

12th Lyon Biennial

Various venues

Beyond its purpose as a vast manifestation of art, an ambitious biennial endeavours to tell a story. But an outstretched frame of inquiry can become a noose around its neck. The 12th Biennale de Lyon, titled 'Meanwhile ... Suddenly, and Then', and curated by Astrup Fearnley Museet's Gunnar B. Kvaran, proposes an investigation of narrative as an intrinsic function of art. The show spreads across the repurposed La Sucrière (a former sugar factory), the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon (MAC) and the Bullukian Foundation, as well as the Église Saint-Just and La Chaufferie de l'Antiquaille – overlooking the city from their perches in Vieux Lyon.

La Sucrière's curatorial melody feels as unfinished as its industrial environs, marked by leftover sugar shoots spiralling down the walls of the building (occasionally invading installations as interlopers). Front and centre is *Livin and Dyin* (2013), a sculptural tableau by Dan Colen of cartoon characters such as Kool-Aid Guy and Roger Rabbit alongside a lifelike cast of the artist au naturel all collapsed on the floor. Outlines of these fallen fellows are punched through the wall behind them. And so the show begins not with a jaunty kersplat! but with an awkward raspberry. Whatever animated tragedy we've walked into begins and ends in dollar signs. But it's hard to spot anything more compelling than economic here, even though the hole is designed to look onto what lies beyond.

Porous sightlines are an insubstantial means of linking the works on view in La Sucrière, most of which seem to be placed randomly or, worse, grouped by their basic formal similarities: Petra Cortright's and Tabor Robak's fantastical digital landscapes, say, or groups of outsized paintings by Erró and Thiago Martins de Melo. Nevertheless, three of the most exciting commissions are here, all made by young Anglophone artists. Ian Cheng's *Thousand Islands*, *Thousand Laws* (2013) is an algorithmically generated tempest of CGI cinder blocks, Ming vases, office chairs,

About this review

Published on 18/10/13

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Dan Colen, *Livin and Dyin*, 2012, mixed media, dimensions variable

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plants, fires and herons impaling canvases on their beaks – absurd but somehow organic combinations of animate and inanimate characters undoing their individual meanings as they constitute and reconstitute a constantly unstable tumult of signs. *An Inconvenient Trash* (2013) is a room concealed by curtains, which houses a series of three-dimensional projections (glasses required) by modern-day beatnik Trisha Baga. Meticulously runny, each projection maintains a curious, dislocating tension between layers of optical and cognitive gestures, memorably conveyed by paint splotches, confetti and Al Gore environmentalism sound-bites.

Syncopated in his usual style of false starts, razor-sharp gasps and hallowed reverie, Ed Atkins' *Even Pricks* (2013) shines brightest of all. Other highlights are Aleksandra Domanovic's paper monuments (*Untitled*, 2013), Karl Haendel's graphite drawings (*People Who Don't Know They're Dead*, 2013), Anicka Yi's *Auras, Orgasms and Nervous Peaches* (2011), an expansive film installation by Neil Beloufa (*Superlatives and Resolution*, 2013) and Paul Chan's cleverly reprised 'Light' series (2005–08) – with a meditation on that phallic finger the thumb, turned up, turned down, deflated and inserted into several different orifices, amid the eruptions of flaming sinkholes, slickly ominous credit sequences and an inquisitive chimp.

The MAC offers a fittingly more institutional exhibition format, flush with engrossing installations joined by a more cohesive curatorial layout that snakes from one idea to the next. The first floor deals with psychological and phenomenological wanderings as figures of narrative, epitomized by Robert Gober's oneiric installations formed around dollhouses (*Untitled*, 1978–9), and Antoine Catala's playful experiments in perception: a moon beamed onto an inflatable screen that breathes in and out, concave and convex; a mirrored vitrine that hides and reveals the spectral head of a headless E.T. doll; a projection into steam (*Il était une fois ..., Once Upon a Time ..., 2013*). The strongest overall section is the museum's second floor, in which personally wrought mythologies explode in a variety of metres and styles. Perhaps marking this floor as a curatorial ground zero, Matthew Barney's crustacean and wax pillar from *Drawing Restraint 9* (2005) lies here as the contribution from the artist who might be the most inextricably yoked to the exhibition's theme. The best works in this section include Bjarne Melgaard's dishevelled dioramas on binge abjection (*Untitled*, 2012); James Richards' quiet, transporting 2011 video *Not blacking out, just turning the lights off*, which erratically appropriates

