



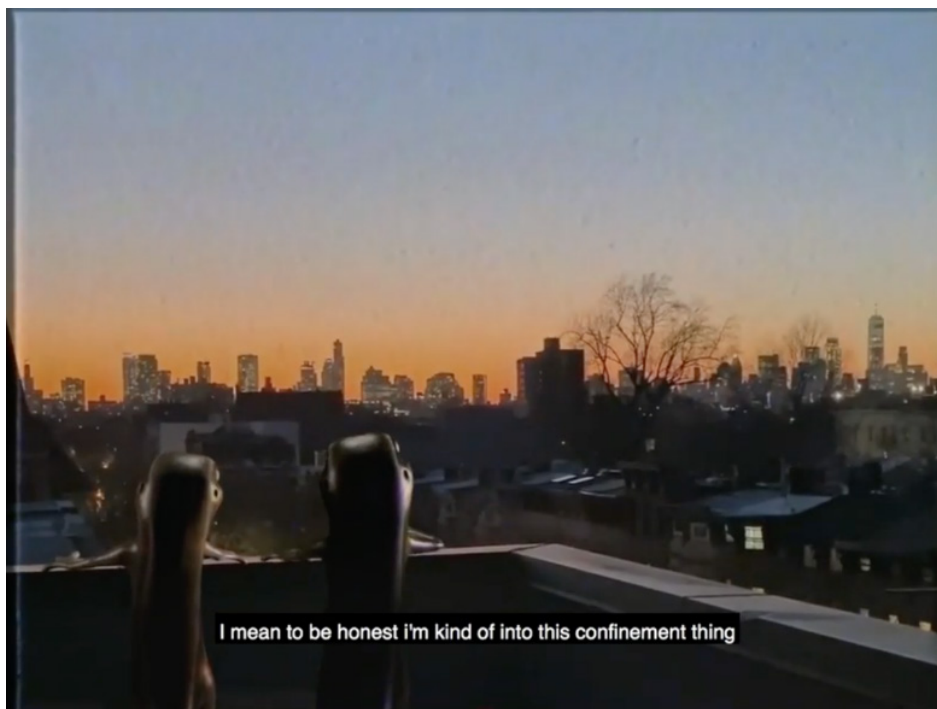
Two Artists' Endearing Lizard Videos Are Connecting with Thousands during Quarantine

Arsty, April 2020

(author: Alina Cohen)

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Artist Meriem Bennani and filmmaker Orian Barki have been gaining attention on Instagram for their new video series “2 Lizards” (2020), featuring a pair of chatty, quarantined reptiles. Bennani and Barki started the project on a whim, with a simple desire to make collaborative work about their pandemic-mandated confinement. “That’s pretty much it,” Bennani explained. “It’s us playing, having fun.”

“2 Lizards” isn’t polished fine art or film. The creative duo has no specific ambitions about where to take it next or any guess about how many episodes fans can expect (since March 17th, they’ve released three of the videos on Bennani’s Instagram account). Bennani compared the series to a fun project you might take up as a teenager, without considerations of

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deadlines, gallery exhibitions, critical opinions, or the market. Yet the videos are finding a devoted following online and eager, potential participants among Bennani's acquaintances. People have already reached out to her, asking if they can contribute music or their voices. The artists stress that no one should take the videos too seriously, though. It's simply, said Bennani, "a way to connect."



Orian Barki and Meriem Bennani, still from *2 Lizards Episode 1*, 2020. Courtesy of the artists.



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Bennani is known for humorous videos that pair animation with live footage, commenting on timely cultural issues: colonization in Morocco, immigration, and perceptions of the hijab, for example. She often juxtaposes her digital work with interactive sculptures that turn her gallery shows into immersive installations. Barki, for her part, has directed and edited films for Vogue, Nike, and Urban Outfitters.

In "2 Lizards," Bennani and Barki unite their talents to make clever, compelling videos that appear very well-produced despite the casual nature of their collaboration. In the first episode, the lizards stand on a Brooklyn balcony at sunset, overlooking the city. One, voiced by Bennani, expresses her guilt about enjoying the quarantine: She's been fantasizing about not having any plans or obligations, and her confinement will let her make music and do things she'd never otherwise get around to. "In a fucked up way, I'm loving this," she says.

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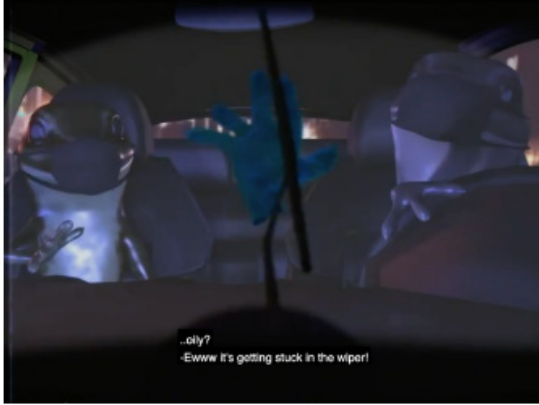


“That’s such a quarantine-week-one thing to say,” responds Barki’s more cynical lizard. Then, Miles Davis’s melancholy “It Never Entered My Mind” begins to play. The lizards look across the nearby roofs to see that other animals are playing the tune: one (perhaps a camel or a horse) on trumpet, another (a dog? bear? dinosaur?) on keyboard, and another on cello. The lizards begin to boogie as the orange twilight glints off their slick skins.

The first episode has over 68,000 views and more than 400 comments, which include: “This is beautiful. More plzzzzz,” “IM OBSESSED!” and “BigMood [heart eye emoji] [spiral emoji].” Big mood, indeed!

Episode two finds the beloved lizards in a car, comparing the confinement to celebrities’ lives. “They can’t go outside, they can’t really do stuff,” says Barki’s lizard. Suddenly, a blue latex glove flies onto their windshield.

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Orian Barki and Meriem Bennani, still from *2 Lizards Episode 2*, 2020. Courtesy of the artists.



Orian Barki and Meriem Bennani, still from *2 Lizards Episode 2*, 2020. Courtesy of the artists.

“I bet that thing has corona on it,” says Bennani’s lizard, who then curses, worried that she’s just touched her face. Turning the windshield wipers on just makes the glove situation worse, as the wipers squeak across the plasticky material. With so many bodies in close contact and an invisible virus mounting a rampage, tensions run high. An innocuous drop of rain suddenly becomes suspect as Bennani’s lizard fears it’s a drop of “corona”-laden spit. Featuring eerily empty evening streets, as well as a pulsing soundtrack by the band Coqueta, the video perfectly captures the angst pervading New York right now.

“We’re trying to not get too scared, but stay informed at the same time,” said Barki. She and Bennani must take everything in stride, just like everyone else. Luckily for the rest of us, they’re doing it in a meaningful, expansive, and creative way. “We’re just processing whatever’s happening,” Barki said.