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Art Basel's Close Ups

by *paul david young* 12/08/11

With few exceptions, video art isn't a great profit center for galleries. Nonetheless, Art Basel Miami Beach showcased in a fair-sponsored section a collection of videos selected by David Gryn, director of the London production firm Artprojx. And sprinkled among the 250 booths were a number of other videos, some of them worth spending time with.

Five video "pods"-relatively comfortable, semi-enclosed, curvy plywood shelters in the central area of the convention center-showed 22 videos Gryn culled from a larger program that he screened in nightly installments in the nearby Soundscape Park.



Martha Rosler's one-minute *God Bless America* (2006) was the inspiration for a collection of works shown in the park on Dec. 2. Rosler's video is indeed inspiring for its economy and clear message. A wind-up toy soldier with a trumpet plays the eponymous semi-official national anthem. Rosler rolled up one of the toy soldier's pants legs to reveal the mechanical knee device that allows its leg to move. The device looks eerily like a prosthesis, and with that shrewd association, Rosler effectively questions Americans' unthinking patriotism by violence that fails to register as maudlin sacrifice.

Theaster Gates and the Black Monks of Mississippi, a musical group Gates formed and with whom he frequently performs, eloquently crossed cultural boundaries in *Breathing* (2010), which blended gospel singing with Buddhist chanting. Recorded in heavy shadows so that only their faces are visible, male and female members of the Black Monks appear individually, singers alternating with chanters. Gates edited the sequences so that sounds and visuals merge during the transition.

(Gates and the Black Monks also performed on the opening night of the fair, beginning in the convention center and parading out into nearby Collins Park.)

Appropriation fueled the work of Neil Hamon and Penny Siopsis. Hamon's 2008 self-reflexive video about authorship and originality, *Invasion*, which takes footage from the original 1956 movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and a 1978 remake incorporated as a picture-in-picture inside the frame of the 1956 movie. Using a line of dialogue from the original movie ("What happens to the original?"), the piece links together its materials and theme. Just as in the *Body Snatchers* plot, where aliens take over humans and people run scared from their loved ones out of fear that they may have been snatched, Hamon asks an interesting question about himself as an artist using multiple versions of an "original" to make something new and perhaps alien and hostile.

Siopsis's 2011 work *Communion* combines diverse textual and video material to tell the story of the 1950 killing of a nun in South Africa. The grainy found footage and subtitles relate in the impossible first-person the nun's account of her own brutal death, apparently the result of a misunderstanding about her untimely presence in a rural village. The story is largely an invention, but it rings chillingly true, perhaps because recent history is littered with such horrors.

Two videos in the fair's pods focused on what might be called the externalities of filmmaking, showing a part of the process that is usually unseen in this medium. The best was Christian Jankowski's *Casting Jesus*, screened as a 2-minute "trailer" by London's Lisson Gallery in the pods and in its full 45-minute glory in the booth of Berlin's Klosterfelde Gallery. The work shows actors auditioning by carrying a cross, dying, preaching, faith healing and so on, as a panel of three onlookers critique and sometimes ridicule the actors. The panelist wearing a clerical collar gives instructions and encouragement to the aspirants. Because the Jesus story is the sacred myth of Western civilization, because it has been reenacted in pageants since the Middle Ages and more recently in countless film and television productions, and because the depiction of Jesus is one of the most repeated motifs of Western painting and sculpture, the Jesus auditions are an especially rich way to poke a stick in the eye of religion and its artistic expression. Like commercial casting directors everywhere, the panelists evaluate the actors' looks and wince at the sodden overacting of some of the Jesus-wannabes. The two-channel full-length version allows the simultaneous perception of the suffering Jesuses and the sometimes equally pained casting panel. Filmed in a lofty chamber decorated with frescoes and ecclesiastical architecture, the video is endlessly hilarious and intelligently conceived.

Clemens von Wedemeyer's *Occupation* (2001/2002) focuses on the "extra," the nonspeaking film actor. It shows 200 extras, cordoned off in a field at night, as they

respond to nonsensical instructions. With unflinching



seriousness, the crew calls back and forth about the light settings and logistics of the shoot, until the lights go out and the crowd runs away.

In the Art Nova section of the fair, which featured work made in the last two years, the title of Ulla von Brandenburg's *Mamuthones* (2011) at Pilar Corrias Gallery of London (not part of the pods program) refers to a hairy type of traditional Sardinian folk ritual costume. The camera revolves in the courtyard of an old, fortified building, capturing a stationary circle of silent masked figures, some wearing 18th-

century knee britches and three-cornered hats and others in the folk costume, curiously reminiscent of aliens from sci-fi films. Nothing happens in this costumed tableau vivant except the rotation of the camera, but a nice sense of foreboding is nonetheless created.

Art Nova also hosted two pleasurable videos of endurance. At i8 Gallery of Reykjavik, Ragnar Kjartansson's *Song* (2011), which shows three women on a pedestal in a neoclassical interior singing a short folk song for six hours while bathed in blue light, is absurdly hypnotic, as the camera circles the wearying women. Kate Gilmore's 2011 *Buster* at David Castillo Gallery of Miami demonstrated endurance of a different sort. Gilmore struggles to kick, throw and destroy several score ceramic containers of purple and white paint, causing it to drip and splash onto her and her girly outfit and all over the gray tiered platform. Like Kjartansson's intrepid singers, it is ridiculous but fascinating to watch.



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