave the country in search of better opportunities; for others, there is an apparent air of disapproval towards Samuel's decision to emigrate. Reading the text accompanying the photographs, the

viewer shares Samuel's sense of being torn between two cultures. Perhaps because the viewer is aware that they are seeing the scenes not only through someone else's eyes, but also through a camera lens, an undercurrent of detachment runs through the work. One wonders whether the title of *Rooted* refers to Samuel's feelings towards her native Eritrea, or to her settlement in London. Photographing people from her past, from whom she has separated herself for a decade, Samuel seems to be searching for acceptance for doing so, and at times almost longing for something lost, whilst maintaining a sense of detachment from what she has left behind.

Just as Samuel's written words reveal her feelings towards her resurfacing past, it is the close-up film of Denis Hyka's face that divulges his emotion at seeing his native Albania. Hyka has not returned to the country since he left for London in 1997. His collaborative work with Tirana-based Violana Murataj was, like Samuel's work, a quest for the past. Using Hyka's drawings of his grandmother's garden and other remembered places, Murataj embarked on a quest to retrace locations of Hyka's past. *Finding Grandma's Garden* (2007) comprises two screens, one showing Murataj's journeys around Tirana, and the other focusing on Hyka's face, which reveals his shifting emotions as he watches the film. The opening scene, of a building site in Tirana, is an eloquent, albeit possibly coincidental metaphor of the change that the city has undergone since Hyka left.

Like Hyka and Murataj, twenty-year-old artist Estabrak Al-Ansari, who emigrated from Iraq to Britain at the age of five, uses the device of two facing screens to convey her experience of revealing to her Muslim family that she is gay. One screen portrays Estabrak's lover, Rebecca, semi-nude in bed. Frequent close ups of Rebecca's body reveal the intimacy between the couple, which is juxtaposed with Estabrak's aunt's back, as she struggles to accept her neice's sexuality. The video of Rebecca is shot beside a window, so that her skin seems to radiate. Bathed in natural light, she giggles and chats light-heartedly to Estabrak about their relationship. In contrast, Estabrak's aunt turns her back on the camera – and by extension, on her niece's appeal for her homosexuality to be accepted. She sits rigidly facing a window, clothed in black and blocking the natural light that casts such carefree warmth in the video of Rebecca. The composition renders Estabrak, her aunt, and the viewer unable to see each other,

offering an echo of the pair's passionate disagreement. In broken English, the aunt insists that Estabrak's sexuality is a plea for attention, and Estrabrak responds with adolescent outbursts of frustration. One wonders, however, whether the aunt's words are superfluous to the work, and whether her turned back could have been more eloquent if accompanied by silence. Standing between these screens, and trying to follow the dialogue of both simultaneously, the viewer is placed in Estabrak's fragile position between her heritage and her heart.

Whilst Estabrak's exploration of the beliefs of her native country occurs on a deeply personal level, Muyiwa Osifuye approaches his investigation into the customs of his native Nigeria from a documentary-like stance. *Kaabiyesi: Courts of Influence* (2007) forms part of his decade-long interest in documenting the cultural heritage of Nigeria and Benin. Muyiwa's large photographs – the physical quality of which he was reportedly rendered speechless by, upon first seeing the exhibition – focus on the Obas, the kings of the Yoruba people, who are considered divine. Each photograph portrays a king – usually surrounded by lavish furnishings and ornate décor – juxtaposed with the humble kingdom that he rules.

Whilst Osifuye focuses on royalty, Addisalem Bizuwork's paintings tell vibrant stories of everyday life in Ethiopia. These bright oil paintings echo Bizuwork's unyielding optimism in the face of unrest in Addis Ababa, which prevails throughout her online dialogue with Samuel. Drawing on the billboards and graffiti of Addis Ababa, Bizuwork brings a contemporary twist to the Ethiopian Christian painting tradition, by exploring the role of women in traditional Ethiopian society.

