

Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

ROBERTO CUOGHI

New Museum

Roberto Cuoghi does not mess around. When in his 20s, just out of graduate school, the Italian artist (b. 1973) resolved to become his father. Dyeing his hair gray and shaving some of it off, he dressed in the older man's outfits for seven years. To get dad's clothes to fit, Cuoghi *films* had to gain a great deal of weight, resulting in serious medical problems (along with, no doubt, considerable Freudian confusion). In another punishing venture, for five days he wore lenses that flipped his sight 180 degrees, hoping that his brain would eventually account for the shift and right his vision again. (It didn't.) While the father piece is a comment on decay, the lens piece could serve as a metaphor for the way art can change perception.

In the artist's first New York museum solo, the New Museum recently devoted an entire floor—albeit a small one—to a new version of a sound art piece, *Šuillakku—corral version* (2008–14), which, like his familial impersonation, deals with



decline and demise. For several years, Cuoghi has been researching the ancient Assyrian culture, which flourished in Mesopotamia along the river Tigris from around 1400 to 600 B.C.E. After consulting with historians and ethnomusicologists about Assyrian musical instruments, Cuoghi hand-built some 100 of them, basing the objects partly on research and partly on imagination. Composed by Cuoghi, the piece features the sounds of these instruments, played by the artist, along with his own voice.

The 8-minute score (2014) is an imagined lament for the fallen city of Nineveh, which came under siege by the Babylonians from 612–609 B.C.E.; the attack would lead to the Assyrians' downfall and the disappearance of their culture. *Šuillakku—corral version* is named for the Assyrian word for a prayerful posture, resting on one knee with one hand raised, and for the piece's architecture, a small, darkened round room that the visitor enters and exits via short passageways, hanging onto the walls all the way for balance.

To my ears, the atonal (or, more accurately, microtonal) composition might be at home at a new music festival or on an experimental radio station. In the gallery, the sound traveled around the room via eight loudspeakers, providing a three-dimensional experience. (All the same, I would snap up a stereo version if it were released.) The audio is at times stomach-rumblingly loud. Along with percussion, stringed instruments and shouting, there's chanting and abundant spitting (which the Assyrians apparently thought would ward off evil). Spooky, mysterious and at times absurd, the sounds caused some visitors to flee after a short time. The discomfort of the visually and sonically intense environment seems a mark of success for an artwork dealing not only with personal mortality but the death of an entire culture.

—Brian Boucher