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One curator's assault on hope



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Jim Quilty | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Easily the most entertaining works on show in the street-level hangar of the Ashkal Alwan building these days are a couple of works by Nelmarie du Preez.

Mounting on facing walls are a pair of looped videos from the artist's "Trust Exercises" series. "To stab" and "to rely," 2013, both depict the artist's performative encounters with a pair of robotic devices.

In "to rely," du Preez watches while the machine loads an arrow into a bow and tries to pull back the string to launch the projectile into her chest. The only thing that prevents it doing so is her hand which, trembling, restrains the weapon.

In "to stab," the artist sits, the fingers of one hand splayed on a tabletop, while another robotic device reproduces the old game of driving the tip of an evil-looking hunting knife between her digits.

The artist's facial expression while trusting the vagaries of man-made technology is well worth the price of admission to "What Hope Looks Like After Hope."

This admission-free exhibition of new and recent work by a dozen international artists is premised on a proposition. "What would hope look like if we injected it with a strenuous dose of reality," writes Egyptian-born curator Bassam El Baroni in his notes, "placed it in a world where causes are untraceable and effects incalculable, severed it from its more eschatological concerns about the future, and blocked it from using the posturing of human rights and humanism?"

After spending some time with Baroni's exhibition, you may decide that the show's 13 pieces are concerned with a great many things but have very little to do with "hope."

Hope may emerge elsewhere. Baroni doesn't see his deployment of these works in space as an end in itself but as a sounding board for "a series of related talks and presentations by artists and guest speakers through which the aesthetics and politics of Constructive Alienation are presented and discussed."

"On Constructive Alienation" is the second half of the show's title. Members of the public whose day jobs make these parallel talks and presentations impossible to attend can content themselves with the constructive alienation of reading the works in situ, flensed their discursive and didactic blubber.

Of the 13 pieces on show, two of them qualify as objects.

Martti Kalliala's "ExoStead" (2015) is a three-level aluminum terrace atop which are scattered several depotted plants – organic and otherwise. Upon the floor, just before the bottom step, extends a vinyl print of a body of water that looks as though the fluid had been photographed while tumbling out of a pipe.

Where the aluminum and vinyl meet are bits of refuse – plastic bags, half a plastic bottle, an old gas bottle hose and a discarded Dixie cup of melting ice cream. "ExoStead" includes a pair of small speakers, suggesting the artist intended aural content. During this writer's visit, unfortunately, they were mute.

Presumably any reference to Lebanon's lingering trash crisis is coincidental to Kalliala's work – though it's said other places in the world accumulate rubbish as well.

Alternative readings of Kalliala's work might have been more apparent on the show's opening night, when it was the site of "Dormant Assets," a one-time-only performance by Brian William Rogers and Yasmine Dubois Ziai.

The other "object" on show is "Printed Reproductions of the Artist's Paintings in a Hotel Room Setting," 2015. The artist in question is Leonardo Cremonini (1925-2010).

The three canvases – "La Sortie" "Les Vides a Saisir" and "Les Gouvernantes" – have been reprinted and installed in a hotel room-like installation. As such, the works, though engaging enough in themselves, are reduced to décor – which may be a point Baroni is trying to make.

As happens in hotel rooms, visitors' eyes will be drawn to the flat screen television adorning the wall facing the head of the bed – this writer's examination of the "hotel room" uncovered no life-like reproduction of a minibar to compete with the TV.

The flat screen is the medium for Yuri Pattison's video "1014," 2015. The 10-minute work is comprised of a single roving shot of the Hong Kong hotel room where whistleblower Edward Snowden hung out while disclosing certain troubling intelligence agency practices to journalists Glenn Greenwald and Ewen MacAskill.

Augmenting this exercise in post hoc snooping, drawn and textual interventions are superimposed upon the video image of the room's interior and exterior landscape features. Some lines and squiggles are allusive but inexplicable, while others resemble redacted texts. Other times they take the form of subtitles.

"Life is so arduous," one reads at the top of the work, "that some lies are better left uncovered."

The other 11 works in "Hope After Hope" may be thought of a "new media" – newer, anyway, than aluminum, vinyl and whatever material was used for the Cremonini reproductions.

Mohammad Salamy's "The Artist is Hyperpresent," 2015, for instance is comprised of three screens, each streaming the content of one of the artist's social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram).

It's debatable whether this exercise in social media autobiography constitutes "art," strictly speaking, but there is some voyeuristic pleasure to be found in some of the content. In one tweet, Salamy recounts observing some patron of MoMA snag a snot from one nostril and smear it into the wall of an exhibition.

Will this tweet inspire mimesis among anyone strolling through "Hope After Hope," you wonder.

A more refined reflection upon narrative and (new-ish) mediation can be found in Walid Sadek's "The Conversion of St. Paul: on the double indexicality of the Open," 2015.

This elegant work is comprised of two identical, cube-shaped galleries, each of which is equipped with an overhead projector – a once-new mediating technology that projected images upon a wall via plastic transparencies. Atop each of the two projectors is a blank VHS tape.

Google it.

"What Hope Looks Like After Hope (On Constructive Alienation)" is up through Dec. 10 on the ground-floor garage of the Ashkal Alwan building, 11 a.m. till 6 p.m., 12-8

p.m. after Nov. 24.

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