Tucked away in unexpected corners of Tate Britain, Imagine Art After is an exhibition easily missed by visitors. These artists and their work have had to find their place in the country, in the Western art institution, and in the topical immigration debate. For those visitors prepared to search the gallery for something unexpected, a privileged insight into deeply personal stories awaits.

Art Review: 'Imagine Art After' brings together artists who have stayed in their home country and those who have come to London to live and work. Can you tell me about how the project was facilitated across such distances?
Breda Beban: It began in 2004, when Julia Farrington, of Index on Censorship magazine – which defends freedom of expression – asked me to be involved in an internet-based project in which we aimed to create a virtual state for migrant artists. I became really interested in questions of where 'local' is. So this virtual project evolved very quickly, in three hours or so, into a project about the tension between migration and the notion of 'the local'. We set up online dialogues between pairs of artists, and then invited proposals from artists following these. The six artists who were successful in their proposals make up the show Imagine Art After that is in Tate Britain. Having access to virtual communities online is what allows a project such as this one to work across large distances. However, it was not always easy – for example, Estabrak and Sami didn't have many opportunities to chat online due to the fact that the internet in Iraq was unstable. They still managed to discuss some issues that were really central to the work that came out of their partnership though.

A.R: How established are the artists in their own countries?
B.B: There is one artist who is, in Imagine Art After, a bit of a star – Muyiwa Osifuye, the Nigerian based artist. He was part of the Venice Biennial. The others have barely had shows.

A.R: How do you think this project will inform the artists' future work? For example, do you think collaborations between the pairs of artists will continue?
B.B: Some will continue, like the Albanian pair of artists, Hyka and Murataj. I think in general, all of the artists have been deeply affected by the experience of being involved in Imagine Art After. Many of them have said it was a life changing experience. Muyiwa Osifuye was speechless when he saw his work displayed in the Goodison Room at Tate.

A.R: Your work has been described as being 'about subjectivity and emotion on the edges of bigger stories about politics, geography and love'. Is this a fair

description of your own work, and how applicable is it to the work in 'Imagine Art After'?

B.B: It is very applicable to my own work and it fits 'Imagine Art After' very well too. One of the artists – Hyka – took a lot more risk than others. It's a very personal piece for him, dramatically so, actually. The other pieces have a different preoccupation. I find Senayt Samuel's piece 'Rooted' very interesting. Her's were very understated for Tate. I love the way in which, if one reads the text carefully, it reveals that in her attempts to root herself in Addis Ababa, she's uprooting herself at the same time. I find these two movements that are in the work very delicate. I was there with Senayt when she was producing the piece in Addis Ababa, and she told me that when she was growing up, people just wanted to leave Ethiopia, and very few people didn't want to go. The idea of growing up was to grow up and *leave*. That was part of her upbringing – growing up just to go.

A.R: How has your own practise been affected by curating 'Imagine Art After'?

B.B: The first edition was more the other way round – my practise informed Imagine Art After really. How my practise will be affected, I think I will see in the second edition. The first edition made me realise that it is very difficult for me to make a distinction between my practise as an individual artist and my practise as a curator and creative producer. They overlap completely. Of course it is possible to rationally divide them, but I think my practise in the last four months suffered severely from not having enough time. I had no time to focus on it in a way that I am used to. So the biggest mystery for me is how to divide my time. I will have to be very careful in the future. On the other hand, because of Imagine Art After, and the fatigue I had with it in the summer of 2006, I had a very grown up year. I bought a flat, I became a Professor of Visual Arts, I became a Reader in Media, my mother died. I had a grown up year, finally. I decided to disappear for a month and that's when I filmed my most successful piece so far, 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Gucha', which was part of the Venice Biennial last summer. That was the highlight. They are totally different pieces, but it kind of coincided that as Imagine Art After finishes at Tate, The Most Beautiful Woman in Gucha will be staged. So out of my desperation, came what is definitely my most successful piece so far, in terms of reaction and critical acclaim, and also financially. It has been purchased by Tate as well.

A.R: Where does Imagine Art After sit in relation to other projects concerned with cross-cultural exchange? (for example, The Suitcase Project, in which artists in Copenhagen and Cardiff made work in a suitcase and travelled with it to display it.)

