Narrative Journeys: Michael Stevenson at the MCA

ALTAIR ROELANTS

A mythical raft, a dilapidated hydraulic computer and a pile of riot-strewn golden bricks were some of the works on display for Berlin-based New Zealand artist Michael Stevenson’s recent solo show at Sydney’s MCA – the first Australian overview of this important artist’s work. Internationally renowned, Stevenson is a visual storyteller who mines the archives of 20th century local histories for factual stories that have absurd, almost unbelievable twists, characters and objects or, as he refers to this combination, ‘allegorical potential’. These counter-narratives spanning Latin America, the Middle East and Pacific are often played out against the backdrop of political and economical upheaval, international exchange and capitalism, and reveal art’s presence at these junctions. Stevenson’s broad practice interweaves drawing, painting, sculpture, installation and video work in a highly imaginative yet methodical investigation into these frictions between the specific and the universal. Michael Stevenson was not a complete retrospective, rather it connected earlier works, seminal pieces and more recent approaches to offer an intelligent insight into the artist’s meticulous working process and his ability to uncover the allegorical capacity of historical objects; a quality that reminds one of his New Zealand roots – itself a country imbued with mythology and left-of-centre inventiveness. Integral to the show was the physical mechanics of the MCA itself which, due to the current renovations, was cleverly deconstructed to frame the entire exhibition installation as an ‘artwork’, allowing the site’s past and present mythologies to intermingle with those of Stevenson’s work.

The slow, clunky MCA goods lift became one of the exhibition’s ‘behind-the-scenes’ spaces. The lift was still in use: on my first trip I was accompanied by a pile of abandoned blocks; on my second, the lift was crammed with tables for a zine fair – this transitory space allowed an interesting melding of the physicality of the building’s history and present activities. In contrast, the lift doors opened onto Stevenson’s installation The Smiles are Not Smiles (2005) – a light-strewn wall of golden bricks and rubble. This work recounts the 1978 opening of renowned New York art dealer Tony Shafrazi’s gallery in Tehran, at the culmination of a period marked by the Shah of Iran’s expanding wealth and investment in an imperial collection of predominantly Western art. Tony Shafrazi’s inaugural show, Gold Bricks (1978) by Armenian artist Zadik Zadikian, comprised a wall of one thousand gold leaf covered bricks. The gallery’s launch coincided with the public and military clashes that signalled the onset of the Iranian revolution and the Shah’s subsequent ousting. The gallery was destroyed and looted, the golden bricks immersed into the chaos of the surrounding streets. The only remnant from this charged encounter between art and revolution was the opening invite, one of which was inscribed with the comment: ‘the piece glowed like a shattered chain in the Persian sunlight having no beginning and no end’. Stevenson recreates a fictional portion of this demolished wall – the golden bricks as dual signifiers of Iran’s cultural traditions and western capitalism are strewn across the floor along with the detritus of an art gallery. The work explores the systems of the art world alongside those of shifting political and economic ideologies, and the often problematic and hazardous exchanges of cultural ideals when countries undergo transitions to globalised economic and social models – the aspirational ‘smiles’ of a new art market that never came to fruition. The installation’s double glass door with ornate metallic handles streamed in light from the ‘imagined’ chaos outside which mingled with the voices of people in the adjoining gallery – further reminding us of the historic and ongoing connection between art and social revolt.

Located behind a temporary partition wall within the same gallery sat another object telling an economic tale, The Fountain of Prosperity (2006) – a fantastically strange contraption that looks as if it’s been unearthed from the depths of a Victorian laboratory. Stevenson’s installation is a recreation of a hydraulic powered computer invented in 1949 by New Zealander Bill Phillips – while studying at the London School of Economics. Drawing on his experiences of dairy farming, Phillips aimed to use water to educate students on the flow diagrams of Keynesian economic principles. As Stevenson describes this DIY approach: ‘For an antipodean breaking into the metropolitan seat of international economics, this was a masterful display of cow shed ingenuity’. The Fountain of Prosperity chronicles the journey Phillips’ machine took as it was updated and renamed the Moniac by American economist Abba P. Lerner, who in 1953 sold a version to the Central Bank of Guatemala during a period of national political and economic turmoil. Stevenson’s Fountain of Prosperity has the deteriorated appearance of a machine left to
rot – its dripping, rusted façade is covered with a myriad of stained clear plastic pipes, water tanks, metal taps and white plastic labels with such headings as ‘Income after Tax’, ‘Domestic Expenditure’ and ‘Minimum Working Balance’. This assemblage is brought to life by the trickle of murky water – the sluggish flows of an economy in strife. Its ad-hoc appearance is emphasised by crude weights dangling from strings, empty clipboards affixed with ballpoint pens, and hunks of red putty. Such that an archaic machine was employed to assist a struggling national economy seems unfathomable.

