

From BURU to GIUDECCA

Embodiment and Escape in the Ecological Art of Rossella Biscotti

Tania Roy with Rossella Biscotti

My work has dealt with explorations of forgotten events that reveal changing value systems, and how they are produced and consumed. I am interested in narration, and how a subject is formed and creates alliances as well as its mode of resistance in conflict with often violent institutionalized systems. To this end, I use montage as a gesture that might weave together traces of lives and materials into new narratives, while revealing the structure, and tools, that create these narratives. I produce sculpture, performance, filmmaking, and other forms to explore these themes. (artist's statement)

For Rossella Biscotti, trained as an architect and set designer, narrative is a deeply individualized claim on space. Across the contexts of Biscotti's works, narrative casts disparate concepts of time—from the novelistic, the testimonial, or the historiographical—into spatial formations that are documented, remembered, or dreamed. Combining verticality with extensive elaborations of floor space, Biscotti's sculptural installations cohere around narrative trajectories that are at once paradigmatic and singular, and seldom personalized. In their especially feminized sensibility—involving touch and the refinement of organic matter into ornamental detail—Biscotti's installations set in play a series of exchanges across bodies and species. In the collection of works and images assembled



Figure 1 *Surati* (2019), detail. Natural rubber, 250 × 150 cm / 210 × 100 cm. Exhibition view, Dhaka Art Summit, Dhaka, 2020. Photo by Randhir Singh.

here, Biscotti evokes Indonesia's historical transition from the rule of the Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie (VoC, Dutch East India Company) into sovereign nationhood, through a putative "natural history" of abduction, forced mobility, domestication, extinction, and violent regeneration.

Sanikem Nyai Ontosoroh Madame Le Boucq, Maiko, Annalies, Mei, Surati, Princess of Kasiruta (all 2019)—these borrowed names provide Biscotti with titles for her series of rubber castings, and a syntax for "the natural" across the collection images presented in this visual essay. Tactile, transportable, and motivationally variable, each work cites the wax-resist process of hand-dyed *batik* in different formations, suggesting, first, that the textile is a detailed inscription of feminine work into the spaces and value of domestic property. By combining women's names

with patterns that originate from distinct regions, the rubber works evoke the Indonesian Archipelago through a differentiated feminized subjectivity—these rubber artifacts comprise, altogether, Biscotti's long-standing preoccupation with *The Buru Quartet* (1980–88), Pramoedya Ananta Toer's series of novels that thematize narrative resistance to colonial rule in early twentieth-century Indonesia.

While the quartet elaborates the *Bildungs*-plot of its masculine protagonist, a journalist who integrates "the social protests of reportage . . . with fiction's eye on the real," Biscotti, in a remarkable reading, extrapolates circulating references to textiles across the books, consolidating their passing descriptions within a disturbing materialist insight—in Biscotti's Buru works, molded surfaces of natural latex are installed as placeholders for propertyless



Figure 2 Mei (2019). Natural rubber and food coloring, 240 × 60 cm each. Exhibition view at the solo show *Clara and Other Specimens*, Salzburg Stadgalerie, Salzburg, 2021.

women, permitted ownership over movable conjugal items (like *batik*) but not the transferable value of their bodies (Hitchcock 2010: 167, 170). Defeated through the use of detail, in their skin-like contact points (such as between variable figurations of wife and concubine, or mother and daughter), the rubber works advance a deeply sexuate claim on Pramoedya's twentieth century. In the absence of the women themselves, Biscotti confronts us with the complexity of their biographical traces within the materiality of rubber,

itself a product of histories of forced migration, crop substitution, and indentured labor in the plantations of North and South Sumatra.¹ Under the sign of the feminine, Biscotti installs narratives of survival, escape, and, perhaps above all, an order of morphological plasticity across disparate entities that relegates the gendered, enculturated, and commoditized body to the order of accident or catastrophe: in a passionate account of the rubber work named after one of the several women that proliferate Pramoedya's national epic, Biscotti



explains how she wished to “spatialize the story of Surati” while refusing the personalizing marks of beauty and kinship that attach to the character in the novel (fig. 1).² In what constitutes the most subversive action of escape from the institutional conjuncture of conjugality and nationhood, Surati, on learning that she is to be made *nyai* (concubine) to a Dutch plantation owner, rolls amid the corpses of smallpox victims to contract the disease and pass it onto the man. She succeeds, survives, and lives on in in Pramoedya’s narrative

in a permanent if fully reconciled state of physical disfigurement; as a figure, Surati destroys both a biographical past and the notion of a purposive future, together. For Biscotti, Surati stands for a strategy of mimesis between organisms—the reproductive body of the woman and its assimilation to the microbotic life of the virus here, in the installation, suggests an escape from the body itself.



