

THREE WAYS OF RETURNING

We can't go home again. But we need to, regardless ...

An essay film by Mania Akbari, Xiaolu Guo and Andrea Luka Zimmerman
2026, 80 mins, China, Germany, Iran, UK.
Chinese, German and Iranian with English subtitles
Sound Design - Philippe Ciompi, Perspective Films
Colour Grading - Jason R. Moffat
FFI: threewaysofreturning@gmail.com

THREE WAYS OF RETURNING

We can't go home again. But we need to, regardless ...

Three Ways of Returning comprises three filmmakers' reflections on the themes of home, exile and relation. Guo leads us into the lively seascape of contemporary China, presenting snapshots of local fishermen's lives from her radically changed home village, under threat from the globalised corporate maritime industries. Zimmerman employs a disquieting and startlingly intimate lens to look back into their childhood and adolescent years in Germany, and the challenging intergenerational violence that persists. Akbari brings us into the intimacy of her family, exiled from Iran, and reveals the profound complexity of personal and political aspects of migrant life in Canada. These three short films together create a richly textured exploration of home and belonging of lives in various forms of exile, and the strategies of surviving and thriving that accompany this displacement.

Xiaolu Guo

Xiaolu Guo is a Chinese British cineaste and novelist. She has directed a dozen award winning films, including *How Is Your Fish Today* (Sundance Official Selection 2007) and *She, A Chinese* (winner of the Golden Leopard at the Locarno Festival 2009). Her documentary *We Went to Wonderland* was selected for ND/NF at the MoMA in NYC. *Once Upon A Time Proletarian* premiered at Venice Film Festival 2009. She had her film retrospectives at London's Whitechapel Gallery (2019), Cinematheque Switzerland (2011) and the Greek Film Archive (2018). Guo is also a prolific author. Her novels include *A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers*, and *A Lover's Discourse*. Her memoir *Once Upon A Time In The East* won the National Book Critics Circle Award 2017. *Radical* was published in 2022, followed by *My Battle of Hastings*, completing her autobiographical trilogy. Her new novel, a subversive reimaging of Melville's *Moby-Dick* entitled *Call Me Ishmaelle*, is published by Vintage in 2025.



Sea Scavengers

by Xiaolu Guo (25mins)



After years of absence from her native China, Xiaolu Guo returns to her hometown, Shi-tang, the fishing village where she grew up with her grandparents on the shore of the East China Sea. Like a stranger, she wanders the streets trying to find her childhood home, now a hair salon. The hairdressers tell her about the last years of her grandmother, as do others from the village. Memories of her childhood return to her. Xiaolu talks to the sailors and fishermen as they prepare to restart their fishing expeditions after the annual three-month fishing ban. She reflects on the momentous changes the village has undergone during her absence. Next morning, she watches as the ships set out to sea, beginning their long voyages. In her province, fishermen are still called 'taohairen' – sea scavengers. Xiaolu can never forget the days when her grandfather was one of their company. The image of sea-scavengers reminds her of a distant past, and beckons to an unknown future.

Andrea-Luka Zimmerman

Andrea Luka Zimmerman is a Jarman Award-winning artist and filmmaker whose multi-layered practice explores fragile refusals and counter memories, itinerant lives, human and otherwise, in relation to structural and political injustice. Andrea films include: Taskafa, Stories of the Street (2013, written and voiced by the late John Berger), Estate, a Reverie (2015), Erase and Forget (2017), Artangel produced Here for Life (2019) and The Wapping Project produced Wayfaring Stranger (2024, featuring Eileen Myles), which have screened widely around the world including at Berlinale, Locarno, IDFA, Istanbul, BAFICI and IFFR festivals, as well as in cinemas, galleries, and community and activist spaces. Selected exhibitions include 'Shelter in Place', Estuary Festival, 'Civil Rites', the London Open, Whitechapel Gallery, 'Common Ground' at Spike Island, Bristol and 'Real Estates' at Peer Gallery. Selected writing includes extended essays in 'Brick', 'Strangers Within: Documentary as Encounter', 'Open Democracy', (among others) and co-editing the books 'Estate: Art, Politics and Social Housing in Britain' (Myrdle Court Press) and 'Doorways: Women, Homelessness Trauma and Resistance' (House Sparrow Press). Andrea's films are held in the Arts Council England Collection, Archives and libraries, and are distributed by LUX, Modern Films, Grasshopper Films. A 2 disk BluRay, Fugitive Images: Selected Works by Andrea Luka Zimmerman, is released by Second Run. Andrea co-founded the cultural collectives Fugitive Images and Vision Machine (collaborators on Academy Award® nominated feature documentary 'The Look of Silence').

www.fugitiveimages.org.uk



While the Gods Were Busy with Another Child

by Andrea Luka Zimmerman (2026 .25mins)



This deeply exploratory work is drawn exclusively from the eclectic personal and public archive, in multiple formats, of Andrea's life until their lasting estrangement from both parents, aged 30. Alternating between the playful, poetic and unsettling, *While the Gods...* collages together photographs, 16mm, VHS, interviews and diary entries in a process of profound and necessary self – and social interrogation. Unflinching in its presentation and analysis of a precarious and challenging working-class childhood and adolescence in 1970s Munich, nevertheless *While the Gods...* manifests an enduring and wayward spirit of resistance, seeding the possibility of living a life on one's own terms.

