

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

The '2 Lizards' of Instagram Are Coronavirus Art Stars

Meriem Bennani and Orian Barki are building a world of animated anxiety and resistance aimed at phones.



Art on the fly: A portrait of "2 Lizards," characters from a series of videos created by Meriem Bennani and Orian Barki for Instagram.
Meriem Bennani and Orian Barki

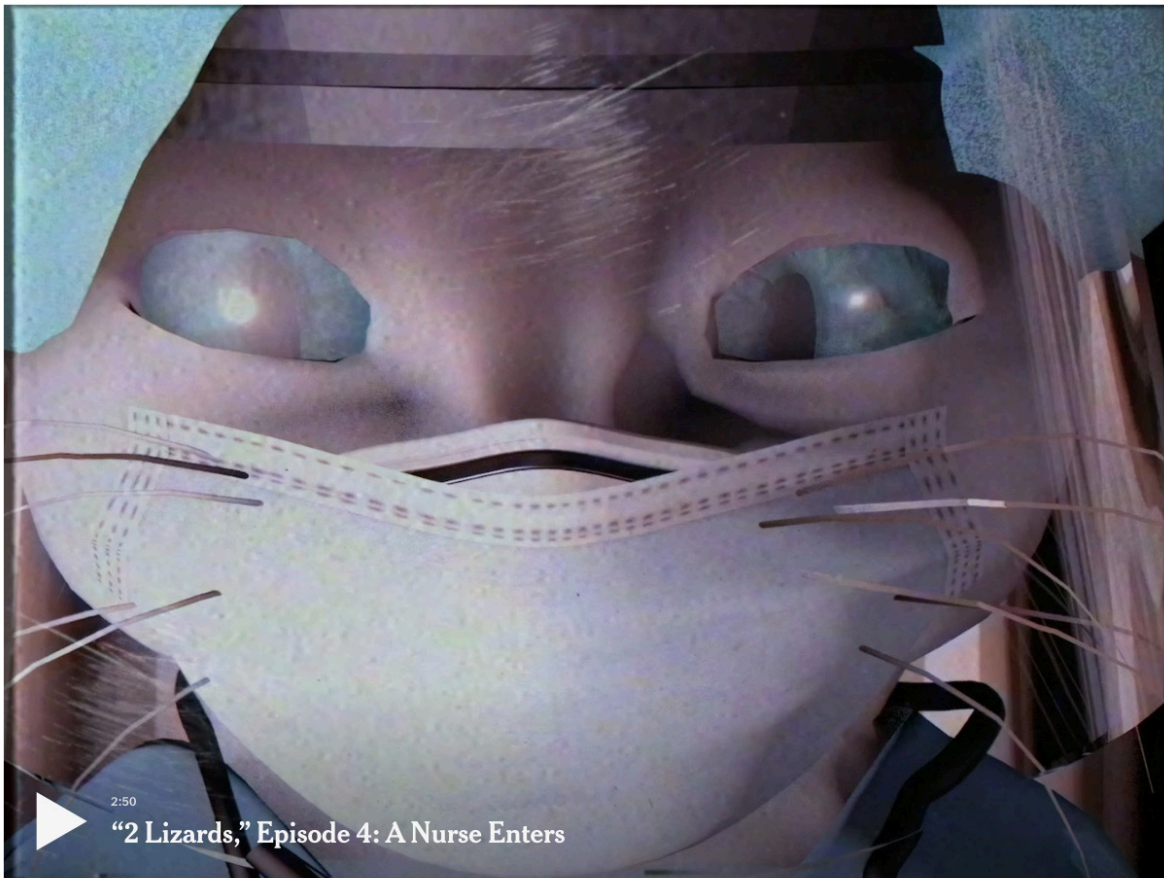
By [Jon Caramanica](#)

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Quarantine has soft edges: hours pass without notice, days are a construct. Here we are, trapped in a suspension, barely in control of our time and action no matter how hard we try. (Though honestly, who's trying that hard?)

The "2 Lizards" series of videos by Meriem Bennani and Orian Barki, which has been rolling out on Instagram over the past few weeks, pinpoints this particular blend of helplessness, lethargy and anxiety. Deploying a blend of documentary structure and animation surrealism, the clips are both poignantly grounded in actual events and also soothingly fantastical — art on the fly that's as ensnared in the past-present-future mud as the rest of us.



In the fourth episode, the intensity of the coronavirus impact is made clear with the inclusion of a new character, a nurse cat voiced by Cady Chaplin, a nurse at Lenox Hill Hospital. Meriem Bennani and Orian Barki

The four episodes to date — they appear on Ms. Bennani’s Instagram page — trail a pair of talking, large-scale, anthropomorphized lizards as they try to navigate the world as coronavirus is rewiring it. They survey their desiccated neighborhood, absorb hard news, wear masks as they take to the streets, and attempt to reckon with the gravity of the predicament, the fullness of which always feels just slightly out of reach.

“We decided to go for moods,” Ms. Bennani said in a recent interview, “because there was so much factual information from the news that it’s our way of abstracting it into a feeling that can fuel story.”

