

witnesses the destruction and cracking of the image, a nation, but also actively participates in the destruction of a location, hence the trauma placed on a collective.



Oscar Muñoz, *Ambulatorio*, 36 B+W photographs, security glass, 600 x 600 cm, 1994–2003. Courtesy the artist and Sicardi Gallery (Houston).
PHOTO CREDIT: TONI HAFKENSCHIED

Muñoz's agility with diverse media—including photography, printmaking, drawing, installation, video and sculpture—is remarkable. His sensitivity to materials suggests an analogy to the ephemeral nature of human existence, a theme present in all of his work. In *Paístiempo* (2007), the audience is allowed to flip through the delicate pages of newspapers with compositions made of cigarette burns in a dot-matrix pattern, while in *Pixels* (1991–2000), sugar cubes infused with coffee in various degrees of saturation slowly decompose. Seen from a distance, these works reveal portraits of people who have died violent deaths. In *Re/trato* (2003), a video projection shows the artist repeatedly painting his self-portrait with water on concrete. The title is significant: “retrato” means portrait in Spanish, and “re trato” translates as “try once again.” In *Narcissi* (1991/2008), too, we witness the evaporation and disintegration of the artist's self-portraits. In each of seven Plexiglas containers filled with water, a portrait of the artist made with charcoal dust is sifted through a photo-serigraphic screen on the surface of the container to transform and mutate. Deformed by time, climate and place, the portraits finally reach a fixed image—a state of death—once the water evaporates. Changed by the act of memory, once they disappear, images, people and events are never recaptured as they were.

As the daughter of Chilean political refugees, the black and white portraits in the show inevitably remind me of the disappearances during the dictatorship. The families of the disappeared will probably never be able to determine the physical whereabouts of their loved ones, and are incapable of mourning a death that remains uncertain, or of engaging in any other type of commemoration. In a sense, Oscar Muñoz acts on behalf of these families. The artist acknowledges the loss of the individual by devising methods for creating a disappearing image, one he mediates through processes of reinterpretation, recapture and reconstruction. In an interview with José Roca, Muñoz states that he is “not interested in putting forth any sort of political discourse”; with his work, he is simply “responding to a process that has to do with my life and my environment... it's my way of trying to understand this malaise.” Commemorations and memorials are meant to foster remembrance. The artist eloquently describes them as “depositories of memory, they strive for perpetuity... in opposition to the transient nature of the bodies or events they allude to.” Muñoz questions whether these attempted memorials will last over time. Perhaps it is not only memorials that are susceptible to dissipation, but also disappearing lives threatened by a vanishing collective memory in times of globalization. ▶

RIGHTFULLY YOURS,

Wendy Coburn, Steven Cohen, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, Alicia Framis, Alison S.M. Kobayashi, Minging Mike, Mattias Olofsson, The Yes Men, Camille Turner, Sisley Xhafa, Your personal viewing of Borat, Ali G, and Bruno, Curated by Tejpal Singh Ajji, Justina M Barnicke Gallery, Toronto

by JON DAVIES

Rightfully Yours, was an intellectually thrilling and politically provocative exhibition mounted by young curator Tejpal Singh Ajji. Through a wide range of Canadian and international performance-based work—very broadly defined—Ajji created a laboratory to consider how artists insert themselves into a contemporary world wracked by conflicts over territory and identity, investigating what rights they or any of us have to take on and occu-

py the position of the other. Artists here are productively framed as invaders, re-invigorating debates over cultural trespass and appropriation while never losing sight of the potent pleasures that come with transgressions of symbolic and actual property, of insider and outsider knowledges. Ajji's exhibition offered a highly nuanced and multi-faceted perspective on artists venturing where they don't belong, frequently finding them to be mediators of conflicts between different publics.

The raw, beating heart of the show was Steven Cohen's video, *Chandelier* (2001–2002), projected large in a darkened nook and casting a figurative shadow over the entire exhibition. Cohen, a queer, Jewish South African, stumbles through a Johannesburg shantytown that is being torn down around its residents. In elaborate, bejeweled makeup, Cohen wears a large, jangling crystal chandelier as a dress: he is a spectacle of white privilege. Striking mannered poses in his precariously towering platform heels, he is as much in danger of collapse as the fragile shacks around him. A few locals are joyful and many are shocked. To some, he is an angel sent from God; to one, a whore to be fucked. Regardless, he continues his halting choreography through a ravaged landscape of poverty, disenfranchisement and despair decked out in the chi-chi symbols of a feminized, decadent elite (also flagged as Jewish through the Stars of David he wears on his body), haughtily refusing to communicate verbally. A catalyst amid chaos, Cohen is alternately threatened and protected, cursed and blessed. Cohen is not personally responsible for apartheid or the glaring economic injustice that remains in its aftermath, yet we fear that the artist's mere presence in the shantytown, wearing his ridiculous finery and frippery, further subjugates the squatters. But clearly, feelings of being mocked by this intervention do not approach the devastation they have experienced as a result of the social and economic conditions under which they live. Cohen becomes an easy target for our disapproval, but only because systemic injustice rarely clowns for its victims and makes a spectacle of itself like cosmopolitan artists do. Similarly, in another video, Andy Bichlbaum of media infiltrators The Yes Men is castigated by a BBC newscaster for the “cruel trick” played by the organization on the people of Bhopal, getting their hopes up with the wish-fulfilling prank of devising a televised apology on behalf of Dow Chemical for the ruinous Union Carbide disaster. As if

their brazen act of corporate humiliation and sabotage were more malicious than the company's far greater crime of destroying thousands of Indian lives.

