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Theatre of the Absurd



Ana Mazzei, *Garden*, 2017, Wood, painted wood, iron, felt, tempera on linen, acrylic on linen, 350 x 450 x 180 cm. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery

Is it a painting masquerading as a sculpture or the other way around? Is it an elaborate stage setting for players unknown to their audience? Is it none or all of the above? Like any successful piece of contemporary art, *The Garden* by Ana Mazzei, a large installation in Green Art Gallery's exhibition *Theatre of The Absurd*, is not

supposed to be prescriptive in terms of interpretation. Instead, Mazzei is interested in playing with expectations and in this case, forcing the viewer to reflect upon their own physical presence in relation to the work.

Upon the painted backdrop of a sumptuous dark teal, 18 objects (all part of the same work) have been placed. They include oddly shaped angled wooden plinths rising up to nowhere, pieces of felt and iron, and paintings on linen. Pops of colour appear seemingly at random: a yellow disc, a blue disc, a red semi-circle and rainbow painted wooden tracks. The entire structure is more than three metres tall and four metres wide and invites perusal from different viewpoints engaging the audience in an almost theatrical way – hence the exhibition’s title, which takes its cue from this work.

The dynamic between audience and environment is central to Mazzei’s practice and as spatial configuration informs her work, it has an interest in architectural functions. This is the central pillar upon which the entire exhibition pivots. *Theatre of The Absurd* is the result of several months of rumination from the gallery’s owner Yasmin Atassi about how artists use architecture as a launching point for wider subjects as well as the way they use architectural language to decipher space, objects and mass.

What is particularly enchanting here is that none of the artists in this show are on the Dubai gallery's roster. Mazzei is from Sao Paulo – and made a similarly striking commission for the recent 32nd biennial in the city last year with [Espetáculo \[Spectacle\] \(2016\)](#). The other four artists are spread across the globe, with none having appeared in exhibition together before. This is the treat of a group show. Done well, a group show brings in the new perspective of a curatorial standpoint and can start dialogues between artistic practices that hadn’t been seen before and as such, can highlight nuances previously hidden.



(L-R), Untitled (Order of materials 7), 2017, Mixed media on paper, 38 x 30 cm. Untitled (Order of materials 8), 2017, Mixed media on paper, 38 x 30 cm. Courtesy of artist and Green Art Gallery

For instance here, Mazzei’s work spars nicely with that of Elena Alonso, an artist from Madrid whose drawing practice shows similar precision. Her careful lines and pinpoint accuracy are alluring and even more rewarding are the subtle but deliberate inconsistencies in her purportedly symmetrical drawings. As with Mazzei’s work, the shapes are indefinable and therefore straddle the tension between uncertainly of function and our relationship to our surroundings.

Add into this dialogue the painting of Farah Atassi who has dissected a human frame into sharply geometric and architectural forms. Through heavily applied and somewhat messy layers, she has made the human body part of architecture and so opened enquiries into materiality itself.

This is also key to understanding the sculpture placed on the floor. It is sad, discarded and certainly indefinable without explanation. What is it? I say to myself, looking down at the folded and decaying piece of scorched and blackened material. In contrast to the pristine presentations from the other artists, Hemali Bhuta is interested in decay as well as perception. She has presented a folded piece of flooring reclaimed from a traditional Indian home, which the gallery describes as a “fossil from a bygone era” in their press release. The tension between what was once a robust, seemingly indestructible material as well as a delineator of space and the cast-away that it has now become is a grounding experience that opens the architectural debate much further.



Hemali Bhuta, *Fold*, 2016, latex rubber and silicon rubber, 73 x 40 X 7 inches. Courtesy of artist and Green Art Gallery.

The dialogue between this and Nika Neelova’s sculpture is strong. Neelova has used mahogany banisters from the staircase of an old English mansion and although kept its original form, she has joined on end to the other in a kind of warped infinity symbol and yet another indefinable object. The aesthetic matches Mazzei and Alonso in terms of interest in form and the concept is similar to Bhuta’s in that she is interested in giving a second life to a discarded object. The banister too is an object of stability and offers the function of balance, yet, presented in this form, the viewer feels decidedly unbalanced.

That in a nutshell, is the victory of this exhibition. A chasm has been opened up in the relationship between man and the spaces within which we operate. What is measurable and certain is suddenly teetering on a tightrope.

- *Theatre of the Absurd. September 13 - October 28, 2017. [Green Art Gallery, Dubai.](#)*



Nika Neelova, Lemniscate V (installation view), 2017, two flights of stairs and hardwood handrails, 320 x 100 x 50 cm. Courtesy of Artist and Green Art Gallery Dubai