

Frieze

Reviews /

Untitled (12th Istanbul Biennial)



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Raymond Pettibon, *Selection of works on paper, 2011*, Installation view as part of 'Untitled (Death by Gun)'

The curators of this year's Istanbul Biennial, Jens Hoffmann and Adriano Pedrosa, have deflated the overblown biennial format, tossed out locality as a topic of debate and funnelled an entire biennial – comprising five group shows and 55 solo exhibitions – into two waterside warehouses. Sidelining what they call 'nostalgic or romantic' views of the city as a crossroads between East and West (a tendency of earlier editions), they have declared allegiance to 'aesthetic concerns': put that art back where it belongs.

Their title, 'Untitled (12th Istanbul Biennial)', plays on the titles of the Cuban-American artist Félix González-Torres and is echoed in those of the individual group shows, each of which adapts the name of one of his works. This pairing – a neutral signifier plus a parenthetical nod to a field of meaning – crisply announces that meaning is mutable, and that the biennial's business commences from there. Works by González-Torres himself are absent but for a single wall text in each group show that describes each piece; Hoffmann and Pedrosa suggest that his symbolic role should be thought of no differently than more typical uses of literature, music or political events as curatorial inspiration.

Just how little these group exhibitions depart from their allegedly flexible premises is the biennial's major disappointment. Each grouping strikes a single note over and over again, swelling into a sort of dogmatic march where guns are bad toys for bad boys, in 'Untitled (Death by Gun)'; homosexuality is about men having sex with men, in 'Untitled (Ross)'; and more than a dozen art works feature the written page as a means to address the historical record, in 'Untitled (History)'. Still, the group shows are nuanced by the solo exhibitions that cluster around them in a warren of free-standing white cubes designed by the Tokyo-based architect Ryue Nishizawa. These demonstrate a higher sensitivity to the intersecting politics of geography, gender and media.

A series of revelatory rooms featuring the work of women artists from the 1920s to the '70s is the biennial's major strength. Peruvian Teresa Burga's cataloguing of her body's form and functions, Elizabeth Catlett's mid-century wood-cuts of African-American sharecroppers, and Turkish sculptor Füsün Onur's canvases and small plaster works, lay the formal ground for a biennial that seeks to counter the bombast of recent mega-exhibitions – not least Hou Hanru's 2007 Istanbul Biennial – with a quieter programme of photography, works on paper and textiles. (There are almost no videos or large installations, and hardly a hint of the Internet or events of the last decade; next door to the biennial venues, Istanbul Modern's flashy 'Dream and Reality: Modern and Contemporary Women Artists from Turkey' is a study in contrasts.) This focus also carries the historical weight of life under authoritarian regimes, a significant issue in Turkey where, over the last decade, efforts to recover the country's forgotten 20th-century artists have multiplied. Geta Brătescu's 'Vestigii' (Vestiges, 1978), patches of layered fabric scraps hovering between abstraction and figuration, came out of her experiences working in rural Communist Romania. Yıldız Moran Arun's black and white photographs of 1950s Anatolia – villagers, camels, a horse-drawn cart parading film posters through a village – provide little-seen images of Cold War-era Turkey, where a booming film industry played a major role in international relations.

'Untitled (Death by Gun)', in which the few women artists included produce domesticated testimonies to violence largely perpetrated by men, makes for a surprising shift from the deft selections and thoughtful gender politics of many of the solo shows. Rózsa Polgár and Ella Littwitz present a blanket and a sheet riddled with bullet holes, respectively; Jazmín López films violent child's play. Iconic photojournalism (Mathew Brady's American Civil War images, Eddie Adams' 1968 photo of the street execution of a Viet Cong prisoner, Weegee's New York homicides) sits uneasily alongside Raymond Pettibon's drawings, Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) and Mat Collishaw's emblematic *Bullet Hole* (1988). The fact that this is one of the only rooms in which American and British artists dominate already signals the difficulty of treating 'gun violence' as an invariable concept in contexts with wildly different political and legislative histories. In this sense, 'Untitled (Death by Gun)' hews close to the curatorial strategy used by Hoffmann in his trilogy of illustrative exhibitions about canonical American novels at the CCA Wattis in San Francisco (2008–11). Here, a range of art works are forced to conform to a narrative pattern where 'death by gun' aborts the action, but we are denied anything further, including responsibility.

