

Art Review

A Prologue To The Past And Present State Of Things, Delfina Foundation



A Prologue To The Past And Present State Of Things: Delfina Foundation - Re-Staging Histories

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A Prologue to the Past and Present State of Things brings together thirteen international artists using performance as a medium through which to explore the complex histories of the Arab region and their global ramifications. Spanning three decades (1984-2005) the works share a conviction that performance opens up possibilities for negotiation with historical narratives, a chance to actively engage past events.

Curator Aaron Cezar suggests in his catalogue essay that each work can be understood as a 'preface, consequence, or echo of major developments during this period'. The relationship between the works and the events to which they relate is thus conceived as dynamic, the exhibition functioning as a conversational space in which orthodoxies can be met and challenged. The works shown use performance to re-stage history, creating a space for alternative narratives to be posited.

The earliest works exhibited are by Hassan Sharif and Mona Hatoum. Their works are united by a visceral quality as well as by the artists overlapping histories; both studied at Byam Shaw in London, Hartoum just before Sharif. Represented here through documentation, Sharif's *Hair and Milk Bottle* (1984) reflects the multiple ways in which the theme of re-staging history manifests in the show, as this now historic performance is reprised through the display of its documentary traces. Hartoum's *Variation on Discord and Divisions*, also of 1984, sees the artist produce raw kidneys from beneath her heavy black garments and serve them to an assembled audience. Hartoum is both anonymous and exposed in this performance, her blood and internal organs seemingly made visible while her face is obscured. Meditating on the body as a site of violence and transgression, these two artists set the stage for the works that follow chronologically.



Doa Aly, *Tress of Hair* (2008), image courtesy of the artist ©, Artlyst 2015 all rights reserved

Much of the more recent work is more focused on particular events, and the defining conflicts of this period are thoughtfully explored. Wael Shawky walks through post-war rubble in *Bent Jbeil* (2008) reciting verses of the Quran which refer to the relationship between Jews, Christians and Muslims, reflecting on the reams of history which fed into the 2006 Israeli attack on Lebanon. Emily Jacir's *Crossing Surda* (2002) reflects on containment and the violence of borders with respect to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Works addressing the Iraq War and the War on Terror find artists speaking to and of the Arab world from the outside, a reminder, should it be needed, of the external forces that so brutally marked this period of Arab history.

Coco Fusco's *Operation Atropos* (2006) examines a military interrogation and Prisoner of War resistance training course. Based on training given to elite US military forces, the film bears testament to the speed with which participants in role-play situations can assimilate to their assigned parts and offers an implicit reflection on Abu Graib and the dehumanising effects social and political structures can have. Lin Yilin's *A Kind of Machine Called "Liberation"* (2003) turns attention from the conflict's controversial outposts to its center, recalling the destruction of Iraq's cities that resulted from the invasion. By locating his performance, which evokes a city in the act of crumbling, in an art gallery and filming it before an audience, Yilin also evokes the global spectators of the war, passively looking on as destruction gathers apace. Are we, as visitors to this exhibition, implicated too?



Coco Fusco, Operation Atropos (2006), image courtesy of the artist ©, Artlyst 2015 all rights reserved

A Prologue to the Past and Present State of Things represents just the start of an on-going project, Staging Histories, which will develop with the help of two curatorial fellows, artist/curators Ala' Younis and Barrak Alzaid, who will take up the lines of enquiry raised here.. Described as a 'constellation of starting points' by Cezar, the exhibition also connects to 'Echoes & Reverberations' at the Hayward Gallery, with the latter focusing on sound as a way of performing history. The first three new commissions from Staging Histories have been produced for the Hayward Gallery exhibition, and all will be complemented by live performances which will take place on 18th July at the Southbank.

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