Mania Akbari

Mania Akbari (b. Tehran, 1974) is an internationally acclaimed intersectional feminist artist, curator, and filmmaker who gained early recognition in the Iranian underground art scene, seeking freedom beyond censorship. During the digital cinema revolution in Iran, she transitioned from a painting career to the camera as a mode of storytelling. Akbari delves into the webs of body politics, by documenting personal narratives through the female gaze as a form of empowerment encouraging critical reflection on bodily oppression and suffering. Concerned with the socio-political traumatisation of female-identifying bodies, Akbari transforms lived experience into an act of resistance by uncovering hidden historical and cultural memory and examines the transgenerational transmission of trauma. Weaving through the relationship between the camera and the body, Akbari identifies the body as a metaphor, as a political message with a revolutionary capacity against the patriarchal status quo. Led by a therapeutic approach, Akbari's practice is often collaborative and participatory. Akbari works with other women to question the ways their bodies are positioned and valued in society, and to explore the relational confluence of embodied memory and gendered violence. Drawing on accounts of sexual assault, abortion, pregnancy, illness, body image, gender, and sexuality through archival material and biopolitical fiction, her films generate dialogues between past and present, between trauma and reflexive healing. Akbari is committed to highlighting the invisible, with a fierce defiance against heteronormative socialisation. Her distinct filmmaking process reframes how we view personal and national histories and produces radical potentialities for women to regain control of their bodies through sharing, talking, and listening. Selected film awards include Feature Film (Digital Section), Venice International Film Festival (2004) for *20 Fingers* (2004); New:Vision Award (2019) at CPH:DOX, Copenhagen, Denmark and FIPRESCI International Critics Award (2019), Flying Broom Festival, Ankara, Turkey for *A Moon For My Father* (2019).

www.maniaakbari.com/award

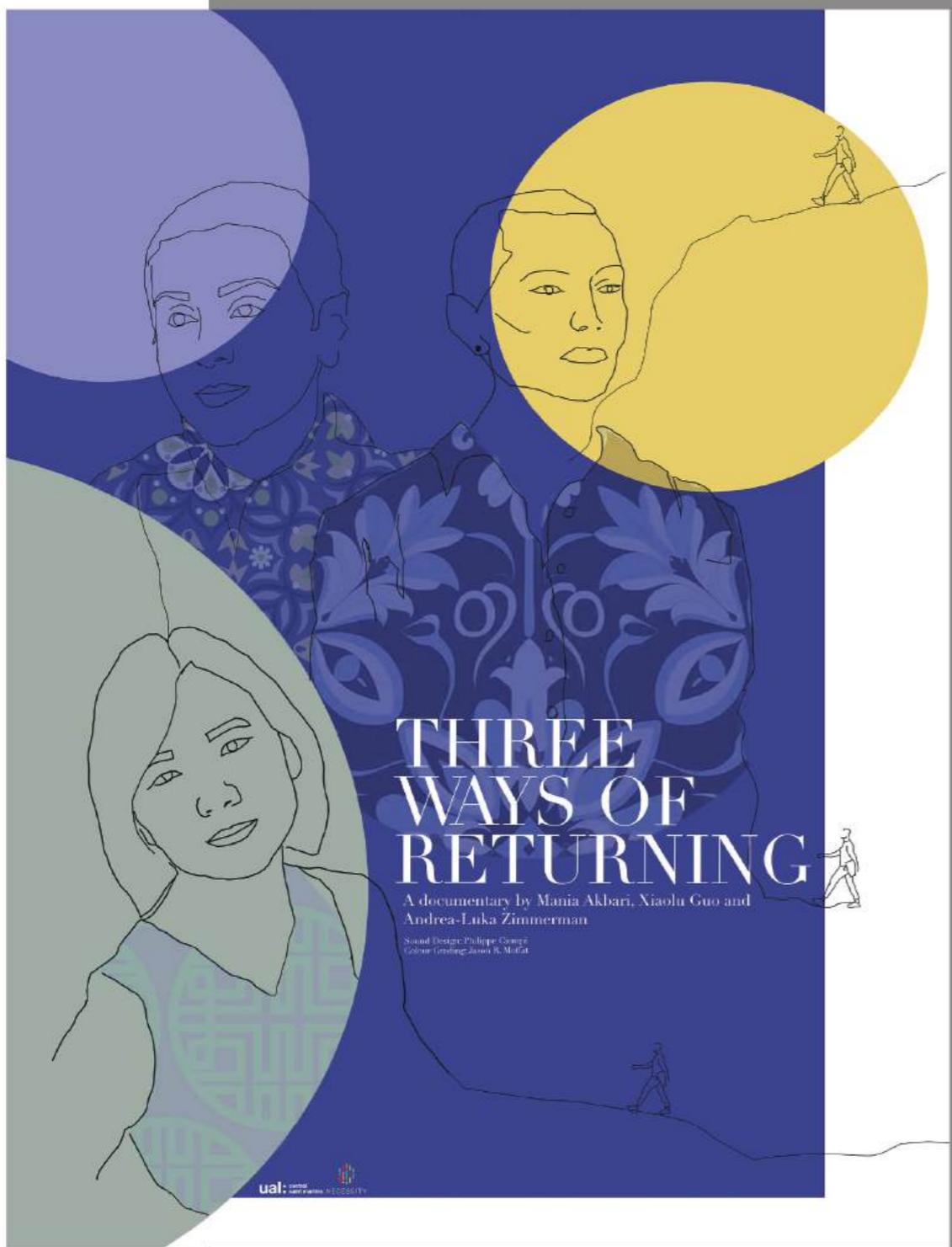


I Am a Tree

by Mania Akbari (29mins)



Forced migration creates a state of disconnection between the body's historical memory and its current circumstances, disrupting the body's relationship with everyday reality and creating a rift between who one was and who one has become. Mania turns to her mother in migration, seeking through image and sound to bridge these gaps, making the inaccessible emptiness and void tangible. The film endeavours to connect the historical reality of her past life in another land to her present moment. What happened to her and her family now feels like a distant dream, one she tries to examine, to awaken her child's imagination and connect it to the history of her mother and grandmother.



Graphic Designer : Kimia Fathali