



ART

THE HANDRAIL: CHOREOGRAPHY OF THE ABSENT HUMAN BODY

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Nika Neelova brings my attention to the handrail on a staircase. She talks, mesmerizingly, about its sinuousness, and its ability to choreograph fluid, familiar, and invulnerable movements all around it. Never moving but always guiding, it has the ability to connect through touch and lead from one place to another. For Neelova, this relationship between skin and wood mimics a direct connection between a person and a building, and signals a continuity that runs through the human body, architecture and space. More seductive is the idea that the old wooden bannisters, which she repurposes in her practice, were crafted over a hundred years ago by human hands, and spent the next century interacting with other hands. There is something intensely faithful and intimate about this private relationship. Neelova believes that through this continuous exposure and contact with human skin these handrails preserve the memory of human bodies and with it the identities of these house. She calls them 'portraits' of different houses.

I met Neelova at Green Art Gallery to talk about her work and place it within the context of the exhibition *The Theatre of the Absurd* (September 13 - November 21, 2017), a group show of five women artists who explore the collision of human existence and the built world, manifesting itself in the relationship between art and architecture.

For Neelova, this means looking into what she calls a post-human world and seeing how objects function in a non-anthropocentric setup, one that isn't based on human-approved functionalities (reflective of the concept of Object Oriented Ontology—of which we didn't speak). She goes on to add that it explores how "*objects are not ontologically exhausted by their relationships to humans, and our views of functionalities of things could be called into question.*" She is aware of the irony in the concept: these objects exist because of the humans that built them, and to fulfil and facilitate human needs. The dialogue, however, in line with OOO, is of a more metaphysical nature.

The *Lemniscate* series consist of various sculptures made from wooden bannisters reclaimed from old English houses awaiting demolition, and then repurposed and fitted together so that they form an infinite loop. A lemniscate, in mathematics, is a curved line or plane with a distinct 8-shape, consisting of two loops that meet at a central point. While the sculpture doesn't necessarily adhere strictly to this form, the concept of the infinite loop remains the same.

It is hard to remove the human relationship from this form, and I imagine hands clutching and grazing on it endlessly, wearing away the polish at certain points. I bring this up with Neelova who calls it the choreography of the absent human body. The absence of the body in itself makes a powerful image, drawing upon both the presence and absence of existence, both infinitely tied together. This is the underlying thread in all the works in the room, save for one painting.

As Yasmin Atassi (Director, Green Art Gallery) leads me on a tour of the exhibition she explains that she's been preoccupied for a while with observing and exploring how contemporary artists are responding to the themes around architecture, so this is not unfamiliar territory to the gallery. Within the gallery's programme, Atassi shows the work of artist Seher Shah who has been looking at concepts of architecture, landscape and space and the experiential

and hypothetical aspects that ascribe meaning in a human world. Her work ranges from drawings to sculpture, sometimes brutalist, almost always bereft of the body.

What is interesting is how the works of the five artists in the show, none of which have either worked together or with the gallery before, come together in a cohesive dialogue—one that spreads from Bombay to Sao Paulo, all the while retaining a strange relevance to its host location: Dubai. Atassi points out that it is a complete coincidence that all the artists in *The Theatre of the Absurd* are female and in their 30s, yet, a strong female artist representation seems characteristic to her programming, somehow avoiding becoming token. One of the gallery's shows earlier this year, *Modernist Women of Egypt*, was based on the premise of "Egypt's unique engagement in the early 20th century with issues of nationalism, womanhood, activism, traditions and multiculturalism..."

It is quite clear that while the audience for art galleries in Dubai is growing exponentially, there is still much work to be done when bringing in conceptual and/or critical dialogue within the white cube. Nika and I discussed themes of hyper-urbanity, of Dubai's architecture, of changing landscapes, and what it means to identify with cityscapes that are constantly evolving: faster in Dubai and slightly more slowly, but steadily in London, her *dig-site*. And the sense of memory and loss attached to this instantly reminded me of another exhibition which was installed in the same gallery, early last year. Curated by Dubai-based artist Lantian Xie, *1497* explored various artists' responses to space and land as home, and the idea of belonging/unbelonging. While *The Theatre of the Absurd* doesn't necessarily deal with the same issues, it emerges as a continuity on the same plane.

The work that anchors *The Theatre of the Absurd*, and perhaps this chain of thought, is *Fold* by Hemali Bhuta. The sculpture of a seemingly decaying, folded, soft-form (a blanket, insulation material for a roof?), now hardened with glue or grit, is placed on the floor and is in sharp contrast with the clean precision of the other works installed around it. In its abjection though, it is completely complementary. While the other works retain archival value as storytellers, this sculpture is made of materials that will continue to disintegrate. The exhibition text describes this particular series of sculptures as "fossils of bygone eras, sometimes embracing their spaces, and other times destabilizing them. Through the tension between the works and the spaces they inhabit, viewers experience

a state of 'in-between-ness.'"

Its existence allows for an exchange that bounces back and forth between transience and transcendence, material and immaterial, and finally, the real and the deceptive. Its tangibility, then, allows 'decay' to be accepted as a legitimate partner in storytelling of what it means to respond to a lived experience in a constructed reality – summing up my strongest takeaway from the exhibition.

In an odd and perhaps unexpected way, the dialogue reminds me of a presentation that the Dutch Architect Rem Koolhaas made when he came to Abu Dhabi in 2014 to talk about his concept for the 14th International Architecture Exhibition, of which he was the Director. Titled 'Fundamentals', the exhibition looked at histories and tried to "reconstruct how architecture finds itself in its current situation, and speculates on its future."^[1] He made us take a step back and instead focus on the importance of the essentials - the door, window, floor and staircase, for example - and how it was their unique characteristics that gave a building its identity. In a way, the artists in *The Theatre of the Absurd* return to the fundamentals to tell their story.

Koolhaas, who has spoken extensively about the new and the old, and the juxtaposition of the universal and the local, once gave an interview to Wired Magazine in 1996 about the role of architecture in cities, saying this:

Architecture has been defined in terms of one activity, and that activity is adding to the world. A few years ago I realized the profession was as if lobotomized - it was stuck conceiving of itself only in terms of adding things and not in terms of taking away or erasing things. The same intelligence for adding ought to also deal with its debris. It's a very depressing phenomenon that we can deal with decaying conditions in the city only by inventing weak attempts to restore them or to declare them historical. It would be much more powerful and creative to use other tactics, such as taking away something and then building something entirely new.^[2]

^[1] OMA, Venice Biennale 2014: Fundamentals - oma.eu/projects/venice-biennale-2014-fundamentals

^[2] *From Bauhaus to Koolhaas*, by Katrina Heron. Wired Magazine, 1996 - <https://www.wired.com/1996/07/koolhaas/>

Images courtesy of Artist and Green Art Gallery Dubai.

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