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Doris Salcedo, Untitled, 2003. Mixed media, dimensions variable.



Bruna Esposito, Public Composting Toilet, 2003.

*Mixed media, installation view.
photo credit: Muammer Yanmaz*



Mike Nelson, Installation, 2003. Mixed media, installation view

Istanbul Biennial

by Carolee Thea

Eighty Artists from 40 countries participated in the 8th International Istanbul Biennial under the conceptual frame "Poetic Justice." Curated by Dan Cameron, the exhibition related to current global developments in art and politics while claiming territory for the artist. Cameron explains that "at this stage of globalization, not only are hybrid and transitional identities increasingly becoming the rule rather than exception, but also interchanges between artists from different cultural backgrounds are significant."

The main exhibition space, The Antreppo, is a former customs warehouse along the Bosphorus. The darkened first floor contained mixed-media works, well placed among the circular, draped viewing areas that housed videos. Most, complex or mundane, political or not, were personal narratives.

A metal staircase/sculpture with chains as banister and balustrades connected the darkened theater of the first floor to a lighted second floor: Stairway to Hell, by Monica Bonvicini, was quite dramatic and introduced a pervasive architectural theme. A facsimile staircase by Do-Ho Suh was smaller than life size. Made of red transparent nylon and stitched together in three dimensions, no small detail (for instance, a light fixture and plumbing pipes) was omitted.

While continuing its journey to an imagined upper floor, the ethereal staircase floated as if in apprehension of an unknown journey.

Bruce Nauman's narrow hallway served as an influence for two artists. Monika Sosnowska's Untitled Corridor brought viewers through a narrow hallway then around a corner to another much narrower passage complete with doors and ambient sounds, near but unreachable, as in the perspectival maladjustments of Swift or Carroll. Tanya Brughera's Poetic Justice lined a hallway with scented tea bags and small videos. This work referenced colonialism and a kind of perverted Minimalism.

Appeals, a new work by Ann Hamilton, appeared as a series of floor-to-ceiling blue reversed to white curtains that opened and closed to divide the space, a metaphor of inclusion/exclusion. Jorge Macchi's Buenos Aires Tour, although modeled on a subway map and plans of the city, resembled a Borghesian garden of forked paths. Texts and sound added another layer of intrigue to the work, mirroring confused directions in a new city.

The Tophane-i-Amire Cultural Center built in 1451, once a cannon foundry and barracks, was another venue. Some of the works here were too seductive in their spirituality for my taste, but two works caught my fancy. Where We Come From, by Palestinian artist Emily Jacir, consisted of 32 mounted photos of variable sizes, framed texts, and a DVD. The artist asked displaced Palestinians, "If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?" Jacir documented both the desires and her fulfillment of the requests; some were impossible, referencing the seemingly impossible destiny and legal status of the Palestinians as a people. (Jacir used the freedom of movement status provided by her American passport.) The other work was by Pascale Marthine Tayou, born in Cameroon and now living in Brussels. Devise/Untitled was a game of darts in which the target was marked with names of countries and their dates of entry into the UN; national flags were attached to the darts.

While Hagia Sophia proved too imposing a venue for almost all of the artists exhibiting there—including Tony Feher whose sensitive piece referenced the stained glass windows—the Yerebatan Cistern, a 6th-century water reservoir often used by the biennial curators seemed to inspire. The artists who engaged with this leaky architectural phenomenon rarely disappointed. Jennifer Steinkamp's work, a projection of a tree upside down in the water, was a poetic presence. Two more trees projected nearby referenced the famous upside-down Medusa columns of the site.

As if on a treasure hunt in Istanbul, various site works led visitors through colorful streets, armed with only vague directions or an address. Colombian artist Doris Salcedo filled a gap between a row of buildings with 1,600 wooden chairs. London's Mike Nelson sited his work in an ancient garment district given to narrow streets and aggressive pushcarts. We found his piece in an old factory building with stone walls, dirt floor, and arched entrances with thick wooden doors: a claustrophobic den, it was a metaphor of the artist's mind, glowing red like a photographer's studio. Across the hall, in an arched doorway with small streams of light, a man beckoned us to take tea. This piece worked on the level of discovery, poetics, enigma, and participation.

Another marvelous site-specific work was based on the possible threat of a dwindling supply of fresh water. Inside the Istanbul Science Center, Bruna Esposito, with Italian Modernist flair and Greenpeace activism, designed an enclosed area with mosaic tiles, four sinks at different heights for children), and a fish tank that sat atop an ancient squatting toilet. Up a few stairs, a tall round translucent glass arena with a central toilet introduced a time-honored and natural treatment of human waste—the compost toilet. “No need for expensive sewer and purification plants,” Esposito says, “as micro organisms will do the job.” This application of an ancient solution to a present problem was stunning.

The abundance of international biennials could suggest that the arts are a vehicle for change. But to lead to change, biennials must be a forum for experimentation, engaging more complex or destabilizing motifs that embrace the mutations of institutional critiques. The venerable Istanbul Foundation For Culture and Arts could certainly consider this for its next chapter.

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