

FEATURED REVIEW



Michel Blazy:
Pull Over Time,
2015, sweat, shoes,
socks, pants,
camera, printer and
laptop, dimensions
variable; in the
Lyon Biennale.

LYON BIENNALE

Lyon — various venues

The title of the 13th Lyon Biennale is curiously antiquated: “La Vie Moderne.” Like previous iterations of the recurring exhibition, this one was conceived by a guest curator in response to a prompt by the event’s cofounder and artistic director, Thierry Raspail. This time around, Ralph Rugoff, the American-born director of London’s Hayward Gallery, was selected to organize an exhibition in response to the word “modern.” The show grapples with the term throughout, both positing it as a synonym for the contemporary era and distinguishing it as a historical period, with its own set of concerns, that haunts life today.

In 2007, Rugoff curated an exhibition at the Hayward called “The Painting of Modern Life,” which considered the influence of photography on painting since 1960. For Lyon, he broadens his purview, teasing out numerous associations from Raspail’s assignment. According to Rugoff’s catalogue

essay, “La Vie Moderne” is “aimed at undermining our superficial concepts of the ‘contemporary,’” a periodic categorization he describes as “a kind of deracinated perpetual present, an endless horizon of the now.” The actual texture of life today, he says, stands in marked contrast to the postmodern era’s declaration of a networked global culture, free of the old internecine conflicts. Rugoff asks viewers to “consider such ‘contemporary’ developments as the global rise of religious crusades, the alleged return of the Cold War, and the accelerating economic disparity between the world’s richest and poorest.”

Certainly in France, questions of identity, assimilation and exclusion feel urgent. In addition to dealing with the global Syrian refugee crisis, the country is still reeling from last January’s massacre targeting staffers of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* by Islamist extremists, while also

ON VIEW
THROUGH
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View of ground floor exhibition at La Sucrière, showing installations by Céleste Boursier-Mougenot (foreground), Haegue Yang (ceiling), and Liu Wei (background), at the Lyon Biennale.

experiencing a rash of anti-Semitism. The most recent high-profile attack occurred just two days before the Lyon Biennale's professional preview, when Anish Kapoor's sculpture *Dirty Corner*, installed in the Palace of Versailles garden, was covered with lewd anti-Semitic graffiti. (The Indian-born British artist has both Hindu and Jewish roots.)

Rugoff's show attempts a balance between local specificity and internationality. The Biennale covers a lot of ground—economic inequality, consumer waste, struggles over immigration, and changes wrought by technology—in a relatively succinct exhibition. Works by some 60 artists from 28 countries occupy two large venues, La Sucrière and the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon (MAC Lyon). Seventeen artists are French or based in France. Several others, such as Marina Pinsky, Marinella Senatore and Ahmet Öğüt, produced thoughtful pieces examining episodes in Lyon's history. The show branches out with three "simultaneous exhibitions" and two "platforms" scattered around the region, including a Kapoor installation (unconnected to the vandalized Versailles project) at a Dominican monastery designed by Le Corbusier.

Rugoff's curatorial approach is artist-centric, focusing on individual practices rather than making grand statements about aesthetic trends. The MAC Lyon exhibition architecture of small rooms, mostly devoted to solo presentations, led to a more fulfilling viewing experience than the cavernous former sugar factory La Sucrière. The show's weakest visual component was La Sucrière's wide central ground-floor corridor. There, major installations by Liu Wei, Haegue Yang, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot and Andreas Lolis were placed one after another, an anti-spectacular strategy that made them appear like just so much stuff in the world. While some works played on the concept of detritus, others would have benefited from more intimate viewing conditions, such as Greek artist Lolis's impeccable rendering in marble of a precarious cardboard housing structure.

Certain works of post-Internet art evoked the same irksome, overwhelming sentiment. On La Sucrière's ground floor, for instance, Simon Denny showed his archive, including media reports and real-life items, of property seized from former online mogul Kim Schmitz (*The Personal Effects of Kim Dotcom*, 2014). Jon Rafman's commissioned *Glass Troll Cave*, an immersive booth on the second floor, featured three videos with a loosely dystopian narrative populated with images from seedy Internet subcultures, including that surrounding anime porn. With plenty of adventurous new media art to choose from these days, the inclusion of such works by familiar names missed the mark.

Technological adaptations of nature proved more promising terrain in both venues. On La Sucrière's top-floor terrace, Paris-based Michel Blazy's installations of plants growing out of old sneakers, computers and printers were a crowd favorite. The works' placement outside encouraged viewers to gaze across the Saône river or glimpse the rapidly gentrifying Confluence district surrounding the



museum, inviting speculation about Lyon's history and future. On the same floor, Moroccan-born Hicham Berrada encased night-blooming jasmine in vitrines under artificial twilight. The lighting reversed the flower's cycle so that the petals opened during the daytime, perfuming the space with a powerful scent.

