

Wardell Milan

19 Nov-22 Dec, 2005

Taxier & Spengemann, New York

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Review by Ben Davis



Left: Wardell Milan, *The Re-Birth Of Venus Hottentot, And The Death Of Cupids. Love-Lost pt.5* (detail), 2005, Digital C-print on aluminium, 85 x 125cm

On initial approach, this first solo outing by Wardell Milan displayed a sort of confusion, as it offered two disconnected series of work by this 2004 Yale graduate.

The first of these was a set of three drawings, each titled *Desire and the Black Masseur*. Executed on large, heavy sheets of paper, these drawings featured configurations of stocky male figures done in a rough, smudgy style, so that individual features were hard to pick out. Bodies overlapped and the relations between the men suggested an uneasy combination of combat and passionate groping as their bodies blurred and melted into one another.

Interspersed with these drawings were photographic works, employing a totally different set of conventions. In *Black is the Color of my True Love's Hair* and *The Re-Birth of Venus Hottentot, And The Death of Cupids. Love-Lost pt. 5* Milan created and photographed densely packed dioramas. These landscapes, cut out from magazines and art history textbooks, are filled with disjunctive figures posing with one another amid a mossy jungle, in the former work, and a strange architectural ruin, in the latter.

There are Surrealist references – a de Chirico burning giraffe stands solemnly in one corner, while elsewhere there is a melty Dali face. Other recurring motifs include figures from vintage sports and bodybuilding magazines, evoking the synthetic kinkiness of Richard Hamilton's famous collage, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* These muscular, naked figures

suggest a field swarming with fragmented, barely controlled physical desires.

In these works, the juxtaposition of different scales and the flat, cut-out shapes make the photographic space resemble the surface of a collage, but Milan leaves hints of real depth, playing with out-of-focus space around the edges, and cannily leaving the occasional object to jut into the foreground.

The effect is an image that teases the viewer with different modes of reading it. This is taken to its climax in the third and last photo work in the show, *Stargazing at Mapplethorpe's Black Book*, which captures the view through different layers of clear material printed with star patterns. The eye is made to move in and out in search of shapes, making viewers aware of how they are wrestling with the image in order to make sense of it.

Finally, this is the thread that holds these distinct types of work together: the parallel between a fluidity of perception, where surface and depth, figure and ground, melt together without quite merging, and a fluidity of desire – a mobile, polymorphous space penetrated by mobile, polymorphous sexuality.

The Iraqi Equation

18 Dec-25 Feb

KW Institute, Berlin

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Review by Axel Lapp

What do we know about the current situation of the Iraqi people? What is the state of cultural production in a country that has been tormented by warfare and oppression for the past 30 years? What is the position of the artist in a climate of religious fanaticism and cultural confrontation?

In this exhibition, part of the long-running series of projects 'Contemporary Arab Representations', curator Catherine David poses interesting questions without providing many answers. There is an accompanying programme of talks and discussions, but within the show itself there is remarkably little information about the context of the work or its meaning, for either the people in Iraq or viewers in Berlin.

Sawsan Darwaza provides a fascinating series of interviews with Iraqi emigré artists who mediate between Arab and Western culture, such as designer Hana Sadek, filmmaker Saad Salman, poet Shawki Abdul Amir and theatre producer Jawad Al-Assadi.

Then there is Koutaliba Al-Janabi's documentary portrait of Nahida Rammah, an icon of Arab cinema during the 1950s and 1970s, who in many of the parts she played challenged the constraints on women in Iraqi society. Now living in London, she discusses her perception of the situation in her home country, and her part in an extraterritorial cultural life.



Right: Hana Al-Bayaty, *On Democracy in Iraq*, 2003, documentary, 52min

This documentary, and others by a younger generation of exiled Iraqis who returned, such as Baz Shamoun and Maysoun Pachachi, are all geared to a Western public. They try to explain the situation in Iraq to an audience with different cultural expectations.

The video installation *Oriental Square* (2005), by the Swiss-trained Iraqi filmmaker known as Samir, makes the point. Different footage on four screens – from *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), the Pathé newsreel *Ageless Iraq* (1954), TV reports about the war from 2003, and scenes from a middle-class Iraqi family – shows how life there can be very different from how it has been portrayed, and how it might still be seen, here.

Some of the photographs in the show, brought together by the Arab Image Foundation, also show how modern the country once appeared.

The exhibition misses the opportunity to relate what moves Iraqi artists today. It documents the online diary *Daftar* (2004-05), written by Nedim Kufi from the Netherlands, yet fails to translate it, so viewers who do not read Arabic are left to admire the beauty of the script. And what are we to make of the three TV sets, atop tables standing on oriental rugs, playing extracts – untranslated, unexplained and unauthored – from Iraqi channels? Is this a profound comment about the availability of information and its bias or merely a curatorial attempt at atmospheric setting?

This exhibition would have benefited from some serious research in Iraq and more effort in communicating the information gathered.