

'Colourless Green Ideas Sleep Furiously'

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

21 April – 17 June 2017

'COLOURLESS Green Ideas Sleep Furiously' sounds like nonsense, and it is – a phrase coined by Noam Chomsky to be grammatically correct but semantically all over the place. In this ambitious exhibition curated by David Upton, five geographically diverse art practices explore ideas of transient or un-locatable meaning via their own un-locatable objects, objects rendered by impressions and residues, and images deviating between fact and fiction, movement and stasis. A story in the exhibition booklet describes the fate of Byzantine icons bought at a Turkish Bazaar in the 1920's. Eventually ending up in the National Gallery of Ireland, the icons, separated from their original place and function (and unable to return to a home that no longer exists), have been opened up to new kinds of meaning and attachment. The exhibition booklet usefully outlines some aspirations, among them, "To open discussion around ideas of dissolution and dispossession, loss, of cultures in crisis and futures altered, of cataclysm – and [ask] what happens after all of this?" That's a lot to ask of a single exhibition, but the fate of the icons becomes a unifying concept, a paradoxically fugitive underpinning.

In a relatively cerebral show, works by Swedish artist Ida Lennartsson convey a powerful sense of materiality and touch. Modest in size, the floor-standing, irregularly-shaped tablets of *Ruins* (2013) have, like a mini Stonehenge, a sense of mystical presence. Impressed with rope patterns, the clay and wax forms also suggest fossils, body casts or flayed skin. Allusions to the sacred and profane also come together in Lennartsson's drawing series, *Tsuri* (2013). In chalk rubbings of knotted rope patterns, her creased, black paper sheets reveal the intricate bindings of a Japanese form of bondage. Untied from these connotations, the rope patterns emerge from their stygian ground like illuminated relics.

Relics of a different kind are conjured in the graphic works of Erik Bulatov. Featuring text superimposed over images of urban landscapes (I was reminded of Ed Ruscha), these detailed drawings hark back to Russian Constructivism, and the didactic role the arts in Soviet Russia often conformed to. Despite a connection to the emblematic icons as conveyors of orthodox pieties (though challenging orthodoxies seems to be part of Bulatov's brief), in the six small works presented here, his imagery and Cyrillic typography remain stubbornly opaque.

Chronoscope, 1951, 11pm (2011), by the Venezuelan artist Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck, in collaboration with Media Farzin, is more accessible, and offers a fascinating glimpse into the early days of *Talking Heads TV*. Reworked from original

American broadcasts, the video collage shows expert speakers offering polite analysis of the global economy. They talk about the Middle East, and the Iranian oil industry in particular. Bow-ties and old-fashioned cordiality seem like the only things out of place in conversations that might otherwise be happening today.

While Balteo-Yazbeck's work is unambiguously concerned with the dynamics of power, the mood elsewhere is more cryptic, the exhibition's miscellanea of artefacts like pieces in a puzzle. None more so than *Lourde et dure comme de l'acier* (2013), a piece by two Dutch artists, collectively named Gerlach en Koop. In an apparently casual floor arrangement, a dumbbell of polished steel, components of antique dumbbells, metal discs and steel cones appear like the remnants of some gnomonic board game. Translating the French title into 'Heavy and hard as steel' didn't leave me any wiser. A second work by the pair is called *Untitled (Scatter Piece)* (2013) and comprises a string of pearls without pearls. Presented in the manner of a priceless museum artefact, the fine, periodically-knotted string made me think of the 1953 Max Ophüls film *The Earrings of Madame de...* about a set of gifted jewels that become a clandestine currency between characters. That film's cyclical conceit felt somehow connected to the absence of the signified in Gerlach en Koop's piece. An entirely fanciful connection, but in the duo's enigmatic work, the relationship of language to things seen or unseen leaves everything up for grabs.

Projected onto a free-standing wall angled at the centre of the room, *Re-run* (2013) was made by the India-based Raqs Media Collective. Feeling pivotal to the show overall, the grey and blue-toned image shows a group of people, seemingly a section of a larger crowd, pressed together in a sort of anxious-looking conga line. The work is based on a Henri Cartier-Bresson photograph taken in Shanghai in 1948. Queuing to exchange their rapidly devaluing cash for gold, Cartier-Bresson's original photograph captures the citizens of pre-Communist China reacting to another cycle of boom and bust. In this restaging – a transposition of contemporary figures into the look and choreography of the original – the photographic image has become subtly animated. Not immediately apparent, an extremely slow, pulsing rhythm gradually asserts itself. The image is breathing. The slow repetition suggests the convergence of intimate and historical forces, the cyclical nature of global and individual fates entwined.