B.B: Imagine Art After wants to do the exact opposite – instead of shrinking art literally into a suitcase, if an artist wants to go big, we want to go big with them. Basically we want to bring what is normally on the margins, or even off the margins, right into the centre, and give it visibility. Through the process of production we want to really help the work grow, and help the artist grow with it. Ideally, I'd like Imagine Art After to have money to help artists sort their debts out, to pay for their studios, to really equip them. I would really like to see Imagine Art After grow to such a point that we could really embrace the artists and help them in many ways. I think it's important because the work's seen within a context of art, with huge audiences. As we know, small exhibitions in alternative places don't have as many visitors. One of our goals is to have wider audiences for this kind of work. We had stunning reactions – for example, when we brought the artists for the openings, I took Addisalem Bizuwork to see her work, there were four teenagers sitting on the floor making exact replicas of her work. It turns out that their teacher had given them the task to engage with, and make copies of, their favourite work in Tate Britain. And when I introduced them to the artist, they couldn't believe it was her! Addisalem is very young and she is this almost unreal African beauty. She's very modest but she doesn't need glamourous clothes to look incredibly glamourous. These teenagers were shocked, because they thought she was about nineteen or something, and she was completely thrown. It was her first time in any Western museum, she'd never left Ethiopia. So this is the reason for making Imagine Art After, to get that going. If you have it in an alternative place, no one will bring the school children.

A.R: In a society where immigration is such an influential topic, what does the project offer?

B.B: I want it to be seen by as many different people as possible. That's why it was good for it to be hosted by Guardian Unlimited, because we had 57,000 hits. We had three times more hits than Bob Dylan's website, which was running concurrently on

Guardian Unlimited. But it is impossible to measure, and a lot of it is anecdotal. We have been told many, many times that we went absolutely beyond the standard of how migrant art is represented. We also know that a lot of people who saw it at Tate could not believe that someone at Addis Ababa could make such contemporary urban art. Because I'm an optimist and I'm a migrant as well, I know that the way migrant art is usually dealt with by being kept in the margins. So you end up in bad restaurants, in small galleries with absolutely no facilities. You're constantly pushed back into the margins. It's a circle. So how to break that circle? You have to show the work where people don't normally go for it. Small galleries will have their dedicated audience, which is excellent, – and I don't think that art is important only if it's seen by many people. But because Imagine Art After is about this delicate political issue, I think it is crucial for it to be visible. That's why it was so great to work with Guardian Unlimited, that's why it's showing at the Tate, and that's why we want to move into broadcasting in the next edition.

A.R: Where will broadcasting of the project sit, amongst other media that is dealing with similar themes?

B.B: It will hopefully be with BBC or Channel 4, and the documentary will hopefully be broadcast to wider audiences, so it will be accessible to people like other media is. Let's be realistic – programmes like Eastenders and Coronation Street are already engaging with these issues in *phenomenal* ways. Art sometimes lags behind certain things. That's why I love to read *Heat Magazine*, and *Grazia*! These types of media are incredibly alive, and they reflect very well on society's burning issues. And then you have the right wing papers, which are like a hangover from some twenty years ago. Coronation Street dealt with issues of immigration very successfully. The women from Eastern Europe were not whores, which is usually what mainstream television portrays them as.

A.R: How relevant is Imagine Art After to today's British society?

B.B: It is, I hope, addressing issues that are really important to all countries at the moment – the idea of moving. If you go to the Home Office website, you see that the numbers of people from each country making application for asylum are very small. Prior to doing Imagine Art After, I thought this must be hundreds of thousands, but its

like five or six hundred altogether. With the European borders being open, people are migrating. Like the British people who are going to Spain. What's the big deal? People move! For whatever reason – economic, leisure, retirement. So what's the problem if people move because wages here are better than Poland? I listened to a radio programme where an English person said that he salutes everybody who comes from any country in the world to Britain, because they want to work hard and make their lives better. And there are so many English people in his street who would not even walk to the corner to make their lives better! So things are changing, whether people want it or not. Imagine Art After is really concerned with these changes to ideas of where home is, and where one belongs if one moves.