The MAC Lyon exhibition began with foreboding works on a similar theme: Lucie Stahl's resin-sealed flatbed scans of filthy, corpse-like hands holding pristine Coke cans and wilting plants. The compositions resemble still lifes from a postapocalyptic era. Next to Stahl's work, Miguel Angel Ríos's five-minute video *Ghost of Modernity Lixiviado* (2012) showed a glass cube floating over a Oaxacan landscape littered by garbage and rudimentary shacks. In formal terms alone, French native Cyprien Gaillard's impressionistic 3-D video *Nightlife* (2015) was a MAC Lyon standout. Psychedelic shots of violently thrashing plants, presumably digitally manipulated, help convey the work's themes of foreignness and political disquiet.

Rugoff's exhibition is admirable for its focus on colonialism and racial inequality—an uneasy topic in France, where the values of secularism and national identity hold stronger appeal than dialogue about difference. Certain straightforward works, like photographs by George Osodi of Nigeria and Daniel Naudé of South Africa depicting changing landscapes and societies, resonate in this context. So, too, does Kader Attia's 18-channel video *Reason's Oxymoron* (2015), a series of interviews with Western and non-Western subjects about psychiatric illnesses. Striking what seems like a lighter note, Algerian-born Mohamed Bourouissa's framed photographs of shoplifters at a Brooklyn deli (originally displayed in the bodega as a criminal deterrent) deftly illustrate the intersection of race and poverty in the United States.

Works that address the representation of "exotic" women's bodies are more uneven. London-based Kenyan native Michael Armitage paints black women in a style indebted to Gauguin's Tahiti work. Berlin-based Nina Beier shows an installation in which *coco-fesses*—coconuts

in the shape of buttocks, native to the Seychelles, a former French and British colony—are plunged into mounds of dirt. Argentinian choreographer Cecilia Bengolea, who lives and works in Paris, collaborated with artist Jeremy Deller on a video called *Rhythmypoetry*. The work features three women of color from the Lyon suburb Vaulx-en-Velin performing provocative dancehall moves among lush vegetation on the property of former Lyon cultural counselor Denis Trouxe. An elderly white man, Trouxe narrates the video in the form of an “ironic” rap that he cowrote with Bengolea. On the surface, Trouxe’s words pay homage to the art of the streets. Yet calling the women “les sorcières qui résistent” (witches who resist) and proclaiming “Vivent les fesses qui parlent!” (Long live talking asses!) seems dangerously close to recapitulating the “modern” era’s dangerous stereotypes of the “noble savage.” Bengolea and Deller’s video ends ambivalently: as Trouxe swims in his pool, the three women surround him, lowering a cover over the water. If the Lyon Biennale has one definitive statement about the “modern” period, it may be that its simmering tensions are not so easy to put a lid on, without the pot boiling over.

—Wendy Vogel

WESTON-SUPER-MARE, U.K.

BANKSY Dismaland

Dismaland was notorious street artist Banksy’s latest and biggest project. Set in a run-down seaside lido in Weston-super-Mare, on England’s west coast—near Bristol, where the artist, who maintains his anonymity, is believed to come from—the mock theme park featured work by roughly 50 international artists, including Damien Hirst, Jenny Holzer and David Shrigley. Banksy himself contributed 10 pieces. Shrouded in secrecy, Dismaland sparked unbelievable frenzy across Europe within hours of its announcement on the front page of the local newspaper *Weston, Worle & Somerset Mercury*. A perfect media sensation.

The artist has quipped that Dismaland was “an art show for the 99 percent, who’d rather be at Alton Towers,” England’s most beloved amusement park. Visitors were met at the entrance to the former resort, called Tropicana and closed since 2000, by disgruntled staffers who made every effort to disprove stereotypes about English politeness. They snapped at the lucky few who were able to get tickets (the huge demand kept crashing Dismaland’s website) to stop smiling and herded them through a cardboard security-screening room, made by artist Bill Barminski, before allowing them to enter.

Once inside, I found myself wandering around—in the rain, naturally—with a crowd of other visitors happily posing as terrorists through a painted board with face holes, or queuing patiently for the park’s many other dysfunctional attractions and quixotic games. Shrigley, for example, had

a stall where you tried to knock over an anvil by hurling Ping-Pong balls at it. More stands modeled on game booths were located next to tents run by political activists, who sold tools for breaking into bus-stop advertisement cases in order to put up one’s own signs. At a neighboring stand, children were encouraged to take out a pocket-money loan with an interest rate of 5,000 percent. Elsewhere, children and adults alike played with overcrowded model boats full of refugee figurines in muddy ponds near a cemetery of rusty merry-go-round animals. And, of course, graffiti in Banksy’s characteristic style could be found on walls throughout.

At the center of this park combining political activism, social critique and art installation, plus coffee shops and bars, were two main attractions: a ruinous Disney-esque castle, drained of its Technicolor, and three large galleries containing the bulk of the other artists’ works.

Upon entering the crumbling castle, visitors encountered a mad mob of paparazzi mannequins drowning the interior with camera flashes. No happily ever after for Cinderella: she was dead. The blonde beauty hung lifeless from her pumpkin carriage—a morbid reminder of Princess Diana’s fatal car crash. To complete the experience, visitors were offered a souvenir picture of themselves in front of the carnage on the way out.

While this dark, depressed version of a fun fair provided much to laugh at and to think about (even if the political messages were pretty heavy-handed), the gallery

View of Banksy’s theme park Dismaland, 2015, in Weston-super-Mare, U.K.