Figure 3 (above) *Tetrastigma* (2019). Bogor Botanical Garden, Indonesia. Photo by Rossella Biscotti.

Figure 4 (right) *Dismembered Rafflesia and Seeds* (2019). Silkscreens on cotton and rubber strips, 700 × 160 cm / 700 × 150 cm (textiles). Exhibition view at solo show *new work*, Kunstinstituut Melly, 2019–20. Photo by Kristien Daem.

I advocate for care and attentiveness toward individual narratives as much as for the methodology of gathering information through the recording of oral stories, archival research, or fieldwork. Sites that have been historically tapped by different forms of mining, exploitation, and confinement are often the backdrop of my explorations. By questioning the relevance of historical information from a contemporary perspective, I'm aiming to create links and networks to the present, hopefully empowering the spectators' imagination, culture, and experience. (artist's statement)







Figure 5 *Seeds* (2019), detail. Silkscreen on cotton and natural rubber strips, 700 × 150 cm (textile). Exhibition view at solo show *new work*, Kunststituut Melly, 2019–20. Photo by Kristien Daem.



Figure 6 *Sanikem Nyai Ontosoroh Madame Le Boucq* (2019), detail. Natural rubber and food coloring, 305 × 108 cm and 210 × 100 cm. Exhibition view at solo show *new work*, Kunstinstituut Melly, 2019–20. Photo by Jeroen Laven.





Figure 7 (left) *Dismembered Rafflesia* (2019). Silkscreen on cotton and rubber strips. Artist studio at CCA Singapore, 2020. Photo by Kee Ya Ting.

Figure 8 (above) Page from *The Annals of the Buitenzorg Botanical Garden*, vol. 32. Batavia: Buitenzorg, 1899–1904.

An Italian-born resident of Amsterdam, Biscotti extends her interchangeable uses of organic materials, of bodies and rubber, to the megafauna of Indonesian Archipelago—the so-called corpse flowers of Sumatra and peninsular Malaysia. These were exported to England, Italy, and the Netherlands at the turn of the century, as spectacular botanical trophies. Indonesia's national flower, the *Rafflesia*, like the *Amorphophallus titanum* (or “deformed phallus”) are colloquially named for dead bodies because of the fleshlike color and texture of their massive inflorescence (the orders of floral growth along the original shaft of the plant). By interweaving narratives of sexual captivity, bodily abduction, and forced intimacy with histories of botanical theft, Biscotti presents us with her own rendering of the folios of the Buitenzorg Botanical Garden (1923; founded in 1817 by Dutch East Indies; now the Bogor Gardens, in Indonesia) (figs. 7–8). Biscotti's concern with the depletion of context (and the boundary conditions therein,



Figure 9 *Live Feed* (2019). Silkscreen on cotton and rubber strips, 4000 × 160 cm (textile). Exhibition view at solo show *new work*, Kunstinstituut Melly, 2019–20. Photo by Kristien Daem.

for the experience of habitable space) is presented, emblematically, in *Live Feed* (2019). The work alludes, in part, to the *Amorphophallus*'s import from Sumatra to Europe by the Florentine botanist Odoardo Beccari in the first decades of the twentieth century, an event that would change the study of modern botany in Italy. For her part, Biscotti repeats the famous gigantism of the plant by scaling the work to its actual human height: the repetitions of floral growth along the spike-like inner shoot of the *Amorphophallus* comprise the largest inflorescence in the world. Flowering once in four to ten years, the plant's cycle of protracted sexual maturation and depletion is readily available online today, through time-lapse videos accessible to tourists as well as the casual viewer. Biscotti attempts to interrupt the symmetrical return of proportions between the flower on the screen and a gazing public through the assembly of the work—arranged as a series of vertically draped image-planes, *Live Feed* provisionally removes the organism from the simultaneous demands of science, entertainment, and bodily exposure by splicing the spectacle into “segmented layers of color that overlap, but which are not permitted to intersect”³ (fig. 9).

