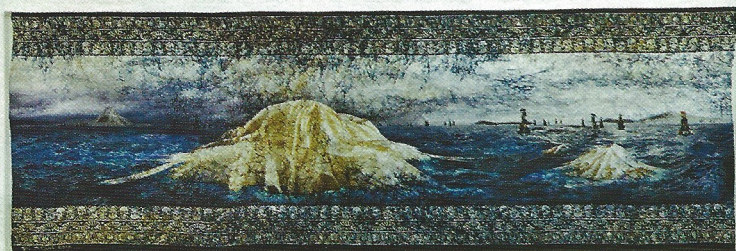


A SPECIAL ARROW WAS SHOT IN THE NECK...



As a legacy of colonialism and the various nationalist movements that ensued, modern understandings of “land” are inescapably bound with notions of territoriality, sovereignty and nationhood. The preponderance of culturalism in the last half-century only abetted this tendency to abstract the profane earth, such that any invocation of “land” today glosses over its brute materiality. The exhibition, “A Special Arrow Was Shot in the Neck . . .,” curated by Natasha Ginwala and Vivian Ziherl at the David Roberts Art Foundation, sought to redress this neglect. Against the geographical inscription of the Earth as a composite of bounded nation-states, land is reimagined as a vector, or “arrow,” cutting through such conceptual sedimentations, unraveling the ways through which its very materiality—its tremors, effusions and viscosities—resists attempts at mapping it.

Such vagaries are experienced in Camille Henrot’s video *Cynopolis* (2007–09). A briskly spliced montage of handheld footage shot by the artist during a sojourn in Egypt, the film skips between views of decrepit shantytowns, rubbish heaps, tourist hordes, ragpickers and, most strikingly, stray dogs foraging through the land. The dogs dart about the rubble like free radicals, carrying the inquisitive gaze of the wayward artist-voyager who also becomes a scavenger as she captures these vistas of ruin. Through Henrot’s guerilla lenses, one sees Egypt not as the eternal past—emblemized by the Saqqara step pyramid hovering in the horizon—but as a land in constant erosion.

Land turns fluvial in two paintings from Etel Adnan’s iconic untitled series of landscapes (2000–04). While posing deceptively as impressionistic sketches of Mount Tamalpais in California, the lush, generous swathes of paint that make up the depicted terrain evoke a fluidity that

suggests a dissolution of the terrestrial forms into an organic whole. The minimal palette reduces the paintings’ surfaces into seemingly discrete color fields; yet the brusque strokes, like a subtle unsettling of the ground, transform the lines where they meet into contact zones, where the forms interface and yoke. Land here exceeds geographical demarcation, diffusing even the horizon where the mountains and heavens meet.

This interplay between the telluric and the aquatic is heightened in Yee I-Lann’s *Empires of Privateers and Their Glorious Ventures* (2010), a digital print on fabric that portrays the oft-forgotten history of the Orang Besar (literally “Big Person,” referring to the noblemen) in the Malay Archipelago during the height of colonial trade. The scene that plays out on Yee’s horizontal scroll is a reversal of Adnan’s compositions: instead of the earth melting, it is the sea that congeals and musters the solidity of land. Its surging waves form a mountainous terrain, upon which stand several pyramids of stacked human figures. At the top are the Orang Besar, and beneath them are their seafaring henchmen. Too often written off in orthodox histories as mere “pirates,” Yee’s quasi-monumental tableau recasts these historically aberrant figures as “profiteers,” and part of a fully developed (albeit no less exploitative) local economy growing out of the global commercial network.

An intimate tactility seemed to be a recurring motif in several of the displayed works—a stark counterpoint to the land art exhibitions of the 1970s in which accumulations of earthly matter executed their geological revenge upon the civilized enclosures of the gallery. Herein lay the acuity of the show’s curatorial vision: not quite unleashed like a primitive force, the materiality of the earth continues to be tested by the human hand. Distilling this relationship was Selma and Sofiane Ouissi’s project *Laaroussa* (2011–13)—presented as photographs, scores and a video—in which the artists work with a community of female potters in Tunisia to formulate a choreographic language based on their clay-molding gestures. Here, far from being over-coded by the abstractions of cartography, the earth literally gives shape to a new haptic lexicon.

A further curiosity was the display featuring illustrations gleaned from the archives of colonial science, in which the silent tyrannies of overwriting the earth are indexed. A collection of comparative charts compressing the landforms and biodiversity of the world into a single picture, for instance, exposes the monocular logic of colonial optics. Land, thus described, was in turn, *de*-scribed by the exhibition’s sweeping “arrow.”

HO RUI AN

Opposite page

NADIM ABBAS

Holy Mt IV

2014

Tetra Brik cartons, dimensions variable.

Photo by Cassander Eeftinck Schattenkerk.

Courtesy Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam.

This page

YEE I-LANN

Empires of Privateers and Their Glorious Ventures

2010

Digital print with batik on silk,

132 x 400 cm.

Photo by Matthew Booth.

Courtesy the artist.