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Mending the Breach

With the title ‘Poetic Justice," the latest Istanbul Biennial signaled its interest in reconciling self-expression and politics. For the first time, the exhibition sites included the Byzantine splendor of the Hagia Sophia.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

At first glance, the title of the eighth Istanbul Biennial, "Poetic Justice," seemed to be one of those open-ended, important-sounding phrases that curators of international biennials like because they are malleable enough to fit almost any selection of works. A closer look at the show, presented this fall at various venues throughout that city, made it clear that the title was meant to set a challenge of sorts. In common parlance, the term "poetic justice" has an ironic cast, suggesting a cosmic or even divinely inspired reordering of relationships that ordinary human justice has failed to properly address. In the context of the exhibition, it seemed to refer to something different, namely, the desire to synthesize two apparently contrary approaches to modern art. Poetry, with its connotations of personal expression and subjectivity, was set off against Justice, a word which here stood for the political, the exterior and the objective. Curator Dan Cameron acknowledges the importance of the latter in a startlingly hard-hitting catalogue essay dealing in large part with the political and cultural failures of the current Bush administration.

The shadow of Documenta 11 hovered over the exhibition. Along with several artists, the two shows also shared two works. Uganda-born Zarina Bhimji's *Out of the Blue,* a haunting video tour of abandoned prisons in Rwanda and Kosovo, appeared in both shows. So did Iranian artist Seifollah Samadian's *The White Station* (1999), an 8-minute video of a woman in a black chador battling through a Tehran snowstorm with an umbrella In Istanbul, it was supplemented by another video of a spider spinning its lethal web and a set of evocative black-and-white photographs suggesting the disjunctive, surreal quality of life in contemporary Iran.

Despite such overlaps, one sensed that this show was also envisioned as an implied critique of Documenta 11. Chock-full of works dealing with justice and injustice in a postcolonial world, Documenta 11 was widely criticized for being too "journalistic" and neglectful of esthetic qualities. In one of the catalogue essays for the Biennial, participating artist Kendell Geers takes on what he views as Documenta 11's closet

colonialism, which reduced the expressions of artists from around the world to a common esthetic of "cold intellectualism."

"Poetic Justice," by contrast, promised to mend the breach that political art has opened between form and content, while maintaining the global perspective that was one of Documenta 11's acknowledged strengths. Cameron seemed particularly well suited to this task. As senior curator of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, and in his earlier incarnations as independent curator and critic, he has shown himself to be deeply interested in engaging art from all parts of the world. As might be expected for an exhibition devoted to such lofty aims, the results were mixed. Along with a few soaring works that hinted at what such a synthesis might look like, there were many that offered more standard biennial fare, providing meditations on well-trod themes such as the contradictions of modernity, the conundrums of migration and displacement, and the mutability of identity. ""Poetic Justice" also reflected other agendas—for instance, diversity of ethnic and national origin, cultivation and encouragement of younger artists, and solid representation of artists from the host country.

But whatever its limitations, members of the opening-day audience, many of them veterans of the leaden Venice Biennale earlier in the summer, were clearly delighted by a show with a recognizable theme, a reasonable number of intriguing new works and a manageable scale that left time to enjoy Istanbul itself.

As in previous versions, the show was spread over various venues throughout the city [see *A.i.A.,* Apr. '00, Mar. '02]. The bulk of the work appeared in the Antrepo, a two-story former maritime warehouse refurbished as an art exhibition space. The upper floor was a light-flooded, white-box gallery filled with works in many mediums, while the dark and gloomy ground floor was devoted almost entirely to video and projected-slide installations. Many of these were tucked into strange, plastic-covered cylindrical viewing rooms whose curtained entrances were often difficult to locate. The two worlds were joined by a gleaming metallic staircase in the center of the building designed by Italian-born, Berlin-based artist Monica Bonvicii. Suspended from chains and topped with glass walls cracked with bullet holes, its brutalist architecture seemed to signal the seriousness of the show.

