Karen Azoulay: Carnation Thunder

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Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien. L’an dernier, le Conseil a investi 153 millions de dollars pour mettre de l’art dans la vie des Canadiennes et des Canadiens de tout le pays.
The Great Vancouver-to-Toronto Exodus that followed sizable cuts to British Columbia arts funding in 2010 has only aug- mented the perpetual compare-and-contrast of the two cities. However, one point of semblance between them that we would all be hard-pressed to challenge is the omnipresence of condominium advertising. The Grand Hotel, which is a half-block from Vancouver— born ready for real-estate intrigue—that I even noticed this para- lel. Sean Martindale, an artist who has flirted between both cities all his life, decided to focus on this nationally shared point of pub- lic imagery in his recent work tent: Life-Like Living.

Martindale’s project is composed of two parts. First, he con- structed simple tent-like structures using reclaimed condominium poster advertisements and plastic broom handles, which he positioned in public locations around downtown Toronto. Later, he opened a mock presentation centre at the 107 Shaw Gallery, where real estate marketing devices such as sandwich boards, scale models and testimonials were created with the help of other art- ists, including Ian Carr-Harris, Janis Demkiw, Lisa Myers and Sandy Plotniko.

In an interview with Torontoist’s Steve Kupferman, Martindale cited the economic disparity of housing options as the crux of the tent project and Carr-Harris corroborated the same in his text about the project, noting that Martindale’s “quintessentially provocative series of interrogations into the fabric of the city are a reference to the plight of the public housing population from the implicit right to shelter that constitutes the rhetoric of both private capital and public policy.” While the discrimination inherent in the urban housing market is undoubtedly a worthy concern, if perhaps belaboured in contemporary Canadian art. Martindale’s project diverges by way of its explicit focus on the complicity of the de- sign and marketing machine in the maintenance of a false ideal. At once tantalizing and absurd, the imagery utilized in real es- tate advertisement is familiar to any metropolitan citizen. Not only do the personifications of a healthy and wealthy lifestyle hail us from billboards and construction hoardings, so do the markers of our cultural diversity. By simultaneously displaying signs of com- munity as well as individuality, these images are not only sell- ing a place to live, but also exemplifying where a person can be “who you are.” By reconstituting and relocating this imagery, Martindale’s tents suggest that “who you artist, coupled with the sound of contem- porary visions but disturbed 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 paper-mâché, pigment and glued stones. The sculptures cleverly used the spokes of burnt-out paper-para Simmons to simultaneously imply the radial projection and the af- termath of a firework’s detonated 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 em- phasized, as the Winnipeg-born artist, Karen Azoulay, once observed, “is strange formal welcome set the tone for the evening’s festive atmosphere.” It would be an underestimation to call this work “art” in the conventional sense, however; it is more of a thought- provoking food-sculpture, where the meaty and the sweet and other culinary delights are presented in a way that is both visually stunning and thought-provoking.

Karen Azoulay is an artist and writer who lives and works in London, UK.

This is the actual filming of the tent project at a public park in Toronto, November (2010).

KAREN AZOUNLY: CARNATION THUNDER

SOHO20 GALLERY, NEW YORK

7 NOVEMBER, 2010

BY LIZ LINDEN

A young child, in a very early brush with semiotics and the cadence of language, was asked by a teacher to draw fireworks. The bewildered Azoulay drew her best imagining of an item firework (the “air”-firework), because, clearly, how could one represent the entirety of fireworks, as variable and profusely specific as they are? Azoulay recounted this story towards the beginning of her latest banquet performance, Carna- tion Thunder, and it proved prescient, nodding at both this new work’s striking successes, and the complexity of its mag- nifying explosions in the sky might taste.” The work called up a number of genres, straddling the disparate references and disci- plines that have become the calling card of recent art-world marks of molecular dissipation.