material conjuring a full spectrum of liminal states; and the initial iteration of a new project by Yang Fudong (*About the Unknown Girl – Ma Sise*, 2013), which tunnels into the biography of an ostensibly unknown actress who has featured in two of his previous films. The denouement on floor three is a smaller and more disjointed grouping of artists plumbing the grandiosity of history, with an austere academic three-part riddle by Václav Magid linking 18th-century German philosophy and art education (*From the Aesthetic Education Secret Files*, 2013), a room by Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch scrambling spatial, virtual and linguistic systems of meaning-making, and recent works by Jeff Koons – most iconic, a *Balloon Venus* (2013) – fusing kitsch and antiquity into a readymade souvenir of market-automated art history.

As for the alternative spaces, a delicately gory video about a carnivore's delicacy (*Control Club*, 2013) and a monolithic sound installation (*Buddha Jumps over the Wall*, 2012) by Chinese artist Zhang Ding occupy La Chaufferie de l'Antiquaille. They may not have much of a lifeline to the rest of the exhibition, but they're inoffensive. Tom Sachs's aesthetically rote *Barbie Slave Ship* (2013) at the nearby Église Saint-Just, on the other hand, has no place in a serious show. Explaining the allegory of his immense replica of a ship with hot pink sails – chock-full of miniature cannons and Barbie dolls packed like human cargo – the artist harped on about the notion that advertising constitutes a 'slavery of the mind' which has exhaustively replaced actual, manual slavery around the world. This unnervingly zany elision of the fact that today more people work against their will than at any point in history precludes caring about how the boat is mechanized to chill and pour a curated menu of spirits.

The Bullukian Foundation hosts a solo exhibition by Roe Ethridge, a constellation of photographs of everyday things. Four images that do not appear in the gallery are strewn around town as the biennial's graphic identity, appearing on all the publications, nametags and ephemera associated with the show. Here we have something more interesting than the photos hung in the gallery. One would naturally assume that the imagery used for the show's promotional materials would be pulled from highlights of the exhibition, but in fact they occur only here, on the periphery of the show, as a conduit between art and public. They initiate an unresolved narrative that interweaves the content of the exhibition with its public relations and life as a bureaucratic entity. More murky collusions like this might have built up an ecosystem of ideas complicating what is, at heart, a deserving thesis, but which in execution has been wasted by curatorial platitudes.

Two conspicuous subplots of ‘Meanwhile ... Suddenly, and Then’ are the strong generational emphases on certain artists, such as the all-American dude pack anchored by Colen, Ethridge, Barney and Nate Lowman, or the 47 Canal crew (which includes Catala, Yi, Xavier Cha, Michele Abeles and Margaret Lee). The latter scene can be extended internationally, accounting for the sampling of Post-Internet artists, and there is also an ample number of artists from China and Brazil. Naturally, all of the selections point back to the curator, not only because Kvaran made them, but because the exhibition only begins to make some kind of sense as an autobiographical archive. This notion of the curator’s own life in art as a parallel for this show about narrative is something that Kvaran writes about in his catalogue essay. But one has to wonder when this is a curator who buys art for a private museum with a stated interest in young American artists, and who recently organized large collection shows of artists from China and Brazil. Ethics are another story, but maybe the recycling of artists has something to do with the reason why, despite so many good artists included in this year’s biennial, the exhibition comes up feeling like something we’ve seen before.

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