Other venues included the Tophane-I Amine Cultural Centre, a former cannon factory whose domed ceiling provided a dramatic backdrop for the art below; the Yerebatan Cistern, a dark, lamp-lit, sixth-century Roman structure that served as a palace reservoir during the Byzantine era; and, for the first time, the Hagia Sophia, the soaring sixth-century basilica, which is one of Istanbul's architectural crown jewels. There were also a

number of works scattered in public sites throughout the city, as well as a mini-retrospective of the work of Shahzia Sikander at a gallery on the main pedestrian street.

The exhibition spanned the possibilities of the "Poetic Justice" theme. At one end were works that offered glimpses of the human consequences of war and conflict. These included some of the exhibition's most powerful contributions. Bosnian artist Jasmila Zbanic presented a short documentary film that followed the intersections in the lives of a man who excavates the mass graves left behind in the wake of the Bosnian war and a woman searching for the remains of her child. Titled *Red Rubber* Boots (2000) for the piece of evidence the mother sought as proof she had located the right grave, it isa character study of two people who may never be able to leave history behind. When the camera lingers on the mother's face as she waits to learn if this pit is the one containing her child, the film is almost unbearable to watch, and offers a reminder that we can best comprehend enormous tragedies and evils in their repercussions in a single human life.

Equally powerful is Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman's video *1 + 1 = 1* (2002). Also choosing to represent larger political forces through a single individual, he focuses on a middle-aged Turkish Cypriot woman who sits at a long table in her living room and recounts childhood memories of ethnic fighting between the Turks and the Greeks. On adjacent walls, Ataman presented two screens showing the woman sitting at a different end of the table. In each screen, speaking in Turkish with English subtitles, she tells different but related stories—how a soldier almost killed her, how her family was moved into a Greek family's recently abandoned house, how her father disappeared. The stories are told at the same time, so that a viewer dependent on the subtitles has to constantly and somewhat confusedly shift between narratives. To a Turkish speaker the effect was probably quite different, as the two voices presumably weave together in a musical litany.

The human costs of history also form the subject of Iranian artist Shahram Karimi's enormous mural. Painting on stitched-together rice bags, she depicted the faces of artists, journalists and other activists executed, imprisoned, exiled or otherwise victimized during the last century of Iran's halting progress toward modernity. In a complementary work Karimi showed an elegiac video in which the camera meanders through unpeopled caves and along sandy beaches.

Emily Jacir similarly personalized the Israeli occupation of Palestine in "Where we come from," which was also recently exhibited in New York at Debs & Co. [seeA.i.A., Oct. ‘03]. An artist of Palestinian ancestry who holds an American passport, Jacir asked Palestinians without such access what they would like her to do for them inside and outside the occupied territories. Going where they cannot, she documented her efforts to fulfill these requests, which ranged from visiting graves and meeting friends to eating at a

favorite restaurant. With an effective economy of means, Jacir reveals how everyday activities and places gain poignant significance for those cut off from them by politics and conflict.

In such works, the poetics of social commentary derives from art's ability to endow the abstract forces of history with individual faces and human emotions. At the other end of the spectrum here were several works of sheer visual poetry whose social messages, if any, seemed secondary to the delight they provided. One of these was Jennifer Steinkamp's digitized projections of leafy trees on the walls of the Cistern. Glowing in the darkness like an apparition, their branches vibrated unnaturally while the water below provided a perfect, seamless reflection.

Also magical was an outdoor work by Doris Salcedo. In a narrow lot between two buildings in the older part of town, she created an improbable structure of hundreds of interlocked wooden chairs. They seemed almost to have grown there, like untrimmed jungle growth threatening to overwhelm the otherwise unexceptional surroundings.