'Untitled (Abstraction)' pushes a programme of injecting Modernist abstraction with life. In a winning grouping, a series of photographs taken from the interior of a glass box with a black line around its centre, 'Drawing with the Camera – Circle in the Square' (1970), by the little-known Hungarian conceptualist Dóra Maurer, is matched with Edward Krasinski's signature line of bluetape (1981); Alexander Gutke's *Singularity* (2010), a 16mm film spooled between the corners of the space, frames the ensemble. Grids of fruit, hair, faces and ants are the less felicitous results of a literalizing impulse that unites all of the five group exhibitions. (Though this emphasis on clarity also produces wonderfully lucid exhibition texts.) The written page is redacted, shredded, photographed, stamped and rolled into pearls in 'Untitled (History)', strangely blind to the alternative ways that history is written today (from WikiLeaks to Twitter), or to the potential of an exhibition to interrogate specifically visual (rather than textual) strategies of chronicling events. In 'Untitled (Passport)', maps are rotated, voided, cut up, redrawn and woven into rugs, often by Palestinians. But American artists – including Tom Burr, Collier Schorr and Colter Jacobsen – get the lease on AIDS and gay sex, with a strong representation in 'Untitled (Ross)', where a promising interpretation of González-Torres's 1991 candy pour (a portrait of his late partner Ross Laycock) gets lost in a slew of beds and bodies. From this room, Kutluğ Ataman's *jarse* (Jersey, 2011) – an altered military health report that catalogues his long-standing interest in men – was a major preoccupation for the Turkish media, building on the momentum of the coach of Turkish football team Trabzonspor's recent denunciation of Ataman's 2004 work *Küba* as 'terrorist propaganda'. The mainstream newspaper *Hürriyet* listed *jarse* as a 'must-see', alongside an advisory for local school teachers to sign up for a biennial educators' conference. Turkey has been relatively at ease with alternative sexualities for some time,

and it's disappointing to see an opportunity missed to push public discussion into more complicated territory.

In the solo shows, photography abets a number of projects that claim happy participation in the cult of bygone a look. Simryn Gill's entropic photographs of abandoned housing near Kuala Lumpur; Akram Zaatari's recovered Beirut studio portraits; and Jonathas de Andrade's and Marwa Arsanios's snapshot-based investigations of tropical Modernism continue a genre that romanticizes histories of Modernism 'at the margins'. Often these say more about the anxieties of current generations – distant enough to appreciate enduring relics, fraught by their impending disappearance – than the ultimate aim of all this preservation. Another strain of work melds craft, humour and stark political messages. Pieces by the Ardmore Ceramic Art Studio, a South African collective, are partially produced by all of its members, carrying the marks of many hands' work in the service of a community: their narrative texts and bright animated figures are geared towards HIV/AIDS awareness (and is one of the only examples in the biennial of social practice).

Hoffmann and Pedrosa have deliberately put a full-stop after the last half-decade of the Istanbul Biennial's history. (The only accompanying event was a conference in November 2010 that convened former curators, resulting in the publication *Remembering Istanbul*.) Following Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun's 2005 edition, 'Istanbul', recent iterations have gradually seeped from the city's historical core into its old apartment buildings, abandoned factories and busy commercial districts, tracing a partial history of Istanbul's modernization along the way. Although Hoffmann and Pedrosa have adopted the museum's guise and discarded the habitual euphemistic 'engagement' with the city itself, they haven't pressured the biennial format beyond recognition. Rather, they have made use of its sheer volume and international pull to enact some tried and true agendas, recovering unknowns and diagnosing shared impulses. Unlike many former curators, they have the luxury of an established international viewership and a local audience educated at the biennial itself – last week, for the first time, I overheard it called 'mainstream'.

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[English](#)