

Eyes on the prize

At the ICA, Foster finalists focus on photography, autobiography

By Sebastian Smee, Globe Staff | November 22, 2008



Rania Matar's "Three Nuns" captures a congregation in Lebanon. (Courtesy of Gallery Kayafas)

I'm guessing that the James and Audrey Foster Prize, the Institute of Contemporary Art's local version of Britain's notorious Turner Prize, sees itself as a little more grown-up and subtle and a little less sensation-craving than the British award, whose winners over the years have included a guy who switched lights on and off in an empty room (Martin Creed), another who specializes in dead animals suspended in formaldehyde (Damien Hirst), and a third who combined paint with elephant dung (Chris Ofili).

Good for it. I'm all for subtlety and maturity. But in giving up on the potential for a bit of excitement, the selection panel for this year's Foster Prize has produced a show that is, unfortunately, less mature than insipid.

Let's face it, art prizes are inherently silly. The genius of the Turner Prize in its heyday was that it accepted the absurdity of treating art like a dog race and made a bit of fun with it.

The Foster Prize, which aims to "recognize the accomplishments of Greater Boston's artists of exceptional promise," is a more earnest affair. The winner will be announced in January; of the four finalists, each allotted one room at the ICA, three make work that is both conceptual and autobiographical - call it conceptual-narcissism.

Only one of the three, Andrew Witkin, turns these unpromising ingredients into anything resonant. The fourth, Rania Matar, is represented by a handful of photographs from Lebanon. Matar's work is artful and engaged with something outside of herself, making it a welcome antidote to the rest of the show.

Matar was born in Lebanon and took these photographs on travels back to her homeland. Her images feature many women wearing black headwear, although not all of them are Muslim; many are Christian Maronite nuns.

As a collection of images, Matar's fairly small display argues for the human richness and complexity of Lebanese society even in a context of destruction (several images show battered buildings and rubble). But there are individual images that stand apart and have a genius all their own.

The best is a photograph taken this year in Beirut called "Three Nuns." It shows three Maronite nuns in black garb standing in front of a congregation praying with eyes closed. All face the same way, toward Matar's camera.

The nun on the left regards the camera sourly, with pursed lips and contemptuous eyes. The middle nun looks at the camera, but with an expression of calm equilibrium, while the nun on the right has caught some of the mood of the congregation: Her tilted head suggests dreamy, divinely inspired detachment.

The photograph is the result of what looks like astonishing serendipity, but Matar obviously had to put herself in an awkward position before serendipity could strike. The photograph is the best in the room. But I was also impressed by a series of nine small images, arranged in a grid, showing close-ups of household detritus amid rubble and ash - the aftermath of bombing.

The series is called "Lost Memories," but the individual works have simple descriptive titles such as "Rubber Gloves" and "Plates," after the identifiable remnants of domesticity they show. With these titles, writes curator Carole Anne Meehan, "Matar does not minimize enormous devastation, but reveals how the human trace persists." Quite so.

Catherine D'Ignazio, an artist and codirector of the experimental arts organization iKatun, is represented by various multimedia traces of a project she embarked on in 2007 called "It Takes 154,000 Breaths to Evacuate Boston." Apparently Boston has a 100-mile evacuation route, and Ignazio thought it would be fun to run it over the course of several months, while counting and recording the breaths she took doing so.

Her project, we are told, "was motivated by a desire to measure fear, and perhaps also by the urge to point out the absurdity of today's official strategies to manage disaster."

This puts it neatly. But though D'Ignazio has settled on various methods to draw our attention to this already completed action (including the amplified sound of breathing, an exit sign above the entrance, and tape on the floor tracing a chaotic web of trajectories), I found the whole thing blowzy and befuddling. Further confusing things, one piece, a looped video of someone pushing through emergency exit doors, is actually a separate work called "Exit Strategy."

The project may be a deliberate joke, poking fun at our susceptibility to panic and at the absurdity of the measures (why absurd?) politicians take to insure against catastrophe. But it's a laborious joke that becomes less amusing with each iteration.

Next comes Witkin, whose installation, "Untitled," is a strange and unsettling piece, full of pathos and a reluctance to commit that becomes more affecting the more time you spend with it.

Witkin belongs to a generation of artists dissatisfied with the distinction between art and life, which they consider as arbitrary and artificial as the distinction between culture and nature. His installation is a room filled with furnishings and objects that relate to his own life. Everything is arranged with obsessive neatness, whether it is stacked, filed, or arrayed on a table.

Of its many parts, I noted a table and desk, both assembled from light wood. The desk has photographs and other items on it, including a stack of cards and clippings of printed matter. Among the photographs are images of a knockout in a boxing ring, a homeless man asleep on a bench, and rowers hugging after crossing a finish line. There are stacks of things whose contents we can only guess at, including folders, portfolios, framed works of art.

Pinned to one wall is a list of dates alongside the first names of acquaintances whose birthdays fall on those days. There is an autobiographical prose poem about the artist's friendship with a sick person (it muses on the awkwardness that can arise from making art from life). And there are two old, threadbare towels hanging beside each other from hooks.

These towels are the last thing you see as you leave the room. Set against the installation's other items, which are all neat, rectilinear, and documentary by nature, they seem almost shockingly intimate, formless, and poetically connected to the enduring human body.

How to account for the melancholy behind this weird mix of sociability and absence? The motivations behind Witkin's work may be a little woolly, but the effect of his fastidious arrangement of personal effects is somehow devastating, as if the life outside this room were too anarchic, too confronting, too emotionally involving to understand. The best one can do is arrange these vestiges, filing and stacking them as if they were crucial evidence.

The last finalist is Joe Zane. Zane's installation of - again - arbitrary-looking items relating to his own life (several oil paintings, a light fixture, a neon sign, and plastic sculptures imitating crumpled paper) is intended as an exploration of self-portraiture.

Two of the paintings are virtually identical portraits of Zane, executed to order by a Chinese company called Royal Painting in Xiamen. One is placed next to a similar portrait, in which Zane's young, bespectacled face is obscured by a painted veil. The other is placed next to an almost indiscernible square of flickering light on the wall. Thus the portrait is "doubled," and each of the doubles has its own veiled or absent double.

Zane's idea is that things have many meanings, and no meaning has more value than any other. Witkin's perspective is similar. But whereas Witkin manages to extract something poetic from his tread-lightly, ruffle-no-feathers, judge-no-one hesitancy, Zane's approach feels almost like a PowerPoint presentation. It's too didactic.

"For me, what makes art special is that it can fill that space where language and other forms of communication fail," says Zane in his artist's statement.

On the contrary, I would say, when art is special it is not because it can mean anything at all (that would be a good definition of failed communication) but because it means, or expresses, something very specific. That something may remain elusive, defeating language. But when you see it you recognize it.

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