Cohen's piece establishes drag as an important theme, one that offers a compelling model for identity in our current historical moment. Costumes are an important element of the show, as artists get tricked out as Miss Canadiana (Camille Turner), Lesbian Rangers (Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan), and a doctor willing to write excuse notes (Alison S.M. Kobayashi). Artists both dress up and dress down, performing figures of authority (and assuming their powers), taking on the guises of the abject, and also confusing such dichotomies. For example, Sislej Xhafa declared himself the unofficial 1997 Albanian representative at neighbouring Italy's Venice Biennale, where he roamed the grounds in the guise of a soccer player, thus embodying both prized sports hero and pavilion-deprived Balkan transient. Similarly, Alicia Framis' large gown made from the near-indestructible fabric Twaron was intended as protective armour for women, but was also emblazoned with abusive and derogatory phrases chosen by women and copyrighted to prevent their public use again. Through publicizing violent speech, the dress transposes the shame of abuse from victim to perpetrator.

Mattias Olofsson's drag is his ongoing performance as a real 19th-century Sami woman named Stor-Stina, here seen in a video learning to speak the slang Rinkeby-Swedish. As Stor-Stina, Olofsson mediates

anxieties between the indigenous Sami, non-indigenous Swedes and their state, and young, suburban immigrants, whose patois Stor-Stina receives lessons in. It seems that Rinkeby-Swedish is not so much about words as about the correct physical performance of masculinity (the coach acts as if he does not notice that Olofsson's persona is a woman) and their linguistic exercises add a further layer of ethnocultural drag to Olofsson's work.

Other artists infringe on the art world, and *Rightfully Yours*, from the margins. Washington, DC-based Minging Mike made covers for his own imaginary soul albums with paper, pencil and ink that reference the black community and its struggles in the late 60s and 70s. He is present here both for his self-insertion into the recording industry and as a sort of meta-commentary, the "outsider" artist as an interloper in a show otherwise populated by "professionals." His handmade albums about sickle-cell anemia, drug abuse, bad landlords, Bruce Lee and Vietnam are examples of history told from the ground up, broad issues filtered through the mind and hands of a fantasist into poignant cultural emblems.

With their status as entertainment rather than art, Sacha Baron Cohen's creations, Borat, Bruno and Ali G, are interlopers here as well, and we are invited to partake of their pleasures on YouTube on our own time. The corporate profit motive makes us immediately more suspicious of Cohen's intercultural exhibitionism than if he were a credentialed contemporary artist with an explicitly critical agenda. (Framing the show with two

Cohens suggests homage to the diasporic wandering Jew as a model for all the artists' border-transgressing peregrinations.)

With a deep respect for ambiguity, uncertain emotions and the insights provided by irony, Ajji's exhibition was a preternaturally mature and satisfying effort. Just as the prominent comma in the exhibition title demands that we sign on to its project—and assert our own agency in the process—Ajji leaves for us to fill in many blanks in *Rightfully Yours*. ►

EXPONENTIAL FUTURES

Tim Lee, Alex Morrison, Isabelle Pauwels, Kevin Schmidt, Mark Soo, Corin Sworn, Althea Thauburger and Elizabeth Zvonar, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver

by ELI BORNOWSKY

In preparing to write this review, I discovered a reservoir of information about each of the works in the exhibition, which is only indirectly accessible but nonetheless integral to the functioning of the show. For example, I learned of Althea Thauburger's work with young men in Berlin who were allowed to participate in her film as a substitute for the period of military or civil service still required in that country. I discovered that Mark Soo had researched the recording studio where Elvis first appropriated black American music and that Elizabeth Zvonar had researched modernist architecture in Montréal. None of this information was available in the gallery (although interviews with the artists were available on the gallery website). It seemed that my task as a reviewer would be to explain the particular subject matter of each artist's work. I hesitated, however, for concern of losing myself in a flood of interesting details about their research, never addressing the artworks themselves. Perhaps the exponent in *Exponential Futures* is not a mathematical analogy, but a person or artwork that expounds and explains. This is understandable, considering how the heritage of Vancouver art is one of discourse and education as a medium for artistic praxis. Undoubtedly, the accessibility of this discourse is open for debate. I would like to suggest that the pitch of contention around this debate is heightened in *Exponential Futures* because of an uncertainty shared by the works. It is not



The Yes Men, *Dow Chemical to Clean Up Bhopal*, 2005, 3 Channel Video (Installation view).
COURTESY OF THE JMB GALLERY AND THE ARTISTS