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IN THE TREETOP . . .
 PANORAMIC WINDOWS
 PROVIDE A VIEW OF THE STRAIT
 OF GIBRALTAR. ON THE TABLE, A
 LAMP BY BARRADA'S HUSBAND,
 SEAN GULLETTE. BELOW:
 BARRADA IN HER LIVING
 ROOM. PHOTOGRAPHED BY
 FRANÇOIS HALARD. SITTINGS
 EDITOR: HAMISH BOWLES.



CASTLE IN THE SKY



Perched above the Tangier coast, artist Yto Barrada's playful house and garden are a laboratory for her eclectic taste and excavator's eye. By Elizabeth Rubin.

It is often suggested to Yto Barrada that she should be the mayor of Tangier. "It doesn't make sense!" she protests. Yet the extraordinary photographer, visual artist, founder of Tangier's Cinémathèque—which just hosted Morocco's National Film Festival—and native of this fabled city easily weaves her way through its parallel universes. Her world extends from the street kids and women in vocational training at Darna, her mother's NGO, to the smugglers, magicians, stragglers, and migrants she befriends, films, and photographs. It also includes the designers, actresses, and collectors who convene, for example, at American



BLOOMSDAY

ABOVE: PAINTER TOMÁS COLAÇO'S FLORAL STILL LIFE ADORNS A SIDE TABLE. LEFT: BLUE AND GREEN CHAIRS SALVAGED FROM HOTEL SOLAZUR OFFER ECLECTIC SEATING IN THE SUN-DAPPLED COURTYARD.

garden designer Madison Cox's extravaganza celebrating his fiftieth birthday. Never mind that the only other Moroccans at such events are usually acrobats and servants; the expats are essential to Tangier's DNA, its history of louche decadence, its cachet as artistic redoubt, its current semirenaissance, and Yto's domestic and artistic projects.

Take, for example, her tree house. One day during her courtship with Massachusetts-born actor and filmmaker Sean Gullette, Yto saw a tree

house in his East Village community garden designed by the musician and celebrated architect Roderick Romero. "This is great. We should do one with the kids from Darna," she told Gullette. In no time Donna Karan and Russell Simmons were helping to finance the project, and Romero was holding an outdoor workshop in Tangier. In two weeks the kids constructed a gangplank and a raft-shaped abode, 21 feet from the ground, in the branches of Yto's giant strangler fig tree looking out over the Strait of Gibraltar.

Her house is actually the family gardener's former dwelling on the hillside of Old Mountain Road. Once a dirt track, with a humid landscape facing north (beautiful but not sunny), the locale attracted green-thumbed British residents, like the Scottish painter James McBey; he and his wife, the American photographer and bookbinder Marguerite Loeb McBey, were the former owners of Yto's family home. (Yto's mother, Mounira Bouzid El Alami, lives in the main house, a little higher up the hill.) A wild garden planted with herbs, thistles, and an ambitious vegetable plot rambles down the cliff to the sea, playing host to Yto's pet donkeys—two were a wedding gift to her husband—and numerous wild boars.

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CHECK MATE

AMONG SALON-STYLE HANGINGS, A BRASS BED RESTORED BY JERRY BUTLER AND COVERED WITH A TANGIER WEAVERS CO-OP BLANKET. THE INTRICATELY PAINTED DRESSER WAS PURCHASED IN TËTOUAN.

VIEW

Up in the Air



TABLE MANNERS

ABOVE: A WATERCOLOR BY THE HOUSE'S FORMER OWNER JAMES MCBEY HANGS OVER A TABLE INLAID WITH MOSAIC TILES AND PILED WITH MEMORABILIA. RIGHT: THE YEAR-ROUND KITCHEN GARDEN.

Yto's interior is hoarder chic, yet airy, not crammed. She trawls junk and antiques shops and the chaotic Casa Barata market for treasures and leftovers, excavating old parts of the city to create something new. Curtains tailored to different windows and mismatched tiles are installed throughout the house, rescue items from mansions demolished to make way for ugly high-rises. The terrace is a gallery for the garden chairs salvaged from a 1960s-era beachfront hotel. The artwork is local—Moroccan painters; a James McBey; pieces gifted by Christopher Gibbs, the grand old art and antiques dealer of Tangier and Oxfordshire; her eight-year-old daughter, Vega's, drawings. Yto laughs at the recent *New York Times* article on the estates of Tangier's European eccentrics—"They're like auction catalogs, but everyone has everyone else's furniture" or that of their dead predecessors. Yto's motif is the flea market, not auctions. "It's a place of redistribution," she says. "It's more alive."

