

california

Conrad Atkinson

Intersection for the Arts

446 Valencia St.

San Francisco, 94103

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Remember Conrad Atkinson? He's the guy who once wrote that art critics dipped their pens in pig's urine. Atkinson has been doing politically oriented conceptual art for much longer than others who are more well-known, Hans Haacke and Adrian Piper, for example. But his work finds its real redemption in its unique deployment of a bitter-sweet (and quite humorous)

satire—Petronian in its glibly wry spirit even as it is delivered with the most deadpan of straight faces. Despite this work's forthright display of social and political indignation, it is oddly humble in its own way, but the punches that it pulls only put us off guard long enough so that we can truly feel the critical sting of what he throws.

Atkinson's installation is ominously titled "Surplus: Cocktail Party," also the title of the exhibition, and it consisted of two groups of work: a trio of found-object tableaux and a thematically linked series of seven modestly scaled iris prints. Both groupings were iconographically related via the deployment of a stylized image of a buzzing mosquito rendered as embroidery on cloth, or on the prints as a rubber-stamp imprint.

It appeared in haunting clusters to remind us of the omni-present (albeit seemingly invisible) exsanguination that high capitalism metes out to all things public and private. The exhibition took its title from that of the largest of the found-object works, which featured a cluster of 14 thrift-store garments hung on a wire gate leaning against the wall. Appended to these garments are embroidered slogans such as "Aesthetics can be a pretty ugly business," conveying multiple associations in this quickly gentrifying neighborhood. At once an indictment of the sweatshop practices that undergird all levels of the fashion industry, and also of the economic cleansing that San Francisco is undergoing at the hands of Silicon Valley wealth, this work proposes itself as a kind of moralistic "writing on the wall" that reminds us of the human cost of these depredations, as well as the exponential rise of that cost as the new globalism consolidates its seemingly unchallengeable omnipresent power.

Mark Van Proyen is professor of art history, painting, and digital media at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Amir Zaki

Roberts & Tilton

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With this exhibition titled "Photographs From," Amir Zaki insinuates melodrama in the abandoned parking lots and grassy verges of business parks and shopping malls. Usually shot late at night and viewed from above, the evacuated cityscapes stretch out before the viewer. In some works small disturbances: the residue of rubber from a screeching tire or the barely visible form of a piece of discarded garbage, suggest that the action has already occurred, while in others, as light creeps through slits in windows and filters on to awaiting balconies, the staging is clearly anticipatory. Partly the result of long exposure, these details remain like held breaths, elements of pause between intent and action. Like Bertolt Brecht, Zaki re-examines urban politics through the strategies of drama. However, he explores his themes using the nuances of set rather than the hyperbole of character. Although figures are entirely absent from the photographs, narrative is implied by the precise grouping of images. Photographs are presented as diptychs and triptychs, the pauses between action are articulated by singular works that take on added iconographic importance. Rhythm and cadence are inferred and the viewer is encouraged to construct a tale around the bare bones of syntax.



Conrad Atkinson
Surplus: Cocktail Party (Installation detail), 2000.
 Mixed-media installation, custom embroidery, dimensions variable.
 Photo by Tom Ontiveros, courtesy of Intersection for the Arts.

reviews

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This elliptical work is elucidated perhaps most successfully in the piece *Untitled (Up_UNIV 01)*. An elegant tondo, it is the only work shot from below the horizon line looking up toward the infinite void of the night sky. The miniaturized eye of Zaki's ground-level lens distorts and makes heroic even the foliage closest to the camera while enlarging a distant university building and displacing the glow of the moon to a degree that approaches the Kantian notion of the terror of the sublime.

Such a romantic theme is certainly at odds with the strip malls

and commercial buildings Zaki has chosen to illustrate his metaphor. To further amplify the anxiety inherent in this discord, the mostly monochromatic photographs are punctuated with small moments of intense color. Surfaces are fractured by the intrusion of hot pink, cerulean blue, bright green, and diffused orange. After taking the photographs, Zaki scans them into a computer to refine his fictions. By manipulating the images digitally, Zaki is able to introduce color lost normally to the surrounding darkness. Particularly arresting, *Untitled (Down_DT 09)*, foregrounds a first-floor deck illuminated bright red by

the light cast on it through an adjacent window. In other works color is used to augment visual signifiers. For example, in *Untitled (Down_NOHO 15)*, a bright yellow/orange road marking intensifies the linguistic relationship of the white, curved, directional arrow next to it.

Zaki employs an easily translated code to title his work so that if one lives in Los Angeles it is relatively simple to figure out the sites used. However, the manipulations he performs places these environments outside the realm of the knowable. The things that appear to be revealed in Zaki's photographs are precisely those elements missing from the various locations. Although the two storage containers in *Untitled (Down_DT 24)* undoubtedly exist in the abandoned heart of Los Angeles, it is unlikely they would be discovered as quite so perfectly matched and aligned in their existential romance. Encountering the city at night is always otherworldly, forms defined by daylight become ambiguous and, devoid of people, volume is suggested by the amount of emptiness a given space can contain. Reminiscent of Gulliver's travels, false perspective, an altered viewpoint, an unseen horizon, and an array of mystifying signs foreclose understanding and propose the terrifying and the amazing among the generic.

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Vanitas: Meditations on Life and Death in Contemporary Art

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

2800 Grove Ave.

Richmond, 23221

804/340-1400

Accompanying the re-installation of the museum's contemporary art collection, "Vanitas" seeks to use the titular theme with its focus on the transient nature of human existence as a means to link a past tradition to present expression. Through installations and sculptural works by 14 well-known contemporary artists, the transformation of this tradition into contemporary art not only highlights continuity, but also



Amir Zaki
Untitled (Down_NOHO 15), 1999. Laser-direct type-C photograph.
30" x 3/4" x 19 1/2". Courtesy of Roberts & Tilton.