

ZARA HOUSHMAND & TAMIKO THIEL

Beyond Manzanar*Planting Gardens of the Heart in a Virtual Prison*

I'm driving the highway that runs like a narrow boundary between snow-topped peaks and the flat, scraggy valley. In the far distance, another mountain range, the edge of a salt desert... If it wasn't for the names of the towns—Lone Pine, Independence, Big Pine—and the smell of sagebrush, I could be almost anywhere in Iran.

I haven't spoken a word in a week, in any language, and the sheer light and hundred mile views match the clear calm of my mind after seven days of meditation and solitude in the Eastern Sierra. But now I'm headed home and the old train of logic and associations is gathering steam again. My last contact with the "real" world was in the first shock of the breaking news about the Oklahoma bombing. I'd left behind the horror of the television images, a war zone in middle America, the knee-jerk accusations, "middle-eastern terrorists," a wave of hate crimes. I don't know yet that the picture has changed, but it doesn't really matter. Facts don't change the feelings that quickly.

I pass a small signpost for a historical monument, like a footnote on the highway. Something makes me slow down, back up, and get out of the car, stepping back into the silence of the landscape. There doesn't seem to be much there—a couple of sentry huts built of stone, what looks like an abandoned warehouse but was once an auditorium, a few tall trees and a patch of green that says there's water out there somewhere. Beyond the green, a small white monument stands dwarfed in the shadow of the mountains. This is all that remains of the Manzanar internment camp, where thousands of Japanese-American families were forcibly "relocated" during World War II—the drab outlines of an archeological site that isn't even old, odd chunks of concrete slab, rusting bits of steel rod. The rows of barracks that housed the prisoners are long gone, dismantled for scrap at the end of the war.

I had read accounts of this particularly ignominious chapter of American history, of lives disrupted, property seized, and the undeserved shame that comes of wearing the face of what America calls the enemy. I had a sense of how the poison still lingered, had listened one night to sake-fuelled stories in a bar in Japantown in L.A., and had seen how those stories, and the silence that surrounded them, shaped the lives of Japanese-Americans too young to remember the camps themselves.

It was coming home to me now in a new way, with the recent news of Oklahoma and the way it dredged up the stale old stories of the hostage crisis in Tehran. There's more than just bad luck involved in being the wrong race, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. There's a moral failure in how casually our media

fuels hatred, how eagerly prejudice partners with opportunism. There's more than bad luck in the way that history repeats itself, not inevitably, but with the force of a stubborn habit.

I spent a few hours walking slowly around the site. I felt the presence of ghosts, a sadness hanging in the air that fifty years of winds had not blown away. But the place was haunted also by other echoes with a different kind of sadness, a nostalgia for the landscape of Iran. What the families interned here had seen as a god-forsaken desert hell was, to my eyes, beautiful. As I listened to the wind in the trees and watched the shadow of the mountains moving slowly across the day, I was home. Even the old scars of the camp roads seemed to trace a chahar-bagh pattern on the land.

I imagined history repeating itself in the most literal way, on this very land, and the irony of mapping such a prison onto the prisons that memory and longing make: the alien looking inward on the landscape of exile, here in this desolate corner of California where the American dream was betrayed. There's a poem here somewhere, I thought. But I didn't get around to writing it. Instead, I did the thing that kills a poem, whatever else it may accomplish. I talked about it.

I talked to Tamiko Thiel, a Japanese-American artist working in new media, whose family had been interned at Topaz, another camp like Manzanar. We were both working at the time at a company with the very arrogant name of Worlds, Inc. We did, in fact, produce worlds—virtual ones on a computer screen, but they were surprisingly real to inhabit. You could walk through architecture and landscape, manipulate a body that was “you” within that world, meet and talk to other people in a similar form, though in reality they were sitting at another computer halfway across the real world. A team of engineers built the technology, while a group of artists and producers, myself and Tamiko included, dreamt up ways to use it that would challenge the limits and provide feedback on what needed more development.

We were supposed to sell the stuff too, of course, but a lot of creative energy went into pondering the philosophical issues of homesteading in cyberspace and defining conventions for a new medium. One persistent issue was realism. If you're trying to create a virtual reality, then one measure of success is a literal-minded, life-like reproduction of the “real” world. It's certainly a measure that makes sense to engineers and salesmen. But we had in our hands a medium that in theory wasn't bound by gravity or euclidean geometry. We wanted to do more with it than build shopping malls and space stations. Naturally, we wanted to make art.

When I told Tamiko about my thoughts at Manzanar, she saw the potential for a virtual reality art piece. Almost unconsciously, we began a process of collabora-

tion that would evolve over five years. We talked through many, many late nights, about problems of structure and form and control of time—how to shape a dramatic experience that has an emotional arc, a beginning, middle and end, and yet give viewers the freedom to find their own way through the environment and make their own discoveries.

And, of course, we talked about the experience of the camps, of being an alien-American, and who we were talking to and what it all meant. We shared family history, old photos, and poems, and made each other listen to “weird” music. We learned, gingerly at first, but with growing confidence, how to trust each other on questions of “turf” and our separate areas of expertise. How could we balance the historical weight of the Japanese experience against the more ephemeral expression of the Iranian “what if”? How would we honor the historical realities without being bound to documentary?

We went back to Manzanar to photograph and started to recreate the mountain panorama on the computer screen. From old photographs we reconstructed the guardtowers and barracks, and peopled the camp with ghost images of the families that had lived there. Deep inside the world of the prison, we planted two gardens of the heart, one Japanese and one Iranian, magical healing spaces like those the mind builds when reality fails. Within the prison, also, we captured images of the American dream as it was dreamt in innocence by our own families, and we fortified its boundaries with the images of betrayal and hatred that accuse us from newspapers and television screens, the aggression that plays out like a video game. We wrote poetry into the barbed wire, and across the sky.