The night began promptly at 8pm, when the doors of the gallery were thrown open by the artist, clad in a black gown and nattie fash- ioned that were at once elegant and smirking. As they walked into the room, they were treated to a parade of dishes, each an interpretation of how the shambles of the gallery presented Carnation Thunder, as presented at SOHO20 Gallery in New York, was described by Azoulay as a “conceptual dinner party… for a once-in-a-lifetime convergence of three vectors: art and food, and the timing of it all.”

The guests then entered the gallery, which was draped with wool cloth, the draperies serving both as room dividers and screens. On one surface, a projector screened a languid slideshow of the banquets of goods proportioned, 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 em- phasized, as the Winnipeg-born artist, Karen Azoulay, once observed, “is strange formal welcome set the tone for the evening’s festive atmosphere.” It would be an underestimation to call this work “art” in the conventional sense, however; it is more of a thought- provoking food-sculpture, where the meaty and the sweet and other culinary delights are presented in a way that is both visually stunning and thought-provoking.

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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 Saskatchewana-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’re materialized. As such, this unfamiliarity gives them a striking sense of possibility.

To start with what can be seen, they grow. In particular, the nested layers of the Cubes for Albers and Lewitt series (abbreviated to sfal; all works 2010) seem to lie within. Interpolation Dramatization 4 and 20×21 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 exist objectively, held up by shadows cast on the solid ground beneath them. Distinctly photographic tones—certain ranges of grey, bright magentas and cyan—are interspersed throughout a vibrant palette. Diverse visual references are called up: mimetic paintings, isometric diagrams, parallax 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 understandings add other layers to Eaton’s photographs with knowledges of other, more conceptual and material realities: those of who we have spent hours fumbling around in darkrooms can read them with a nuanced and conceptual interpretative eye. Such understandings add other layers to Eaton’s photographs, but what makes them so compelling is their ability to transcend such labels and techniques, to directly absorb viewers in the pleasure of images through their radiant, mysterious integrity.

*Reviews*

By: Gabrielle Moser

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**Marcel Dzama:** Behind Every Curtain

David Zwirner, New York

February 17 – March 18, 2011

BY GABRIELLE MOSE

Winnipeg-born, New York–based artist Marcel Dzama’s multidisciplinary practice—encompassing drawing, sculpture, dance and now film—has consistently involved an interplay between historical and contemporary narratives that uses dream logic to unlock the psychic effects of quotidian materials and forms. Influenced by surrealist approaches, such as dreams and automatic writing, Dzama’s works bring together a cast of animal and human figures who struggle (sometimes violently) with one another and with their environment in scenarios that simultaneously evoke childhood games and late-19th-century guerilla warfare. But while his earlier projects subtly reworked the representation of Marcel Duchamp and others associated with the modernist avant-garde, in his recent solo exhibition at New York’s David Zwirner gallery, Dzama’s appropriation of these themes takes on an explicitly gendered dimension. In an exhibition that gradually builds from Dzama’s characteristic two-dimensional drawings to larger-than-life-sized sculpture and, finally, to a live-action video of a ballet conceived by the artist, Behind Every Curtain focuses on the links between chess, art and the subconscious that long preoccupied the work of people like Duchamp. Rather than offering us an ambivalent pastiche of the modernist avant-garde, however, Dzama’s work invests surrealist tropes with a rich substratum of new meanings that respond to the contingencies of the time and space in which he works.

The exhibition opens with Untitled (Winnipeg was won, Winnipeg was one) (2009), a large, panoramic drawing in three sections that maps out a fictitious and epic battle set in the artist’s hometown. Recalling the narrative structure of medieval battle representations (such as the Bayeux Tapestry), Dzama employs his trademark palette of muted browns, olive green, rusted burgundy and steel blue to depict a human conflict that is firmly set in an ambiguous past, yet unmoored from any particular historical moment. Organized in “shots” numbered from 1 to 49, in much the same way that a commercial film is plotted out on a storyboard, the dozens of figures who march and fight alongside one another engage in a serious, yet strangely bloodless, battle over unknown spoils. On