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Karen Azoulay: Carnation Thunder

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Summer 2011

Karen Azoulay: Carnation Thunder

Liz Linden



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KAREN AZOULAY: CARNATION THUNDER

SOHO20 GALLERY, NEW YORK

7 NOVEMBER, 2010

BY LIZ LINDEN



watercolours of fireworks painted by the artist, coupled with the sound of explosions but distorted pleasantly by the speakers to sound like an electronically transmitted crashing sea. Also installed throughout the room were impressionistic sculptures of fireworks, which appeared to be made partly from armatures covered in papier-mâché, pigment and glitter. Some of the sculptures cleverly used the spokes of burnt-out paper parasols to simultaneously imply the radial projection and the aftermath of a firework's tentacled explosion.

In the centre of the room was a table set for a banquet of generous proportions, replete with tiered serving dishes, cake stands and silverware dipped and moulded in black rubber; sculptures of pretzel sticks radiating out of cheese-ball epicentres; a fantastical assortment of colourful candies and edibles; and a number of mysterious little party favours, which would be employed on command throughout the night.

The whole project had an aura of play, and the room's transformation from white cube to sheet-draped, candlelit wonderland seemed intentionally makeshift and provisional, meant to evoke fireworks, and the marvel of them, rather than to illustrate these explosions directly. *Carnation Thunder* was high-concept fooding and craft-kitsch extravaganza at once.

Once her guests were seated, Azoulay read from a script describing the invention and early use of fireworks, their artistic influences, their emotional analogues and

their formal relationship to flowers. The artist had a poetic touch with the material, managing to make this didactic monologue feel personally specific and broadly metaphorical at once. It was in such small-scale synchronicities that the work excelled, when the formal intimations of fireworks and the frisson of their sudden pleasure came together. And they included a few surprising food moments, such as the smoke-flavoured popsicle and the Pop Rocks-infused chocolate. While the meal itself felt rather unsatisfying and skewed towards the sweet, it seems petty to complain about it when the consumables were just one part of a complicated work with more invested in representation than in restauranting.

Indeed, many would argue that in such projects, the sating of hunger is always beside the point. As the continued popularity of Jennifer Rubell's blue-chip concept-catering has shown, tasting good is not always the goal. For instance, for dessert at this year's PERFORMA gala benefit, Rubell served what *The New York Times* described as, "a plywood installation resembling a padded cell lined with oblong blocks of pink cotton candy." (The writer went on to quote one guest who had eaten the dessert as saying it was "kind of gross.")

More than anything, though, one wonders about the sudden prevalence of such exclusive conceptual-food projects, and why, at this moment in time, the extravagance of such works has taken hold. It feels counterintuitive, but perhaps it's a

As a young child, in a very early brush with semiotics and the perils of representation, artist Karen Azoulay was asked by a teacher to draw fireworks. The bewildered Azoulay drew her best imagining of an unlit firework (the *ur*-firework), because, clearly, how could one represent the entirety of fireworks, as variable and profusely sensory as they are? Azoulay recounted this story towards the beginning of her latest banquet performance, *Carnation Thunder*, and it proved prescient, nodding at both this new work's striking successes and its inherent failures.

Carnation Thunder, as presented at Soho20 Gallery in New York, was described by Azoulay as a "conceptual dinner party... with a parade of dishes, each an interpretation of how the shimmering explosions in the sky might taste." The work called up a number of genres, straddling the disparate references and disciplines that have become the calling card of recent art-world mashups of molecular gastronomy and relational aesthetics.

The night began promptly at 8pm, when the doors of the gallery were thrown open by the artist, clad in a black gown and tulle fascinator that were at once elegant and camp. Azoulay greeted the evening's attendees warmly, one after another, as they fell naturally into a queue, like wedding guests in a gothic bride's receiving line. This strange formal welcome set the tone for the evening's festive and friendly inclusivity for ticket-holders.

The guests then entered the gallery, which was draped with cloth, the draperies serving both as room dividers and screens. On one surface, a projector screened a languid slideshow of



once-in-a-lifetime convergence of three vectors: the popularization of the conceptual-science-based cuisine at restaurants like elBulli, wd~50 and Ainea; the instrumentalization of relational aesthetics; and a recession-inspired push for novel ways to entice abundant charitable giving at big-ticket fundraisers when non-profit arts organizations need it most.

Generosity certainly has precedence in conceptual-cuisine. Indeed there have been a preponderance of meal-works made during and about down economies—from Gordon Matta-Clark's *FOOD*, which served inexpensive, albeit unorthodox, meals to the SoHo art community in the early 70s, to Judy Chicago's 1979 work *The Dinner Party*, an ambitious, if inanimate, effort to bring to the table underappreciated historical women, to Rirkrit Tiravanija's earliest pad thai giveaways, performed when the market slumped in its recovery from 1987's Black Monday. Like *FOOD* and *The Dinner Party*, Tiravanija's *Untitled (pad thai)* was not only about generosity, but also about

↑ Karen Azoulay, *Carnation Thunder*, performance/ conceptual dinner party, November 7, 2010, Soho20 Gallery, New York
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