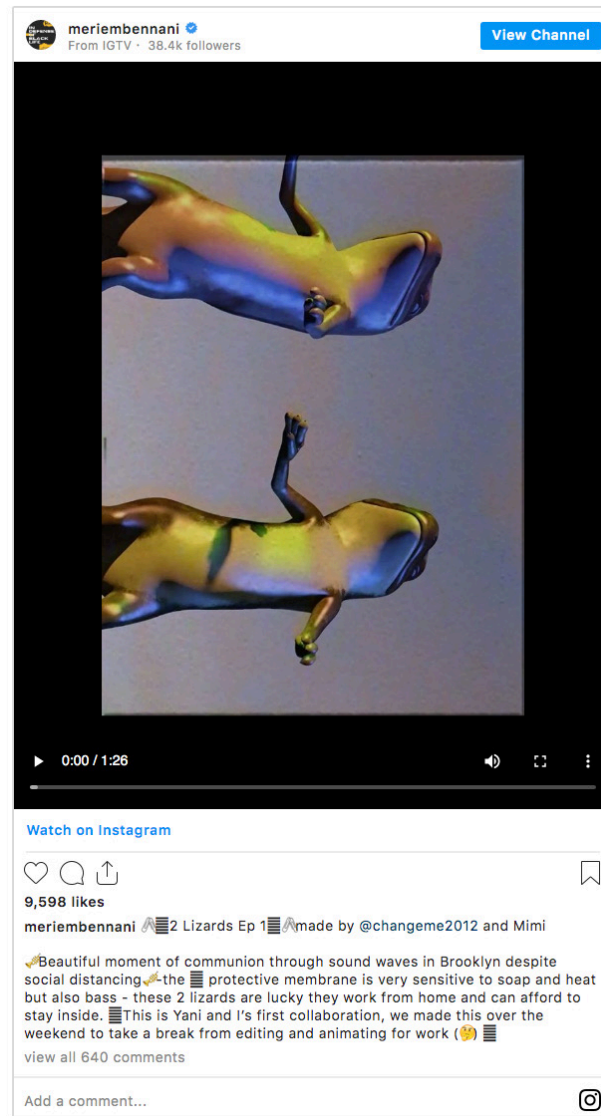
To shape the scripts, the two artists, who live near each other in Brooklyn, start with a conversation about the tenor of the moment. Each episode — they’ve been appearing about a week to a week and a half apart so far — has been slightly tonally different, becoming, Ms. Barki said, a de facto “diary of whatever happens in that moment. There is going to be an arc, and it’s going to reveal itself to us.”

The hypnotic videos, which run from one to three minutes, are the first collaboration between Ms. Bennani, 32, a Moroccan-born artist, and Ms. Barki, 34, an Israeli-born filmmaker. In early March, as the city was beginning to grind to a halt, they found themselves

unsteadied by the new normal and seeking a creative outlet apart from their pre-existing work responsibilities.

Once they settled on their animation-superimposed-upon-reality approach, they set to the task of determining “how to take 3-D cartoons and then make them have these psychological scenes,” Ms. Bennani said.

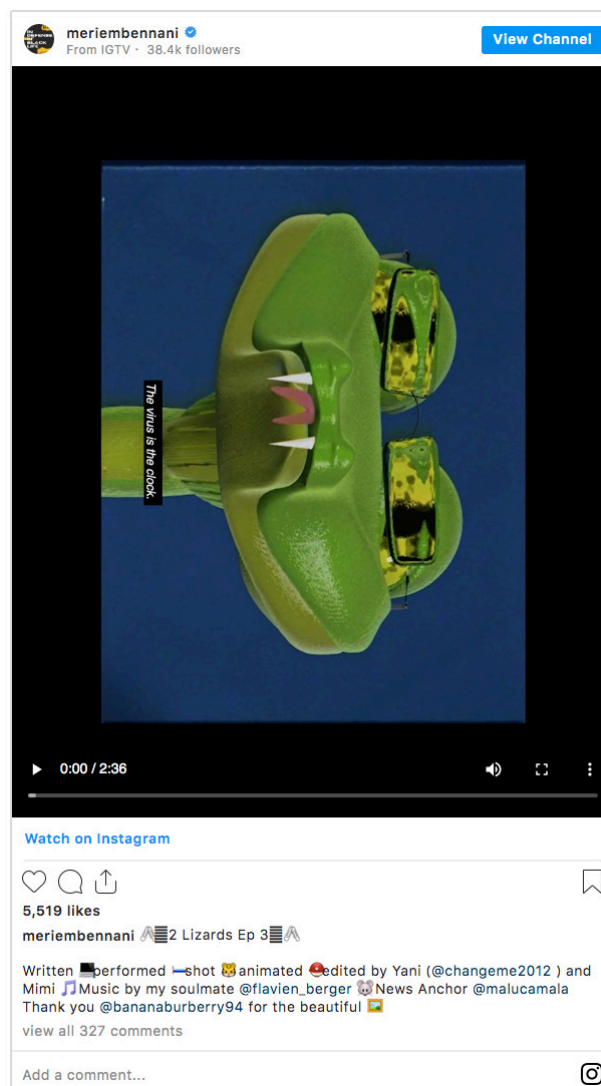
Each artist voices one of the lizards — Ms. Bennani’s avatar is green, Ms. Barki’s is more tan — but the lizards themselves are unnamed, serving as universal stand-ins.



