

Lange, Christy. "11th Biennale de Lyon"
Frieze (November – December, 2011)

frieze



11th Biennale de Lyon Various venues

The entrance to the massive, darkened main venue of the 11th Biennale de Lyon is dramatically heralded by several layers of billowing curtains cascading from the ceiling onto a platform that we must walk across to enter. Installed in La Sucrière, a former warehouse, Ulla von Brandenburg's *Kulissen* (Sceneries, 2011) literally sets the stage for an exhibition in which many of the works are spot-lit and foregrounded as theoretical or theatrical propositions. This feeling is complemented by the voice-over to Zbyněk Baladrán's video, *Model of the Universe* (2009), playing near the entrance, which enumerates the Czech artist's proposals for the ways an exhibition can be 'a model of the universe'. Together the works signal that we are entering a biennial that presents a series of such models – of universes both large and small. From nearby comes the sound from a video of the Israeli national anthem played on an electric guitar, performed by Tracey Rose next to the dividing wall in Jerusalem (*San Pedro V*, 2005). Rose's work suggests that the propositions in 'A Terrible Beauty is Born', curated by the Buenos Aires-based curator Victoria Noorthoorn, are not only individual, artistic performances, but ones in which the darker sides of political conflicts are also brought to the stage.

La Sucrière features several large-scale installations that book-end each level, while smaller-scale drawings and sculptures file in between. In a space curtained off by black drapes, Brazilian filmmaker and set designer Daniela Thomas restages Samuel Beckett's short 1969 play *Breath*, in which a human life is lived out – from birth cry to death rattle – as a post-apocalyptic landscape enters and fades from view. While two universes – one minute, one immense – emerge and die, we can overhear the soundtrack of Gabriel Acevedo Velarde's animated video, *Escenario* (Stage, 2004), eerily repeating a round of applause. In Velarde's film, a queue of identical cartoon men take their turn 'performing' a death scene on stage before their peers. A spotlight illuminates each short death, followed by an outburst of clapping, as if an endless series of public executions is taking place.

Across all four venues of the Biennale, we encounter not only Utopian models of the universe – embodied in the many works that take the form of research or proposals – but also their dystopian counterparts, worlds that are the products of mental or physical confinement. If Yona Friedman's 'model architecture' in *Untitled* (2011) proposes possibilities for a Utopian future, Javier Téllez's world in *O Rinoceronte de Dürer* (Dürer's Rhinoceros, 2010) is a lonely, interior one, plagued by madness. Téllez created his film in conjunction with psychiatric patients from the panoptical Miguel Bombarda hospital in Lisbon who helped write and act in the film. This claustrophobic version of a model world is made even more tangible in a stunning collection of works made by self-taught Brazilian artist Arthur Bispo do Rosário, which were created during his 50 years as a patient on a psychiatric ward in a Rio de Janeiro hospital. According to the wall text, Do Rosário embroidered his many fabric works using thread from the hospital's uniforms.

Notably, Noorthoorn has brought together a number of South American artists for the show, but does not ask them to 'represent' or carry the flag for their countries; the inclusion of many artists whose work might be previously unknown to European audiences feels neither tokenistic nor heavy-handed. On the whole, Noorthoorn's selections, refreshingly, don't so much serve to illustrate a curatorial thesis or reflect her personal sensibility as share a similar psychological and formal tenor. This quality is most obvious in the exhibition at Le Musée d'art Contemporain, where pieces are not only linked formally in their strict black-and-whiteness, but also quite literally, by the thread of Cildo Meireles's *La Bruja 1* (The Witch 1, 1979–80), skeins of thin black needlepoint thread unspooled, piled and strewn across the museum's third floor. On the walls, the gestural, scribbled marks of Ely Strik's pencil drawings and the thick black markings of Marlene Dumas's haunting portraits echo the tangled black threads that trip you up and muffle your footsteps, reinforcing the suggestion of a tormented and tangled mental space.

In the Biennale's most remote venue, a former artificial silk factory in an industrial area outside of the city centre, Jorge Macchi has recreated the surreal, placeless gardens from Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad*



Above left:
Jorge Macchi
Marienbad
2011
Installation view

Above right:
Ulla von Brandenburg
Kulissen
(Sceneries)
2011
Mixed media
Installation view

(1961): neat grass plots, flower beds and classical statues are installed among the rubble of this demolition/construction site (a landscape which inadvertently echoes the stage in Beckett's play). Visible from Macchi's gardens, Lucia Koch's massive billboard, *New Development* (2011), erected in front of the ruins of the neighbouring factory, sardonically serves as an 'advertisement' for this soon-to-be-demolished real estate. In tandem, both works draw attention to the dissonance of hosting art on a site like this, and satirize the idea of 'regenerating' neighbourhoods through public art. Both works have the *unheimlich* feeling of model homes built in the desert to advertise a coming housing project, an idealized proposal that will never fulfill its promise. The contrast between the neat edges of the grass plots and the rubble cleared out of the way to build them is jarring. The garden will be maintained for the duration of the exhibition, though it would be just as poignant if it were left to decay.

Christy Lange

Background:
Marlene Dumas
'Series of 100 Drawings'
1979–2004
Works on paper
Installation view
Foreground:
Cildo Meireles
La Bruja 1
(The Witch 1)
1979–80
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