Back at the Antrepo, New York-based Korean artist Do-Ho Suh's red-fabric installation presented an inverted structure of stairs and floors, each architectural detail painstakingly sewed in place. A counterpart to Rachel Whiteread's recent monumental sculpture at Luhring Augustine Gallery in New York, it replaced mass with transparency, blank whiteness with delicate red translucency and a sense of permanence with a celebration of the ephemeral.

Another architectural work that transformed the banal into the magical was Polish artist Monika Sosnowska's corridor installation. Part early Bruce Nauman, part Ilya Kabakov, it consisted of a narrow hallway, painted institutional green and beige, that led around a corner before dead-ending at a wall with a vertical slit in it. Through the slit one could glimpse a narrow space lined with a long succession of slightly open doors. Unable to open more than a few inches into the cramped corridor, they conjured an impossible space, enterable only by the imagination.

Meanwhile, one of the site works succeeded in making the city itself an integral part of its form and meaning. British artist Mike Nelson invited viewers to undertake a journey that began to feel like a kind of treasure hunt. It led along crowded market streets that were off the usual tourist route, then through an unmarked, easily missed door and into a run-down 17th-century complex containing a warren of small workrooms. One of these was a cell that Nelson had transformed into an art environment. Because the directions to the piece were sketchy and perhaps deliberately misleading, one ended up asking locals and passersby, and depending on the kindness of strangers in this slightly unsavory part

of town. Thus the journey, which took some opening-week visitors an hour or two, was an integral part of the piece. I found it after about an hour, with a great sense of accomplishment, only to discover that the installation was closed that day. Somehow, this almost didn't seem to matter. Later, I was told that the space was set up as a darkroom and contained photographs of many of the same buildings and landmarks the visitor would have passed in searching for the site.

One could read social significance into such works—seeing Sosnowska's installation as a meditation on futility of bureaucracy or Salcedo's on the problematic relationship of the individual to the mass. But the power of their esthetic effect warned against an overly didactic reading. The rest of the show existed in a continuum between the two poles of deeply engaged political work and flights of imagination.

Many of the works on the political side of the spectrum relied on fragmentation, appropriation and postmodern distancing to make their points. Fernando Bryce's *Atlas Peru* (2001) consisted of hundreds of drawings apparently copied from magazines, newspapers and handbills that obliquely told the story of Peru's transformation and submission to military dictatorship between the 1930s and 2001. Using a similarly diaristic presentation mode, Filipino artist José Legaspi presented a room full of small, much more personalized charcoal drawings of horrific dream images from a world of irrational imprisonment and inventive torture. Among his subjects are dog-men, disemboweled cadavers, scenes of self-inflicted mutilation and visitations by the devil.

Korean artist Kim Boem suggested the banality of television news with a pseudo-broadcast. As their clothing changes every few phrases, Korean news anchors read what seems like news reports but are actually nothing but sets of reassuring platitudes. Meanwhile, Albanian artist Anri Sala's *Ghostgames* (2002) presumably is meant to present a metaphor for the manipulation of people by larger political authorities. It's a video in which two people (the viewer sees only their legs) torture a crab on the beach in a kind of game that involves forcing the creature to run away from the glare of their flashlights.

Other works explored a more general sense of paranoia and alienation. One of the most effective of these was a video installation titled *Sometimes* (2002) by German artist Bjørn Melhus. Projected onto the four walls of the room where the piece was installed were images of the same bemused-looking man (the artist) dressed in white and grasping a teddy bear. He takes turns expressing a general sense of anxiety in a variety of voices both young and old. In the center of the room, a group of upturned video monitors periodically came alive, flashing and issuing chilling phrases from the movie *Poltergeist:* ""We have to survive, no matter what the cost," "we are fighting the forces of evil." An

absurdist drama suggesting some cosmic battle for the soul of mankind and the possession of the earth, it evokes the demons unleashed by science, religion and politics.