Key to the effectiveness of the videos is the way the lizards move: with a slight sluggishness, always a touch slower than reality. Take the end of the first episode, in which they dance side by side to a Miles Davis song on a Brooklyn rooftop — it’s slippery and dream-like. The lizards blink slowly, a trick the filmmakers use to make them seem just out of step with their surroundings. Ms. Barki and Ms. Bennani also speak slowly, forcing attention and anticipation. Like the current reality, the lizards are a little hazy.

In the first episode, which was posted on March 17, they linger on a roof and discuss the perks of confinement. The tone was casual and a little sleepy, and also just a hair skeptical, betraying an uncertainty of just how serious the problem was going to become. The second episode is palpably tenser; they take to the streets to witness the city's quiet firsthand, but find it disrupted at every turn; a nitrile glove lands on their car windshield out of nowhere. (To capture street footage for the episode, the two artists rented a Revel and rode around Brooklyn.)

In the third episode, the lizards are lounging at home, watching the news, including an excerpt from an interview with Dr. Anthony Fauci — rendered as a “good snake,” Ms. Barki said — where he notes ominously, “the virus is the clock.” Here again, the pace oozes — all the things the lizards are doing as distractions (reading, watching a tiger camgirl, absorbing news, attending a Zoom birthday) all bleed into a formless blob. Only the virus ticks.



Slowly, maybe even imperceptibly, panic has seeped into the videos. In the fourth episode, the intensity of the coronavirus impact is made clear with the inclusion of a new character, a nurse cat voiced by Cady Chaplin, a nurse at Lenox Hill Hospital. She tells stories from her personal experiences, which are jolting — holding a phone to a patient's ear so his wife can play him music, getting eyed suspiciously on the subway for wearing scrubs — but don't fundamentally derail the light narcissism of the lizards, who still view the crisis through foggy lenses.

The “2 Lizards” videos have been “the most on-the-nose, accurate, what it feels like to be in New York City during this quarantine period” cultural product, said Rujeko Hockley, an assistant curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and one of the curators of the 2019 Whitney Biennial, which included Ms. Bennani. “They make me cry.”

Part of their effectiveness owes to how they're rooted in actual circumstance but rendered with fancy and wit. In a moment when fact can be elusive, or harsh — what's unassailable, and needs no translation, is feeling.

“Art and culture takes facts, events, historical truths, even subjective truths, and turns them into something that someone who's never had that experience can connect to and access empathy,” Ms. Hockley said. “That's something Meriem does so well in general.”

Ms. Bennani frequently uses animation in her work, which often focuses on women and young people in Morocco, and deploys the whimsy of animation to slyly address serious sociopolitical subjects. At last year's Whitney Biennial, she offered a sculpture garden that contained a pair of videos grounded in documentary footage and amplified with animated flourishes: One video featured singing luxury homes, and the other was a quasi-reality show about teenagers at the French school in Rabat that Ms. Bennani attended. (She was one of eight artists who demanded their work be removed from the Biennial in protest of a Whitney board member with ties to a military supplies firm; the board member resigned before the work could be removed.)

Though she's lived in the United States for a decade, Ms. Bennani thinks of “2 Lizards” as her first American film. “All of my projects take place in Morocco,” she said. “When you work in a new place, it's charged with a new historical context, a new political context. It's been really fun because I never did that before.”

Ms. Barki has directed several short films focused on music and youth culture, and worked as an editor and director of photography on projects for clients including Nike and Vogue. In the “2 Lizards” series, their aesthetics blend together — Ms. Bennani's interweaving

of video and animation matched with Ms. Barki's editing, rhythm and pacing; Ms. Barki's full immersion into the news with Ms. Bennani's laissez faire reluctance.

The lizards are animated versions of a 3-D model Ms. Bennani had downloaded and been saving for a future project. But unlike her usual installations, which often pair videos with ornate physical environments, these videos are targeted directly at phones — “extremely, extremely available,” she said.

The shapeless nature of quarantine time has also created the opportunity to access a kind of pre-commercial, pre-expectation idea about art making. “This almost feels like if we had known each other when we were teenagers,” Ms. Bennani said. “Having time to take something super seriously that is not lucrative within an economy kind of way, but with skill sets that we’ve developed post-teenagehood.”

At the moment, there is no plan to end the project — the two are currently working on the fifth installment. With each episode, the lizards become a little more tuned in to what’s happening around them. In the first, they go as far as the roof; in the second they’re on the street; in the third, the news of the outside world reaches them; and in the fourth, they learn about the suffering taking place all around them.

But the real world is always a few days ahead, a few days worse for wear. The lizards are prelapsarian. They remind us of how innocent we just were.