

Pedro Barateiro's "Theatre of Hunters" at Kunsthalle Basel



Pedro Barateiro, The Mask of the Hunter, 2010. Courtesy the artist.

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BASEL.- In Theatre of Hunters, his first major solo exhibition outside of Portugal, Pedro Barateiro presents a sequence of installations that include "staged" sculptures, found objects, photographs, drawings, paintings and films that encompass the five connected galleries on the ground floor of the [Kunsthalle Basel](#).

Barateiro's multifarious practice can be situated within a contemporary mode of post-studio production that is neither bound to one medium nor limited to any particular type of skilled object-making. Instead, the Lisbon-based artist primarily works with existing popular images, documents, literary texts, found objects and artworks gleaned from a diverse range of contexts. Barateiro's practice is driven by a critical "re-reading" of those cultural and historical texts that play a major role in determining our perception of reality. Rather than mirroring or otherwise directly responding to lived experience, Barateiro relays highly coded and fragmented statements, mediated by complex visual signs that possess the quality of things remembered from dreams, while simultaneously relating to specific referents.

In his installation Plateia (Audience), realized at the Museu da Cidade, Lisbon, in 2008, Barateiro arranged a set of ordinary chairs—of the type regularly used for public events—in a grid, and then half-sunk them in a platform of concrete, thus metonymically equating the passive and immobile furniture with an act of spectatorship. More recently, in one of the installations in his current show at Kunsthalle Basel, Barateiro presents a photograph taken by Edward Sheriff Curtis (1868–1952), author of the twenty-volume, illustrated publication The

North American Indian (1915), and hailed by the early American press as a "camera crusader of the Red Man". The image depicts a Quagyuhi Indian wearing the mask of a mythological hunter of a giant, man-eating octopus, and Barateiro projects it on one of the Kunsthalle's walls. Extracted from the standard narrative of ethnology and given a new role in the Theatre of Hunters exhibition, the archival image acquires a haunting presence.

In previous works that have dealt with the media representation of former Portuguese colonies Angola and Mozambique, Barateiro has employed material sourced from the archives of Portuguese television. At Kunsthalle Basel, one slow-motion silent video focuses on the angelic face of Lia Gama (born in 1944), the iconic Portuguese theatre and television actress. Another video, also edited out of the Portuguese television broadcast Palavras Ditas (Spoken Words), shows the actor Mário Viegas frenetically reciting a Dadaist grotesque poem A Cena do Ódio (Scene of Hate, 1915), written by Portuguese avant-garde actor, poet and painter José de Almada Negreiros (1893–1970). Placed by Barateiro in opposite corners of the same gallery, the historical performances have been given roles in a new play.

The title of Barateiro's Kunsthalle Basel exhibition suggests a conflation of two diverging fields—the performing arts and cultural anthropology—that the artist has often called upon in his previous work. Although it may be tempting to draw analogies between an exhibition and a theatre play, or compare visual display to stage design, as well as to liken the role of the artist to that of the curator or theatre director, such parallelisms can be misleading. Barateiro's "Theatre of Hunters" is not theatre precisely because it deconstructs and represents the apparatus of the theatre, as opposed to following the narrative logic of the spectacle—which is often the case in exhibitions that use artworks as props in plays written by curators, and which strive to tell stories and illustrate themes, rather than enable artists to give intelligible shape to their ideas.

Barateiro's repertoire of motifs and staging techniques borrowed from the theatrical field includes the participation of live actors as performative extensions of sculpture or installation. It also incorporates the mimicking of the theatre space's traditional tripartite structure—"backstage", "stage" and "auditorium"—in his installations; the use of existing theatrical costumes and accessories for his "performing sculptures"; the deployment of various "stand-ins" (sculptures as actors, actors as sculptures, paintings as decorations, images as scripts, texts as images, ad infinitum), and, finally, the inclusion, next to Barateiro's own works, of pieces by two other artists.

These include a geometrically abstract drawing by Mário Alberto (born in 1925) for a "comedy stage scene", which Barateiro culled from the collection of the Museu Nacional do Teatro in Lisbon (according to Vitruvius's architectural typology, the corresponding setting for a comedy scene was the street; for tragedy, the palace; and for pastoral or satyr play, the woodland), and a series of commissioned paintings by Portuguese artist Ana Jotta (born in 1946), which are installed alongside the installation reminiscent of "backstage area" that opens the show. Jotta, a major figure in the Portuguese art scene, first made a career as an actress in the 1970s, before dedicating herself to the visual arts—including painting, drawing and performance—in the 1980s. The operating principle of her work is a disregard for one style or regime of artistic production; accordingly, her contribution to Theatre of Hunters consists of four expressive-realist chiaroscuro drawings on canvases with gold-painted grounds, which variously represent a dusty backstage area with a first-aid kit hung on the wall, a Kafkaesque cityscape, a fantastic landscape and a spacious bedroom with a 1930s-era racing car. All four settings suggest stage decorations rather than "real" spaces, while the latter two are stylistically indebted to the curvilinear, streamline style of late Art Deco.

The title Theatre of Hunters quite obviously resonates with Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. And, indeed, Artaud is quoted (along with Louis Aragon, Denis Diderot and Oscar Wilde) in Barateiro's new film, Hoje estamos de olhos fechados (Today our eyes are closed, 2010), which makes its premiere at Kunsthalle Basel and will be shown consequently at Kunsthalle Lissabon, a Lisbon exhibition space and curatorial project headed by João Mourão and Luís Silva. Barateiro's film comprises two consecutive parts. The first section features negative images of tropical trees and bushes in a small Lisbon park; the second part offers footage that Barateiro shot at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paulo (FAU-USP), which was built in the 1960s by architect João Vilanova Artigas (1915–1985), one of the leading figures of the Brazilian Modern Movement.

It is perhaps this visual language of modernist architecture and graphic design—with a Duchampian twist—that inspires the installation in the last gallery of Barateiro's show. Here three tables, their glass tabletops lit from above, showcase abstract patterns crafted from golden pencils. This work relates to a number of sculptural pieces in the first gallery, all of which recall rituals, games and riddles. These small sculptures, arranged in rows to suggest an auditorium, are at once onerous and strangely familiar: a gold-plated cardboard box, a pedestal displaying a picture of a woman holding a camera, a red skyline of a city cut out from cardboard and presented on a chair, and a photograph of a sculpture of Bastet, the Egyptian winged cat deity, encased in a wooden cabinet.

This "audience" made of seated objects will find a counterpart in the periodic presence of the real audience attending a live solo performance, scripted by Pedro Barateiro and featuring various actors from Basel, which will be repeated each Thursday at 7:30pm during the course of the exhibition. The 15-minute-long performance will be held in the fourth gallery, where The Theatre of Hunters installation—a freestanding wood structure displaying the shoes and scarf of the actor Mário Viegas arranged next to a dried palm leaf—is also on view.

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