Bulgarian-born, London-based artist Ergin Çavusoglu traded on a similar unease in a video installation titled *Entanglement* (2003) that plunged the viewer into a dark room ilt by helicopter searchlights and pierced with the sounds of planes and sirens. In a similar vein, a set of huge curtains by Ann Hamilton were slung across a large section of the upper floor of the Antrepo; they mechanically opened and closed without regard to the movements of passersby. Dutch artist Aernout Mik teased the viewer with unexplained catastrophe in a video shown on four contiguous screens. The camera plays over a swarm of television crews in a dingy urban neighborhood as they circle an obviously reluctant middle-aged man surrounded by security guards. One never discovers the source of his discomfort or their interest.

A number of works dealt with the issue of cultural displacement, which was per aps inevitable, given the fact that such biennials have become home to the new artist nomad. Turkish artist Esra Ersen's film *If You Could Speak Swedish* (2001) presents a group of recent immigrants to Sweden who are attempting to speak a few sentences in the unfamiliar language of their new country. Their halting efforts are as poignant as the sentences themselves, which speak of the things they love or aspire to. Yugoslavian artist Danica Dakic is also preoccupied with language in a video projected on the inside of the dome of the Tophane which offers an aerial view of a circle of naked people reading from books in a cacophony of languages. But the most engaging take on cultural displacement was provided by Thai artist Surasi Kusolwong, who organized an opening-night kickboxing performance featuring a pair of Turkish fighters whom he had trained in the intricacies of this Asian sport. After five rather unequal rounds, the audience was allowed to vote for the winner, who was then awarded a victory sash and led off in triumph.

One related theme had to do with the clash of cultures, especially as they manifest themselves in the uneven pace of modernization in traditional societies. Australian artist Michael Riley's elegiac *Empire* (1997) is a slow succession of beautiful video sequences of natural and cultural images—ranging from lingering sunsets, rolling clouds, a crescent moon, billowing fields of yellow wheat and raindrops spattering a sandy beach to more charged images of the British flag against the sky, a Bible under water, a statue of the Madonna and child, and a mirror-covered cross blending in with the clouds overhead. The sequence is accompanied by dirgelike music, which eventually becomes a sung lament. The last image is an Aboriginal figurine accompanied by a voice deploring the forced absorption of indigenous people into white Australian culture.

A more upbeat take on this theme appeared in a set of gaudy foil paintings by Cuban artist Alberto Casado. Using an established folk-art technique, he mixed traditional images of figures and references to Santeria with images of police cars, weapons and numbers denoting the Cuban population's illicit obsession with the officially forbidden lottery.

Also contrasting tradition and modernity, Pakistani-born, India-based artist Nalini Malani constructed an elaborate apparatus in the Cistern based on the 19th-century magic lantern. Suspended from the ceiling and slowly spinning were several large clear plastic cylinders. On their surfaces, the artist had painted images of figures, skulls guns and airplanes in a style reminiscent of traditional Indian miniature paintings. A video consisting of archival clips of bomber planes and exploding mushroom clouds was projected through these transparent cylinders, thus casting shadows of the painted motifs onto the walls. The various images shifted and mingled, creating a striking kaleidoscopic effect.

On the more poetic side of the register were several works involving dreams and fantasies. Irish artist Gerard Byrne historicizes the notion of sexual fantasy in an amusing video in which he restages a 1960s dialogue from *Playboy* magazine about the sexual revolution and the joys of group sex. His new version takes place in a generic modernist glass house with actors whose weary middle-aged visages are at odds with the now almost quaintly optimistic opinions they are expressing. More explicitly sexual are Turkish artist Taner Ceylon's precisely painted realist depictions of homosexual encounters and languidly naked young men in elegant domestic settings. One suspects such fantasies are more risqué, and even dangerous, in Turkey than they might be in the U.S.