Developed during the lead-up to the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, Biscotti ran a “dream workshop” within the women's prison on Venice's Giudecca Island. For half a year, Biscotti and the workshop's participants (inmates and a handful of invited guests) recorded and shared their dreams over meetings held every two weeks, a project that individuated the experience of institutionalized prison life for the women through intimate acts of narration, while collectivizing that experience through the development of common themes and images into a shared

dream-text. Selected recordings of this oneiric “document” were represented through a sound piece, laid over Biscotti's installation. In tandem with the collective character of the workshop and the resultant audio track, Biscotti chose to use the prison's compost—comprised of pooled rubbish from the women's cells, the prison kitchen, and its garden—as the raw material with which to sculpt the form and space of *I dreamt that you changed into a cat . . . gatto . . . ha ha ha* (2013). In a strategy that is comparable to “Surati”—both works combine the truth-claims of embodiment with the possibilities of escape into other form and scales of existence—compost was organized in formations along the floor space of the exhibit. While the women inmates were permitted to visit the exhibit, we can presume that it was the compaction, degradation, and changing tactility of the compost sculpture that effectively mediated the relation between the gendered space of imprisonment and that of the celebrated art-event: The compost structure would have



Figure 10 *I dreamt that you changed into a cat . . . gatto . . . ha ha ha* (2013). Compost sculptures and sixty-minute sound piece. View of the installation at Encyclopedic Palace, 55th Venice Biennale, Venice, 2013. Photo by Ela Bialkowska, Okno Studio.



Figure 11 *Sime Darby Oil Palm Plantation, Malaysia* (2020). Photo by Rossella Biscotti.

confirmed the institutional confinement of the absent women for visitors to the exhibition, even as it manifestly protracted their organic residues into the distilled value of the artwork.

“Palm oil plantations are stately projects in the sense that not only do they enjoy the solid support of the state but offend the mimesis of nature’s physical and aesthetic forms so as to imitate the state’s military formations of troops in rows and columns with an overall threatening, mono-cropped visage. Then on top of that come the fabulous mimeses of modern chemistry in the processing plant playing with the infinite mimetic endowment of the benzene ring so as to come up with the metamorphic sublime” (artist’s statement, quoting Taussig 2018: 176).

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Established after the 1830s according to extractive principles of the Dutch Cultivation System, the plantation economy was governed through the proxy rule of a traditional Javanese patriarchy; by the late nineteenth century, the Dutch East Indies and Malay Archipelago would outpace rubber production in both Brazil and the Congo basin, the former becoming the world’s leading exporter of rubber by the turn of the century.
2. Biscotti, in conversation with Tania Roy, December 5, 2021.
3. Biscotti, in conversation with Tania Roy, March 15, 2020.

References

- Hitchcock, Peter. 2010. *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Taussig, Michael. 2018. *Palma Africana*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



Tania Roy is senior lecturer and coordinator of the graduate program in English literature at the National University of Singapore. She is the author of *Adorno and the Architects of Late Style in India: Aesthetic Form after the Twentieth-Century Novel* (2021). At NUS, she teaches topics in critical theory, especially the aesthetics of the Frankfurt School, trauma studies, postcolonial studies, and world literature. Related interests on ecological aesthetics and art after the liberalization of the Indian economy considered, especially, as a response to civic violence under the current dispensation of far-right supremacism have appeared as book chapters and journal articles, including *boundary 2*, *Theory, Culture, and Society*, *Cultural Politics*, *The European Legacy*, and the *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*.

Rossella Biscotti (born in 1978 in Molfetta, Italy) lives and works between Brussels and Rotterdam. She graduated from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Naples in 2002 and later attended the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam from 2010 to 2011. She has taken part in major international exhibitions such as 15th Cuenca Biennale, Ecuador (2021); Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh (2020); Sonsbeek 23th, Arnhem, Netherlands (2016); 55th Venice Biennale, Italy, and 13th Istanbul Biennale, Turkey (2013); dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel, Germany, and Manifesta 9, Belgium (2012). Her work has been presented in several solo exhibitions, including, most recently, at the Salzburg Summer Academy of Visual Art (2020). She was an artist in residence at the Centre for Contemporary Art (2020). She is the recipient of numerous international awards.