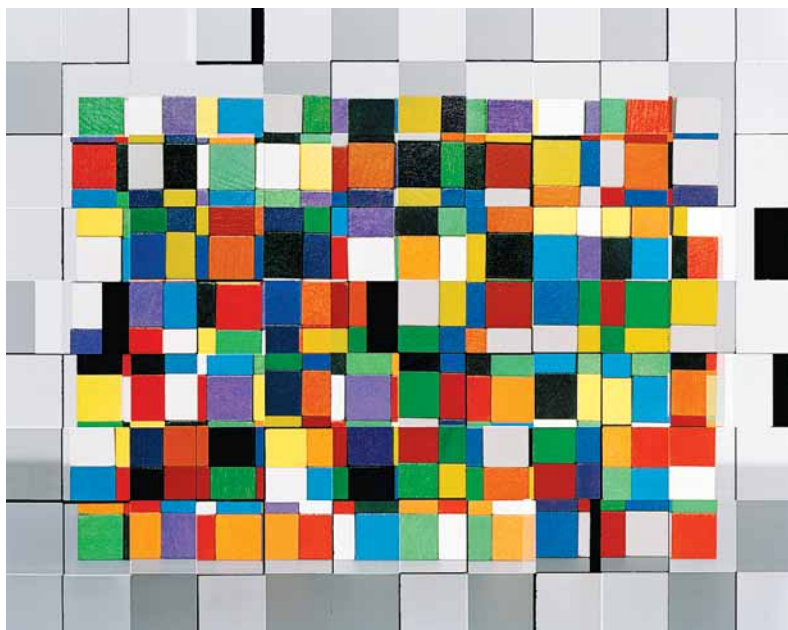
hunger. While the contemporary culinary follies of Rubell and Azoulay promote food's power to entertain, historic works engaged with food's political power: its ability to sustain and to nourish.

Tiravanija's first pad thai project was also engaged with failure in representation—albeit with a degree of self-reflexive criticality that recuperated that failure and structured it into the work's too-often overlooked social critique. On the night *Untitled (pad thai)* opened, while Tiravanija laboured over the dinner he was about to serve, visitors to the gallery took him to be the caterer.

Which brings us back to signification, and its failure. Azoulay's work is both a synaesthetic love poem to fireworks and an elegy

to their failed semiotic likeness, which neither salad nor sculpture nor sound art can wholly describe. This places *Carnation Thunder* in the unenviable position of simultaneously acknowledging and rejecting the impossibility of representing fireworks—a contradiction that Azoulay demonstrated awareness of even as a child. In this way, a degree of self-consciousness enters *Carnation Thunder*, with the work serving as an extended elegy to that precocious childhood self.

Liz Linden is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn, New York.



JESSICA EATON: STRATA

RED BULL 381 PROJECTS, TORONTO
NOVEMBER 18 – DECEMBER 18, 2010
BY ROSE BOUTHILLIER

Jessica Eaton's structured, incandescent images tend to evoke the molecular. Her solo exhibition at Red Bull 381 Projects—the gallery's last—closed the space with the sparkle of many tiny bangs. The Saskatchewan-born, Vancouver-schooled and now Montreal-based artist's photographs call for close viewing; they don't readily reveal what they are or how they've materialized. As such, this unfamiliarity gives them a striking sense of *possibility*.

To start with what can be seen, they glow. In particular, the nested layers of the *Cubes for Albers and Lewitt* series (abbreviated to *cfaal*; all works 2010) seem to be lit from within. *Interpolation Dramatization 4* and *108_21* show smaller blocks of shade and colour set in morphing, shuffling grids. All of the compositions are filled with straight lines, though the edges are soft, some ever so slightly fringed with light. Large, velvety brush strokes, worn

corners and visible wood grain provide just enough texture for the shapes to exert objectness, held up by shadows cast on the solid ground beneath them. Distinctly photographic tones—certain ranges of grey, bright magentas and cyans—are interspersed throughout a vibrant palette. Diverse visual references are called up: minimalist paintings, isometric diagrams, pixelated swatches and vision tests.

These appearances raise questions concerning the images' categorical status and construction—they're obviously photographic, but it's unclear exactly how. Such apprehension means Eaton's process is often forefront in discussions of her work; each of these images comes from a single scan of a 4x5 negative, output on an inkjet printer, the different effects achieved through multiple exposures, masking and camera movement. To create the cube-within-a-cube effect, a large dark cube, a medium grey cube and a small light-coloured cube were photographed in succession, through different colour lens filters. Darker surfaces reflect less light onto the film, leaving available space on the negative, while lighter ones reflect more, exhausting the grain. Each cube, lit from the side, has

three tonal values, making each overlapping surface a unique variable. While it's gratifying to work through such technical details, knowing what the images are and how they came to be doesn't subdue their mystery, it only leads to a long list of collapsing distinctions: abstraction and representation, duration and instantaneousness, calculation and chance.

Photographs always show us something that is impossible to see because a mechanical eye lacks distinctive characteristics of human perception: sensitivity, unreliability, slowness and constant motion. Troubling this relationship, Eaton uses the measured system of the camera to develop opportunities for surprise, multiplied through each exposure. If Eaton's images leaned more heavily on digital compositing, they would still be beautiful; their logic would just be less intriguing. Though wary of fetishizing analogue processes, her photographs' most captivating qualities rely on a correspondence to real-time physical facts.

This indexicality takes on a sculptural dimension, as the negatives are *built up* in blocks of textured colour using light and time. Rarely are negatives so relevant; they usually exist as a forgotten step between event and image, or as sources of collagable data. *108_21* illustrates the physicality of the negative in a particular way: Eaton assembled a wall of wooden blocks, which she photographed 108 times onto a single sheet of film—limiting each exposure to a different square on a 9x12 grid. In between each click of the shutter, she destroyed and rebuilt the wall, resulting in a chance composition that was only seen later when the film was developed. Eaton's labour differs from that of Thomas Demand and Georges Rousse, both of whom also create perceptual uncertainty with their photographs but whose efforts go into building something *for* the camera. By contrast, Eaton builds *with*, or even *inside* the camera. Comparisons with other contemporary photographers don't readily spring to mind (a pleasant blank), though in their physicality and medium reflexivity, there is some affinity with Wolfgang Tillman's

↑ Jessica Eaton, *108_21*, 2010, from the series *108 and other Observations*
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST