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At the Galleries: Cultural studies

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Angela Grauerholz's The Library

Angela Grauerholz

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It's midterm time soon, but even if you're not in university, it's always worth getting schooled at the University of Toronto's downtown campus art galleries. Here's are three shows worth taking notes on. By Leah Sandals

1. Models for Taking Part at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

7 Hart House Circle, to Dec. 11

Humanity doesn't come off well in *Models for Taking Part*. This is especially the case when considering two of the exhibition's major works: Artur Zmijewski's *Democracies* and Renzo Martens' *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*. Zmijewski documents protests and other mass events such as state funerals, sports rallies and war reenactments — mostly in his home country of Poland, but also in France, Germany, Israel and Palestine. Arrayed over several screens in a single room, Zmijewski's videos are overwhelming, whether sonically (as reenactment gunshots ring out alongside requiem orchestrations), visually (as burning buildings lit by the Black Bloc meet "Feminazi" signs at an anti-abortion protest and national flags, well, everywhere), or psychologically (as each group's attempt at "outreach" only seems to entrench disparate positions in its actors and bystanders). As a whole, *Democracies* — a work labelled, supposedly, for one of the greatest inventions of humankind — makes prospects for peace and understanding seem grim. This effect is deepened in Martens' feature film, which traces a Congo journey exposing layers of injustice in a) global economies; b) global media; c) global aid organizations; and d) global art-making. No one, the artist included, seems to escape the film's cynical gaze. Heartbreaking moments, like the deaths of malnourished children, take place very nearly onscreen, while stomach-turning scenes — like Martens suggesting that the Congolese should just learn to "enjoy poverty" because it makes the rest of the world feel noble — provide little relief. Nonetheless, both these works remain strangely compelling for their no-holds-barred approach to our species' fascistic, hooliganistic and narcissistic tendencies. It's also worth noting that the ethical implications of these works could be up for discussion at a special curator talk Oct. 11, at 6 p.m., and a panel on Oct. 12, at 6 p.m.

2. Mark Boulos at Coach House Institute

39A Queen's Park Cr. E., to Dec. 11

Mark Boulos' *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* crystallizes concerns similar to those of *Models for Taking Part*, albeit a little more concisely. Viewers find themselves caught between two projections on facing walls; one wall shows commodities traders at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, the other shows Nigerian rebels fighting to gain control of local oil resources. Establishing shots for both projections show area waterways, underlining the connectedness between these places. Similarities are also suggested as the camera focuses on the tribal, aggressive, back-and-forth gestures of the Chicago traders, as well as the confident grandstanding and ritual preparations of the Nigerian soldiers. Creating a simultaneous sense of distance, however, are the twinned-but-oppositional aims of both groups: Each is looking to profit from Nigerian resources, but the profit of one group would seem to require eliminating the other group entirely. Again, the effect is troubling, but the clear-eyed way it's conveyed — with no easy solutions or platitudes proffered — is also what makes it so watchable.

3. Angela Grauerholz at the University of Toronto Art Centre

15 King's College Circle, to Nov. 26

Montreal photographer Angela Grauerholz's gentle survey at UTAC manages, surprisingly, to hold its own amid the political angst of the previous two campus shows. I've heard for years that Grauerholz's practice was intertwined with concerns around time and memory, but it was only in seeing this show in person (instead of viewing selected works in reproduction) that that effect really came across to me. The massive scale of her soft-focus black-and-white prints insists on the momentous weight that even banal moments — like views through a window, or of a stranger striding across a square — can have in our memories. Her photographs of burnt books and archival sculptures also pluck at this theme in a collective way. The thread gets more obscure in her *Reading Room* for the *Working Artist* installation, which features film clips, images, books and design objects that form a type of memory quite specific to Western artists of a certain generation. But whether you're conversant in art theory or not, there's a fine meditation on remembrance to be had here.

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