

## Venice 56<sup>th</sup> Art Biennale 2015

### Walk through of the Arsenale (B) : TV Script by Paul Malone for Ottica TV

On entering the next section of the Arsenale the first encounter is with the sound of a tinkling cluster of bells that seem to come out of nowhere. Only when in the room and turning to the left do we see the source is coming from a film projection by the French artist Christian Boltanski. Called 'Animitas' (2014) it is a video of an assemblage of tiny bells suspended on the end of a forest of stems that are activated by the wind. The event is located at the edge of the Atacama desert in Peru and Boltanski informs us that the bells are arranged according to the configuration of the stars at the time of his birth. His aspiration for the piece is to evoke the expanse of the sky in such a place without the distractions of a more hospitable landscape. The sounds of the bells are to be carried away skywards by the wind; a sonic soundscape released to re-join the stars from which they derive. Those conversant with Boltanski's work will see this as a departure from the dark humour of his earlier work (here represented at the Giardini in 'The Coughing Man'). However pasted onto the meaning of this work is the realisation that the Atacama was also one of the dumping grounds for the 'Disappeared' during the Junta years. The sound of the bells also operates as a metaphor for the souls of those lost at the point of their death. As such it operates as a kind of sonic sky burial. Our perspective is close to the ground so we are being asked to adopt this role as we view the work.

Turning around and walking into the body of the Hall are a trio of works by the Cuban artist Ricardo Brey. Titled 'Pearl', 'Caja Dorado' and 'Grimoire' (2011) they are assemblages of exotic objects displayed in free standing museum cases. Described by the artist as an environment for the discovery of knowledge these cases are ascribed as if by philosophical category. So there are books that look like they explain ancient lore, artefacts assuming the role of ritual iconography and dressed objects whose identities are cloaked in lavish embroideries reminiscent of shamanic fetish. The artist insists that the origin of these objects can be found in his immediate everyday environment in Cuba but is equally insistent that they are in no way 'ghettoised' within the context of the Biennale - if so then the Biennale itself participates in the same. Some of the texts are closed, keeping their knowledge a mystery but others are opened and on display. The contents are often arcane so this openness is not what it seems and leads to further mysteries within this play. What comes across most strongly in the assemblages is the magpie nature of the artist; not just in the selection and fabrication as regards concept but also the sparkly details in the form of pearl and glass. In this respect it participates in the same narrative as Boltanski though of a wholly different origin.

Further in and turning to the right is an enclave populated by The Propeller Group (Vietnam / USA). The work titled 'The AK47 v the M16' consists of a video screening behind a free standing sculpture. These are observations, in ultra-slow motion and ballistics gel, of the collision between two bullets fired from opposing directions and the respective guns.

According to the artists, the origin of the work derived from finding a similar pair of bullets, that had collided and fused in mid-air, from the American Civil War. Extending this phenomenon as metaphor, the artists have translated this unlikely meeting of protagonist 'materiel' to reflect the conflicts of the Cold War. There is an undoubted beauty in this work that transcends its origins in the graphics of violence. We observe the minutiae of what would be a near instant event in high definition video and the bottom lit translucence of the gel. It is also the crystallisation of the clash of ideologies that lies behind the physicality of the bullets and the guns from which they are fired. The artists do not try to detach themselves from this process (i.e. the choice of title) but neither do they take sides.

Delving further into the building we enter a darkened space and encounter the piece 'La Town' (2014) by the Chinese artist Cao Fei. This takes the form of an extended vitrine in which are placed various scenarios and narratives employing models and toys. Opposed to this is a video which explores the set in detail and from different perspectives. However here the artist is engaging in a play of dystopia. Model trains collide with Santa's sleigh, the cockpit of a Jumbo jet lies detached and battered in a valley. But this is just a precursor to our entry into the 'Town' itself. Here, actors in the form of model figures work out the conflicts of urban life with abandon. Under the artist's 'polar night' they explore bombed out buildings and visit horror films and strip clubs for entertainment. We get the sense that the artist is working out what is happening in the cities of her home country as it metamorphoses into a 'capitalist utopia'. If model-making is a way of enclosing the uncontrollable in terms of the comprehensible then Cao Fei gives the impression that there is a catharsis in imagining the worst possible outcomes. There is a dark humour in all this as well as a serious side. She is asking; is it not, after all, just a model of an observation and not a plan to be elevated into reality?

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