Two works dealt with masquerade and wish fulfillment. New York-based, Korean-born artist Nikki S. Lee's photographic tableaux show her convincingly transformed into characters as disparate as old ladies and near-naked sex workers. Jung Yeon Doo, also Korean, worked the transformation on others. After asking selected individuals to reveal their fantasies about themselves, he staged a pair of photographic portraits of each. The first in each set depicts the person in his or her real-life circumstances. In the second, the subject holds the same pose, but in the fantasy persona, complete with a set of dramatic props. Projected as slides dissolving into each other were scenes in which a waiter becomes a flapper-era crooner, a machinist becomes a pilot, and an elegant single woman becomes a suburban mom.

The site that one might have expected to be the most potentially poetic was of course the Hagia Sophia Museum. This magnificent basilica, which no longer serves any religious

function, is currently in the process of being restored as its Islamic overlay is stripped away to bring back details of its original Byzantine elements. It was a major coup for Cameron to get permission for its use as a biennial site. One wishes that, having done so, he and the artists involved had used it more sensitively. Only one work in the Hagia Sophia played off its stunning architectural features. This was Tony Feher's *Nature Is Over,* which consisted of blue tape applied to the windows of the second-floor gallery in a way that referenced both the stained-glass window tradition and the digital screen. If Feher's work generated more enthusiastic comment than it perhaps deserved, this may have been because it presented, unlike most of the pieces at the Hagia Sophia, a genuine attempt to interact with this dramatic setting.

The other contributions were of mixed interest and some would have been perfectly acceptable in a more neutral gallery setting. Here, however, they ranged from the irrelevant to the irreverent. Perhaps the worst fit was Japanese artist Ozawa Tsuyoshi's "Vegetable Weapons"—a set of color photographs installed in a greenhouselike structure depicting an international group of attractive young people with guns made out of the ingredients of a meal from their native lands. Also out of place were Spanish artist Dora Garcia's locked room meant to signify an inaccessible fantasy space, Brazilian artist Marepe's coin-tossing apparatus and South African artist Kendell Geers's upside-down digital clock. Even Thai artist Maya Rasdjarmrearnsook's sensitive videos dealing with the dressing of corpses didn't really work. Despite the philosophical connections between the ideas of death and mourning and religion, they were undermined by their lack of relationship to the physical surroundings.

Floating somewhere between the boundaries set by the poetic and the political were a number of works that seemed too opaque, trivial or uninteresting to fit into the schema at all. Many of these were videos located in the gloomy lower floor of the Antrepo. One of the major complaints at recent international extravaganzas like Documenta and the Venice Biennale has been about the overuse of video and the feats of endurance the medium requires from viewers. Here again there were many works that relied heavily on real-time exposition of scenes or events that seemed to lead nowhere. Topping my list of unpleasant or unsatisfying videos was Swedish artist Anmika Larsson's *Blood,* a painfully slow video of a man being prepared in a clinic for a blood procedure. First the blood is drawn and then the medical assistant begins to inject it back into points on his face, As the clotting blood slowly dripped down from his nostrils to his white shirt, I fled. I also gave up on Finnish artist Liisa Lounila's three-screen installation in which the camera slowly revolved around tableaux of people frozen in place. Nor did I ever discover if anything occurred in Bangladeshi artist Runa Islam's two-screen work that involved a play between a slide show of scenes of bleak industrial architecture, and an interior scene of waiters in some Windows on the World type restaurant waiting for customers. In the

Cistern, Portuguese artist Filipa César's *Berlin Zoo* (2001-03), which consisted of endless shots of people looking up at what the catalogue revealed were the timetables in a Berlin train station, seemed an apt metaphor for the experience of waiting for something interesting to happen in some of these works.

In the end, "Poetic Justice," like most such exhibitions, was a mixed bag. Having particularly sought out younger, less-known international artists, Cameron no doubt will help propel some of them toward deserved larger publics. Meanwhile, the ambitious questions that the show posed are probably impossible to answer in any universally satisfying way. However, there were some works, among them the contributions of Ataman, Jacir, Sosnowska and Salcedo, which seemed to come close to the ideal of reconciling the political and the poetic. That may be enough for an exhibition of this sort to accomplish.