A.R: Given that the show has been described as 'dealing with displacement and exile', and 'progress at the cost of tradition', we might expect it to be shown in a less mainstream gallery than Tate Britain. What influenced the decision to use this venue, and to spread the work over several floors?

B.B: It is an unusual venue for this show, but you can see we were given the 'non-spaces'. I didn't want a compact show, I wanted Imagine Art After to infiltrate the Tate. I was even thinking we could have a piece in amongst the permanent collection. Well, that wasn't possible and then we were given Lightbox, which was nothing, The Goodison Room, which is a kind of corporate space, and this arcade, which was nothing either. Now I think in retrospect, I understand what Tate was doing, because there was so much risk involved. Along the way they kept asking how I was going to guarantee quality, and I was irritated by that. Later on, when we went into production, I understood what they were on about, because I had to spend a lot of time with the curatorial team to guarantee quality of work.

A.R: By having it spread around Tate, did you intend for it to reflect its subject matter of artists who are quite diversely located?

B.B: Well, what I was asking was, how can we focus on certain issues which are relevant? But also, what I think is a very relevant political issue today is that insecurity which is triggered by the tension between migration and the geo-political notion of 'local'. Local being, let's say, an artist who remains based in Tirana, and local for the migrant artist from Tirana who is now based in London. What does the

local do, how does it shape us? Imagine Art After is doing it, not theorising about it. We are certainly not interested in institutionalised official criticism, or new ideas of officially labelling them. Even with the second edition, I don't want to make a big show. It will probably come down to seven or eight productions. We'll recruit much more artists, probably about fourteen pairs of artists but we'll still have not too many productions.

A.R: The project was produced by Julia Farringdon from Index Arts. Do you know if Index Arts has any plans to further develop cross-cultural exchange between artists?

B.B: They'll be involved in the next edition, and they've been heavily involved in all stages of this edition. They were at the opening at Tate, and it was fantastic. I was extremely busy, showing people around, with it spread over three floors. And one hour into the opening, I walked into the drinks reception to see it packed with people, but a lovely mixture of people, of all kind of races. For the first time, there was a big racial mix at the Tate. I was proud because this is – I hope – the audiences we want to see. This is who we work for, in a way. I was so happy when I saw that.

A.R: Are there any plans for the exhibition to reflect its subject matter of travel, by going on tour?

B.B: There's interest from Italy, and we know they're looking into staging the Albanian piece and publishing the book that's part of it. They want to publish it in Italian and Albanian, because Italy has a lot of Albanian immigrants. There's also interest from the Guggenheim in Venice, for a presentation in the summer. I spoke to a curator from MOMA who could not *believe* that Tate went for this. Not in terms of quality of work – she loves the concept and the work – but she cannot see MOMA being ready to be convinced to stage a show like this. So we'll see how the work will travel. There's a big interest in Estabrak's piece, especially from the Muslim world, because it's quite a brave thing for her to create work about being gay, when Islam views it as a sin.

A.R: Do you see art without borders existing in the future? Do you think this is something that the art world should aspire to?

B.B: I don't know about without borders. I'm sceptical about 'without borders' or 'virtual' – this kind of terminology frightens me for some reason. What I'd like to see is that we have world music, we have world cinema, why not have world art? It'll be less self conscious, less money driven. Though as we know all artists like selling their work! It's impossible to be clinical about this stuff. I'd like to see less claustrophobic art. And also, let's face it – most museums of contemporary art are pretty much the same. It's like the Body Shop – everywhere! It's probably a stage we have to go through, but I'd like to see a slightly different museum with a slightly different dynamic. I think Imagine Art After is changing things. But I think another way to change things is to go into broadcast. Everything is going digital, Tate should go into production – I'm amazed it hasn't been done yet! Also I want to have a boat for education – why can't Tate have a boat for education on the Thames? It could be a home for artists, and we could have a residency on it and you can have education there too. But a boat is not so popular with funders!..