John Graham is an artist based in Dublin.



Ida Lennartsson, *Ruins*, 2013; clay, wax and graphite, dimensions variable; image courtesy of the artist

Janine Davidson

'Into the Gravelly Ground'

Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray

9 June – 8 July 2017



Janine Davidson, still from 53012762459

JANINE Davidson's 'Into the gravelly ground' centres on an unusual site at Turlough Hill, County Wicklow. Here, embedded amidst scenic walks, is Ireland's only pumped hydro-electricity plant. The film work *53012762459* features this structure, its interior and exterior, its machinery and technology. Also depicted is another reservoir at this same location: Lough Nahanagan, which was formed during the Ice Age. Designed to impinge as little as possible upon the environment, the plant's main station is buried out of sight behind the mountain. In Davidson's 22-minute film, the structure is so sleek and streamlined that it appears almost tentative, partaking in the muted tones of the naturally-formed lough. The camera, replete with slight shudder, moves between various viewpoints: we are on a bridge, we catch glimpse of an open door, we are looking at a stunted, top-heavy tower emerging from the water. Importantly, the film makes no distinction between the two formations, and the lens portrays the machines and their inferred functionality with the same quiet, detached observation as it does the rock face and the water.

The structure, indeed, is so pared back and the terrain, for the most part, is so nondescript, that we might be moving through a depopulated dystopia. In this distant or proximate future, the geological and manmade structures seamlessly coexist in formal and even aesthetic terms, entwined on several levels by their shared intent of containment and their mutual relationship with water. Slowly, however, we come to be affected by the stark angles and the constant thrum of electricity. The shots are long and hypnotic, the viewpoints and angles are repeated, and the longer we watch, the more sinister the plant becomes. The effect is purely accumulative, and sees the plant glean a material sentience, perhaps more subversive than we first suspected. Its convergence with the landscape, we understand, is still unfolding.

The exhibition's title, of course, suggests excavation, and the final location is a vast, subterranean chamber. Lit by artificial light, the textures here seem rougher, and this change in register is marked by a shift in the camera's treatment: it begins a backward track through a long tunnel, the continuous movement giving us a sense of depth and scale. The film ends with our exit into daylight, and the viewer is left to consider the disconnect between the plant's public existence as an unobtrusive assembly of cable and steel, and the crudely formed space beneath – a space that can only have been made by burrowing and blasting. The reverberations of its construction cannot help, it seems, but manifest

somewhere, and the architectural innovation of the power station comes at the cost of this vast, inelegant intrusion concealed below ground.

This notion of convergence and its repercussions is meted out across the rest of the exhibition, with photographic prints appearing to ask: what are the effects of such structures, long-term and immediate, seen or unseen? How can their more pervasive, insidious aspects be captured? Davidson suggests that the resulting documents will be equipped with a degree of obscurity and distortion, manifesting in material form as well as in the gaze itself.

Taken in the vicinity of Turlough Hill, Davidson's photographs formally expand on the concealment evidenced in the film. Their surfaces are predominantly shadow, and we see only a blurred and unspectacular segment of landscape, the shape of which conjures the aperture of an outdated optical device – perhaps real, perhaps invented. This sense of alternative technology and collected 'data' is compounded in *Natura I* and *Natura II*, suspended digital prints that seem to map the range of an unknown intensity, radiating from an epicentre that is black with energy or interference.

Tunnel, a second film work installed in darkness, more explicitly refracts the gaze. Filmed inside Túnel de La Engaña in Northern Spain, the piece consists of a seven-minute loop projected onto a diverging mirror. Throughout is the monotonous sound of footfall crunching on terrain, and this grating repetition, combined with the wilful obstruction of the mirror, creates a sense of endless entrapment and stunted progression (this railway tunnel, in fact, was never completed). Here, it is the convexity of the mirror, with its instant reflection and reversal, that disallows clarity. By circumventing the gaze at this early stage, the work suggests that there is no clear view to uncover; the distortion is both material and ontological.

It seems pertinent that this fruitless footfall is the sole sensory reference to human activity. Across the exhibition, bodies are notably absent. To emphasise so keenly the attempted passage of a body through space seems to suggest that such topographies require alternative methods of encounter. Where environmental distortion manifests as refraction and occlusion, we must reassess the tools at our disposal, at the level of the senses, as well as technological device.

Sue Rainsford is a writer and researcher based in Dublin. She was recently announced as recipient of the 2016 VAI/DCC Critical Writing Award 2017.

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