

Decor

Villa Empain
Fondation Boghossian, Brussels

The year 2016 should have been the right moment to celebrate Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976) in his native Belgium, but the homage so far has been discrete. A new group show at the Boghossian Foundation in Brussels, hosted in the beautiful Art Deco Villa Empain, takes its title from the last installation conceived by Broodthaers shortly before his death. With his cannons, machine guns and Edwardian furniture, *Décor: A Conquest* is a highly political and socially engaged work of art. The artist managed to reduce the whole concept to its essence: a little Napoleonic brass cannon and a small piece of paper with the word "décor" written on it.

As Asad Raza, the artistic director of the Foundation, puts it: "The artists that 'Décor' assembles [...] embrace the decorative as a fundamental aspect of the plastic arts and see a political potential in operating with it." Yet, apart from Latifa Echakhch's *For Each Stencil a Revolution* (2007), a sentence attributed to Yasser Arafat, for which she covered the small dancing room with ink-dripped sheets of carbon paper, the strength of the individual works is diminished by their overly immaculate relationship to their luxurious surroundings. The tiles of Carl Andre's *10 x 10 Altstadt Lead Square* (1967) match those of the marble floor, the curtains of Felix Gonzalez-Torres divide the space perfectly, Pierre Huyghe's *Cambrian Explosion* (2014) serves as a real aquarium, and Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds* (1966) fill the entrance hall in orderly fashion. That said, two site-specific works by Daniel Buren and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster go some way toward engaging in a meaningful dialectic with the Villa. The curators of the show take responsibility for its decorative aspect, as both "an exhibition about the decorative" and "a decoration of the Villa." Even though the result is appealing, the second proposition perhaps dominates the first.

by Pierre-Yves Desaiwe

Joachim Bandau

Thomas Fischer, Berlin

Born in Cologne in 1936, Joachim Bandau's early experiences of war-torn Germany undeniably shaped his later fascination with bunkers as architectural forms. All of the historical drawings of the 1970s and '80s shown here took inspiration from Paul Virilio's 1975 book *Bunker Archaeology*.

In the work (*Paul Virilio – Bunker Archéologie*) 8.6.1976 (1976), Bandau sketches the thick, solid, modernist forms of these bunkers in heavy graphite, softened by pale pigment washes of his watery coffee. Numerous individual architectural models are depicted upon the page, one after another, their imposing walls and magnificent curves reproduced with taxonomic accuracy. Executed with bold crosshatching to emphasize the curve of the structure, *Bunker 19.4.78* (1978) is almost anthropomorphic, its windows appearing as deep-set black eyes resting within a dark helmet, a sinister architectural equivalent to Jacob Epstein's *Rock Drill* of the previous war. By contrast, the drawings from the 1980s use essential lines only, and are elegantly worked onto the pages of a British book of lithography from the 1840s. Their thick, creamy appearance adds a soft, gentle quality to structures wallowing in complex pasts.

Elsewhere, a number of the artist's small-scale bronzes from the 1990s protrude from the walls at different heights. Composed of compact shapes and perforated by window-like indents, works such as *17* (2005) mimic the formal structure of the bunkers themselves (though the artist maintains that these are unrelated). Their simple geometrical forms have a paradoxical lightness suggesting cubic emanations; Thomas Fischer has noted how "they look like they might be part of a bigger piece hiding behind the wall." While these bold shapes recall Donald Judd's Minimalism, they seek less the autonomy of the constructed object and more an architectonic delineation of space, as structures with their own social history: shielding, protecting and hiding.

by Louisa Elderton

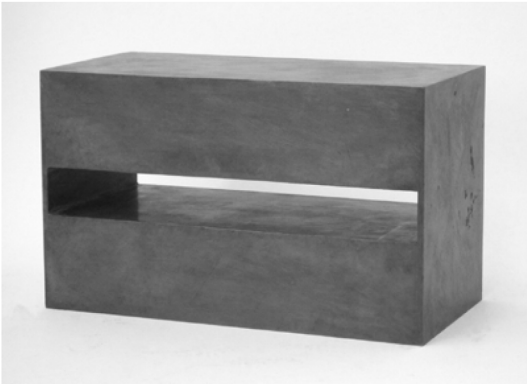
Dena Yago

Sandy Brown, Berlin

"Heck & The Divested Set" raises fascinating questions about the nature of reality. Dena Yago's exhibition considers the experience of real life in a fake place, specifically Pioneertown, California (population of 350). The town was created as a live-in film-set to recreate a "representative" 1870s American frontier town. Reading the history of Pioneertown and examining images of it, one half expects Jean Baudrillard to mosey out of Pappy and Harriet's Pioneertown Palace, hitch up his Appaloosa and cry "Hi-ho simulacrum, away!" It is both puzzling and generative, the notion of an actual population living in a Hollywood vision of the American frontier. What does reality mean in a place purposely dedicated to the idea of preserving a sanitized and commodified vision of a nation's past?

Yago writes in the press materials that "towns are approximations." Even in our current, intrusively surveilled world this remains true; myriad snapshots or videos of a certain place will only ever present an incomplete reality. This show both glories in and suffers from this problem. The works, which included four digital C-prints of locations in Pioneertown and three industrial rubber sculptures composed of letters forming Bible verses and bumper sticker-friendly slogans, only seemed to offer a cursory engagement with the strangeness of Pioneertown. No doubt this is in part Yago's point; one can never fully capture the past, or even the present, and language itself entails distortion. But there are overall questions of coherence, particularly in such a compact show. To take one example, a sculpted quotation from Ecclesiastes on a wall opposite the prints of Pioneertown may have a more umbilical significance than merely restating the distance between representation and reality, but an absence of conceptual connective tissue meant that such works, and the show as a whole, lingered on the edge of a potency it never fully realized.

by William Kherbek



From left to right; from top to bottom:
Felix Gonzalez-Torres
Untitled (Beginning) (1994)
Courtesy of Boghossian Foundation, Brussels
Photography by Nicolas Lobet

Dena Yago
HONK ONCE IF YOU LOVE LIVING, HONK TWICE IF YOU LIVE WITH THE DEAD (2016)
Courtesy of the Artist and Sandy Brown, Berlin

Joachim Bandau
17 (2005)
Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Thomas Fischer, Berlin