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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Abbas Akhavan, Study for a Garden

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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 might constitute a lovely sight when glimpsed from one’s living room window, 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 remaining traces of past inhabitants—wallpaper, carpeting, furniture—as a foil for a different approach to displacement.

Just as nature colonizes the former living spaces, lending them new connotations, other elements hint at something darker. An angled table (where a watering can and wet cloths rest uneasily) sits under a stained 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 smudges of watercolour, letting the weave of raw linen feature prominently.

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.

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 Rohss’ 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 Ghazanfar’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.

[Martine Rouleau]