Stevenson suggests its existence demonstrates our belief in scientific objects, and in turn Western knowledge constructs. As an object, it stands as a material testament to both economic concepts, and attempts to mould ‘developing’ countries within Western frameworks – the specific and local squeezed to both economic concepts, and attempts to

The Gift is considered a commanding life-size replica of Fairweather’s raft, displaying bulbous aeroplane wing tanks, wooden planks, bamboo, rope and tar – the sail a worn WWII parachute. Its weight is supported by four piles of National Geographic magazines – one visible cover reveals headlines including ‘Panama’, ‘Looters Rob Our Past’ and ‘In Defense of Collections’ and an IBM brochure – another clever linguistic link with the exhibition. Like much of Stevenson’s work, The Gift is allegorical on multiple levels; Fairweather’s raft was gifted to the locals of Roti Island which Stevenson suggests has ‘first contact’ appeal. Within the setting of the MCA, as both a museum and site of early contact in Sydney, The Gift considers how such encounters often turn sour due to aggressive processes of colonisation including ethnographic classification, misinterpretation and display of ‘other’ cultures within museums and ‘official’ histories. In a regional context The Gift references the traditional currencies of bartering and exchange of objects practised in the Pacific, and the gift of freedom relevant to Australia and New Zealand’s history of immigration and current media debates over refugees, asylum-seekers and the politicised expression ‘boat people’.

Despite the monumental appeal of Stevenson’s installations and his more recent and equally accomplished video works, the piece that I found the most rewarding and which was conceived for the MCA was Barbas y Bigotes (2011) and Sin barbas y sin bigotes (2011) – or ‘with beards’ and ‘without beards’. Tucked away in another hidden annex this ‘resource room’ comprised two glass display cases and a book-strewn MCA welding table. This installation pulled together a wealth of Stevenson’s research and archival material from the last twenty-five years, including artifacts, correspondence, sketches, models and photographs – a collection of clues to help us navigate the exhibition’s dense narratives. Similarly, it also worked to ground the audience after the purposely disorientating experience of the gallery spaces themselves. The inspiration for the title comes from Sergeant Jose Jesus Martinez’s theories of probability; beasts being one possible (and ridiculous) way of dividing the universe and, in turn, the equally discursive ambit of Stevenson’s career. As the artist states he neither wishes to ‘compartamentalise’ his work or ‘curate people through his life’. Rather Barbas y bigotes and Sin barbas y sin bigotes exemplify and cleverly expose the dot-to-dot game played out within Stevenson’s work, and give the audience the tools to decode and play along with its ongoing riddles.


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1. Term used by Michael Stevenson in an interview on the affiliated MCA micro-site: www.the-universe.com.au
2. Tony Shafrazi is also renowned for being the attacker (in 1974) of Picasso’s Guernica, which is depicted in one of Stevenson’s earlier drawing works and which was also included in the exhibition.
3. Quote taken from Michael Stevenson’s website: www.michaelstevenson.info
4. Better known as Bill, his full name was Alvan W. Philips and the machine was named The Phillips Machine.
5. Approximately fifteen Phillips Machines were produced, being purchased by numerous academic institutions.
6. Quote taken from Michael Stevenson’s text The Search for the Fountain of Prosperity, from www.michaelstevenson.info
7. Apparently referencing ‘money’ and ‘mania’.
8. Triggered by land reforms that saw land removed from the hands of international corporations and wealthy landowners and returned to the indigenous population
9. Possibly a hint that the Monosia arrived at the Central Bank of Guatemala faulty.
10. After being deported from Singapore to London on suspicion of being a spy, Fairweather enlisted the age-old ethos of labour as currency and managed to travel back to Australia without transacting any money.
11. Stevenson discusses this in an interview on the affiliated MCA micro-site: www.the-universe.com.au
13. The space also includes some older, and more recent, smaller works.
14. Sergeant Jose Jesus Martinez (Chuchú) was both a professor of philosophy and mathematics and an aide to Panama’s General Omar Torrijos in the late 1970s. A copy of one of his publications is on display within one of the cabinets, and his story and texts also inform the content and title of the video work Introduccion a la Teoria de la (2008).
15. Quote taken from an interview with Michael Stevenson on the affiliated MCA micro-site www.the-universe.com.au