Born in 1971, Yto spent her youth in Paris, Rabat, and Tangier, where she attended the American School run by Joe McPhillips, a theater director who devoted his life to what he called the Andover of the Mediterranean. Still, the eighties

and nineties were a time of decay and slough in Tangier. The old magic of the Interzone years, when this outcropping just kilometers from Spain was run by everyone (France, Spain, Britain) and no one, had faded, all but extinguished with the death of Paul Bowles in 1999. Tangier, as Yto will often say, was utterly abandoned by culture. There were no libraries, scarcely a museum (except for Yto's favorite, Malcolm Forbes's toy-soldier museum). Weeds began growing out of abandoned mansions—ruins in the vein of Grey Gardens or the Finzi-Contini estate. Driving the hills with Yto is always a history lesson—"That was William Burroughs's detoxification hospital, now it's destroyed; there's Ma-clean's house, he was an instructor to

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GUIDING LIGHTS

BARRADA'S 2012 SCULPTURE *TWIN PALM ISLAND* ENGAGES WITH URBANITY AND NATURE, CENTRAL THEMES OF HER ART.



FRANÇOIS HALARD (2), *TWIN PALM ISLAND*, 2012. STEEL STRUCTURE, PAINTED GALVANIZED SHEET METAL, COLORED ELECTRICAL BULBS. 272½ X 390 X 127 CM. COURTESY OF PAGE GALLERY LONDON.

Sharifian royal troops.” She has been known to call her husband in tears as she watches a tree chopped, a building bulldozed—her patrimony vanishing.

As the nineties became the noughts, Yto—fresh from the Sorbonne and the International Center of Photography in New York—set her sights on her hometown and began photographing what would become *A Life Full of Holes—The Strait Project*, named after the novel by Driss ben Hamed Charhadi that Paul Bowles recorded. In these images Yto takes her place among the great photographers of waiting, that Beckettian interlude in which waiting is life. Tangier was, and still is, the dead end for Africa’s migrants whose hopes of crossing the treacherous sea usually culminate in detention, or even death. According to Yto, “In Tangier, the desire, the determination to leave are shared by illegal migrants and all the young men in the city. Waiting, waiting to leave, is an urban dimension in Tangier.”

Yto’s family legends are so entwined

has been widely exhibited—recently in a major solo show at Minneapolis’s Walker Art Center—and acquired by New York’s Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim. Her studio near the Grand Socco is crammed with drawers of old photographs, books on Arab manners, 1920s children’s stories—“I bought the entire library of the American School of Tangier. They were throwing it all in the garbage!” Yto’s hoarding is not just a salvage project, it’s the material for her art. Her latest initiative is an imaginary museum dedicated to Morocco’s dinosaurs and fossil forgers eking a living out of paleontology’s mystique. And then there’s the Cinema Rif—once the beating heart of Tangier along with the Goya and the Paris, the grand old movie houses that brought out families in suits and dresses. Around the time Yto was photographing her *Strait Project*, Cinema Rif was going out of business. She raised money, bought the lease for the theater, and installed in its

A wild garden planted with herbs, thistles, and a vegetable plot rambles down the cliff to the sea and plays host to her pet donkeys

with local history and intrigue that while working as the photographer on Edgardo Cozarinsky’s 1998 film *Ghosts of Tangier*, she discovered that the man who had helped kidnap her activist grandfather in 1958 was hanging out at the Café Central. Decades earlier, in 1962, Yto’s father, Hamid Barrada, had tried to wound the man with an antique handgun. The gun jammed. Now it was Yto’s turn at family vengeance. Being an artist she handled it with wit and aplomb, while conducting her own waiting game. Every time she arrived in Tangier, the first thing she did was to go and take up her position in the café opposite. And then she’d photograph him. “I Shot Him Nine Times” is the title she gave to the series. She continued to film him with a Super 8 camera until he died.

Recently named the Robert Gardner Fellow in Photography at Harvard’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Yto now spends part of the year in the United States. But Tangier remains at the heart of her work, which

halls an artists’ nonprofit that became the Tangier Cinémathèque, North Africa’s first independent cinema center, with film archives, workshops, and a program, Magic Lantern, for hundreds of kids. “We have a system of donors. It’s like a church,” she says, showing me the plush seats with brass plaques on the back. “Whatever word you want I put on it, and I send you a picture and the bill. There’s a price, until we fill the whole cinema. It’s a lifetime thing.” So Madison Cox donated in the names of Joe McPhillips, Pierre Bergé, and Yves Saint Laurent.

Yto is wary of being sold as part of the city’s revival, and insists that “the bigger picture in Tangier is quite a human disaster. The city is modernizing, but people’s basic needs are pushed aside. Twenty-year-olds are bored out of their minds.” Yet, with the Cinémathèque, she has created a legacy for young Tangerines. The gesture “was very Yto,” recalls Gulette. “Unreasonable, very decisive. Visionary, impossible.” □ VIEW>128