

CULTURE DESK

WATCHING A FISH GASP FOR AIR IN JONATHAS DE ANDRADE'S "O PEIXE"

By Vinson Cunningham



Video courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York, and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo / Produced by Desvia and the Wexner Center for the Arts with support from the Pernambuco Cultural Incentive Fund.

A week or so ago, without much of an idea of what might be on display, I went to the New Museum in the middle of the morning. The Bowery felt empty, and the air outside was strangely warm. The fast-talking, much-pierced, nervously funny clerk from whom I bought my ticket mentioned the main attraction, an exhibition of Raymond Pettibon's screwball drawings, called "A Pen of All Work," then ticked offhandedly through the collection of video art that occupied the lower regions of the building. She reserved special praise for a little film by the Brazilian artist Jonathas de Andrade, called "O Peixe," or, in English, "The Fish." She couldn't—or, perhaps, simply wouldn't—describe the work, thematically or visually, and instead just said that it was "something else" and let her voice trail off.

Alexander and Bonin

I took an elevator up and worked my way downstairs, through the Pettibon, and after an hour ended up on the ground floor again, in the carpeted little screening room where “O Peixe” played on a loop. The film is simple—a fisherman, dark-skinned and shirtless, sits in a boat on a quiet river and, before long, catches a fish. The fish gasps for air and the fisherman holds it to his chest until it dies. This sequence—performed by a series of fishermen, of various ages and using various styles of capture—is the spine of the work, interrupted by passages of quiet natural beauty; one shot is a steady, stately pan through scores of trees and empty air behind. If “The Old Man and the Sea” were a romance, and more pagan than Christian, it might look something like this.

Andrade’s camerawork is calm and unaffected, his lens ever so grainy—the writing on the wall outside the screening room tells us that it is meant to mimic (and perhaps gently to mock) the placid, exoticizing style of ethnographic documentary, and that the intimate gesture between man and dying fish is an invention of the artist. This intellectual content notwithstanding, “O Peixe” felt to me like a refreshment. Its colors—blue and green, brown skin and rainbow-colored scales—are uncommunicatively pretty. And its noises—slight splashes, fish thrashing on the bottom of a boat—threatened, several times, to lull me to sleep.

This was a welcome contrast to Pettibon, whose insistence on language—lewd jokes and quotes from Proust, Ruskin, and Joyce, all in stentorian capitals, mar his surfaces—comes across as a kind of insecurity, a distrust in images, and makes it exhausting to look at more than a few of his drawings at a time. I very rarely go to the museum hoping to read. In one upstairs room, a fuzzy, amateurish film by Pettibon played; bad actors spoke a nonsense language that I couldn’t muster the interest to interpret. I liked some of “A Pen of All Work”—especially a set of record covers and a series on Charles Manson, who in these sketches looks unsettlingly, almost seductively, like a living-room-portrait white Christ—but found the exhibition, on balance, to be just as obnoxious as the politics, official and countercultural, that Pettibon sets out to lampoon.

Andrade’s satire is softer and therefore, maybe, more dangerous. The blank, naturalistic plausibility of, say, a splash of river water on a wrist is enough—minus a block of text in explanatory art-catalogue prose—to change a mind forever. Have we found a better mythmaker, or -breaker, than boredom?

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