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Abbas Akhavan, Study for a Garden, Delfina Foundation, London, October 8 — November 20, 2012

Martine Rouleau

Indignation
Numéro 77, hiver 2013

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/68383ac

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Éditeur(s)
Les éditions esse

ISSN
0831-859X (imprimé)
1929-3577 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Abbas Akhavan, Study for a Garden

Delfina Foundation, London
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How many waking hours does one spend trying to keep nature at bay? We clean, sweep, and tidy up without giving much thought to the tasks that give us a sense of control over our environment and our own bodies. Study for a Garden, the outcome of Abbas Akhavan's ten-week residency with the Delfina Foundation, is an uncanny reminder of this primal urge for dominance.

The tone is set right inside the front door of the derelict domestic building where Akhavan devised his installations, with a row of hedges partially blocking visitors' access. The controlled invasion of the garden doesn't stop there, as the work is deftly scattered throughout the house, from basement to second floor. The garden has crept indoors, and what might constitute a lovely sight when glimpsed from one's living room window is somehow disquieting when it sits within the actual room. Such is the case with a tangle of ivy growing straight out of a gaudy period carpet in one of the first-floor rooms. Even more unsettling is the sprinkler that doesn't stop there, as the work is deftly scattered throughout the house, partially blocking visitors' access. The controlled invasion of the garden occupies the top-floor room, sending wave after wave of water to seep into the ancient linoleum floor.

For Akhavan, whose work has often relied on displacing benign domestic objects to highlight that they are imbued with meaning—cultural markers, indicators of power relations, mechanisms of control—it is a deceptively simple strategy to bring the garden indoors. Having carte blanche to engage with the space as he wished, the artist interpreted the case with a tangle of ivy growing straight out of a gaudy period carpet that water damage in the room above must have caused this drip. Beyond the chain of domestic cause and effect is a reference to waterboarding, a method of torture that might constitute a lovely sight when glimpsed from one's living room window, softened by the fact that this person is smoking through a hole in the clothed individual, fists raised in a boxer's stance. The threat is somewhat injection of humour and aggression with a fixed camera trained on a barely clothed person, fisted raised in a boxer's stance. The threat is somewhat softened by the fact that this person is smoking through a hole in the handkerchief that obscures his or her face.

Some works challenge disciplinary boundaries, existing between installation, sculpture, and painting. Lauren Godfrey's Spaghetti Alle Vongole looks like a placard lying face down on the floor, taking up space in a playful way, as does Tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms farther, a silk banner covered in tiny characters and stretched between sculptural poles. Jennifer Bailey's work also stands out. Displayed on and around a simple plywood table, her digital photograph on fabric, oil on board, and mixed media installation appears like a small exhibition in its own right. The diversity of materials and styles doesn't detract from the tactile quality of her installation New Girls, a collection of crude ceramic objects reminiscent of artefacts. Her works draw you in; they almost ask to be handled.

What makes a young artist good? The number of exhibitions and prizes dedicated to identifying the elusive promise of youth are numerous and wildly variable. Bloomberg New Contemporaries, in its third year at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, specializes in supporting emergent art practice from British art schools. Selected by Cullinan Richards, Nairy Baghramian, and Rosalind Nashashibi from more than twelve hundred submissions, this year's selection of twenty-nine young artists presents a surprisingly cohesive aesthetic. There is a freshness to this edition, an overall sense that the works were selected for their simplicity, their lack of artifice.

For instance, the naive paintings and collages of Freya Douglas-Morris might hint at a post-colonial comment, but it’s their childish aesthetic that dominates. Jan May’s naive paintings eschew the commentary altogether in favour of pleasing shapes on solid backgrounds. Max Ruf’s large-scale abstract paintings are highly saturated with acetone on Xerox and toner pigment, yet Tyra Tingleff achieves as great an impact on a smaller scale with her thickly layered oil paintings. Emanuel Röhss’ work presents a lighter approach as he opted to partially cover his canvas with strategically placed smudges of watercolour, letting the weave of raw linen feature prominently.

There is a wide selection of moving-image works, ranging from documented social experiment, such as by Simon Senn, to the aesthetic manipulation of found footage in Salome Ghazanfari’s Boxer (Young Marble Giants). Untitled (Ready for a Fight) by Anita Delaney provides a surprising injection of humour and aggression with a fixed camera trained on a barely clothed individual, fists raised in a boxer’s stance. The threat is somewhat softened by the fact that this person is smoking through a hole in the handkerchief that obscures his or her face.

If Bloomberg New Contemporaries is any indication of the work that will emerge from art schools in the years to come, it might mark a welcome return to an exploration of materials and a lighter mood.

(Rosalind Nashashibi)