So yes, finally, a poem was written, and this is how the piece ends, with a panoramic mandala of the mountains and the sky:

May the mountains witness;
Williamson, Whitney, Lone Pine, look:
To the East, a sea of strangers.
Each one wears my face.
Erase the shame, the fear, the witless hate,
Witness now, too late:
Each stranger wears my fate.

Let the winds watch:
To the South, a million mouths.
Each tongue speaks my own hope,
Each foreign tongue my own, one taste,
Each hunger, one I've known.

Let the earth feel:

To the West, a friend unfound yet.

Embrace the lover yet to be discovered.

Unmake the bed you've made; go free.

How like you is the other: simply see.

May the sky see:

To the North, a need so endless deep,

That only one whole heart can offer

Ever to console or feed. Then offer this one:

ever watchful never to repeat.

Zara Houshmand

When Zara returned from the High Sierra, she talked to me about the striking similarity between the landscapes of Manzanar and Iran. She explained the evocative power of the ghost town grid of roads at Manzanar, how it strangely mirrored the grid structure of Iranian gardens, an invocation of the geometric perfection of Paradise.

Her vision of paradise gardens in the desert called up forgotten memories of stories I had heard at family gatherings as a child. Stories that I had never really understood, stories about how people had planted flowers and built gardens as soon as they were put in Camp. I looked for images of gardens in the camps and found a stunning photo that Ansel Adams had taken of the largest garden at Manzanar. It was complete with ponds, a bridge, a teahouse—and a rock in the shape of a turtle, a symbol of eternal life used in Japanese paradise gardens.

I had long thought about doing a work about the camps, but many people were already working on the topic, recording memories and stories of the internees before the last ones passed away. I felt that I would want to do a piece that went beyond the historic incident and somehow created a tie to the present—or to the future. Zara's metaphorical relationship to Manzanar as an Iranian American gave us that hook. The story would not just be about a past wrong, but could also function as a warning for the future.

In the book "Farewell to Manzanar" Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston describes how as a child she would seat herself in the garden, carefully choosing a view that had no guardtowers, barbed wire fences or barracks. As long as she held perfectly still, she could pretend she was in Paradise—and was there of her own accord. As soon as she moved, she would 'fall' from her state of grace back into the reality of the

prison camp. The power of this image compelled me to want to create the piece in interactive virtual reality (VR), the one medium where we could enable the user to reenact that exact experience.

We wished to create an epic in VR, with no models of how this could be done. All VR works until this point had been simple, single scenes, or else extensive, beautifully rendered models that provided no dramatic experience at all, like empty stage sets. We had to convey the Japanese American experience, the Iranian American perspective, the internment camp and the paradise gardens. In long discussions—mostly held in the sauna of Osento, a women's bathhouse in San Francisco—we slowly developed the conceptual basis for creating dramatic structure in virtual reality.

We began gathering material for the project and photographed the Manzanar site. A seed grant from WIRED Magazine and the Asian American Arts Foundation of San Francisco covered these costs and enabled us to make the first small prototype of the internment camp. By this time Worlds, Inc. had already gone bankrupt, but my husband had co-founded another VR company, blaxxun interactive, and our knowledge from Worlds enabled us to smoothly transition to blaxxun's technology.

In May, 1999 blaxxun required my husband to move to Munich. Zara and I worried that this would mean the death of our project, but the strong foundation we had laid in years of countless discussions had built up a deep level of trust and a commonality of vision. Additionally, much of our work at Worlds had been done 'virtually,' communicating with co-workers and clients via email, Internet and telephone. With the confidence of this experience our collaboration proceeded over the separation of thousands of miles and nine time zones with surprising smoothness.

From November, 1999—March, 2000 I was awarded a residency to begin production of the final piece at the International Academy of the Arts and Sciences (IAMAS) in Ogaki, Japan. Zara was able to spend January, 2000 with me in Ogaki for a month of intense work, in which time we defined in detail the main segments of the piece. From February, 2000 to the final completion 10 months later we again worked 'virtually,' but trust and our precious time spent face-to-face allowed us to maintain the balance and coherency of our collaboration.

The world premiere of *Beyond Manzanar* happened in December, 2000 at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography. Nine months later, on September 11th, 2001, I gave a lecture on *Beyond Manzanar* at a conference in Amsterdam, not knowing that even as I spoke, four planes had been hijacked in America.

Tamiko Thiel

Beyond Manzanar (<http://mission.base.com/manzanar>) was funded with a seed grant from WIRED Magazine and the Asian American Arts Foundation, and by a production grant from the International Academy of the Media Arts and Sciences (IAMAS) in Gifu, Japan. It premiered December 2000 at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, followed by many international exhibits such as at the SIGGRAPH art show in Los Angeles and the ICA/New Media Centre in London. In 2003 it will appear in the book "Digital Art" from the Whitney Museum, New York. An edition of Beyond Manzanar is in the permanent collection of the San Jose Museum of Art in California.



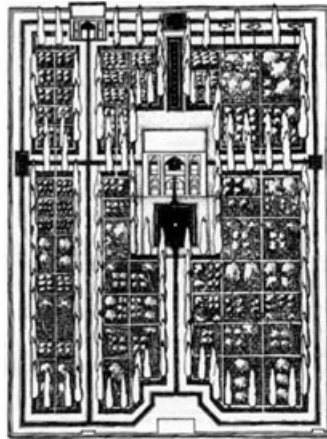
Manzanar Internment Camp. Ansel Adams, 1943



Village near Kerman, Iran



Plan of Manzanar Internment Camp



The Garden "Bagh-i-Fin" in Keshan, Iran