

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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At the Galleries

AMONG THE HIGH POINTS OF THE WINTER were three seemingly diverse exhibitions: Shirin Neshat's new videos and photographs at Gladstone, William Kentridge's etchings, drawings, and works related to opera productions at Marian Goodman, and Rackstraw Downes's paintings at Betty Cuningham. I say "seemingly" diverse because despite the obvious differences between videos by an Iranian-born woman, works in a remarkable range of mediums by a South African man, and canvases by an Englishman long resident in New York, the three shows turned out to have more in common than one might suppose. Each artist, in an individual way, explored the complex relationship between perception and significance. Each made us question our assumptions about what we were confronted with and re-examine our conclusions about the meaning of what we thought we had seen.

Shirin Neshat's new films, *Munis* and *Faezeh*, are continuations of a project, begun in 2003, based on the novel *Women Without Men* by the Iranian writer Shahrnush Parsipur. Another section, titled *Zarin*, was included in Neshat's previous exhibition at Gladstone. According to the show's press material, *Women Without Men* is a "fantastic retelling of the 1953 coup d'état in which the CIA reinstated the Shah of Iran." The novel is an "interwoven tale of five Iranian women as they each seek freedom from their oppressive lives. Their struggle parallels that of their nation, a country fighting for a sense of independence from foreign forces." (Parsipur was jailed for her portrayals of women.) Neshat's short videos, which are related to a larger, full-length film project, are imaginative dissections of the individual stories of Parsipur's protagonists, although how close these reimaginings are to the book's narrative, I cannot say.

Yet even without firsthand knowledge of the novel, I suspect that anyone who saw *Zarin* will feel that the recent films are a great improvement over Neshat's earlier foray into Parsipur's territory. *Zarin* is the story of a prostitute whose sanity snaps; terrified by seeing men's faces as sinister, featureless blobs, she obsessively tries to cleanse herself in the hammam. The film had some arrestingly poetic images and some frightening ones—sometimes simultaneously—but in contrast to Neshat's preceding work, the storytelling seemed illustrational, overly specific, and rather jerky, with the staccato rhythm of what are now called "graphic novels." In *Munis* and *Faezeh*, Neshat's narratives unfold

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in seamless, dream-like sequences, now utterly plausible, now inexplicable. Violence is a subtext—in *Munis*, the events of 1953, street demonstrations, reprisals, and a suicide; in *Faezeh*, a rape—but much of the imagery is ravishing, especially in *Faezeh*, in which the protagonist wanders through a grove of trees, an oasis garden, and a dimly lit house, all muted hues and filtered light, that seem to be projections of her aspirations. In *Munis*, the upheavals of 1953 are conjured up with black-and-white sequences, photographed so that they at once suggest period news footage and Neshat's own recurrent motif of crowds surging towards undefined destinations. In both films, a moody ambiguity dominates. People behave reasonably, yet something is always askew. The boundaries between reality and fantasy blur; logic bends. In *Munis*, we are presented with an inverted image of a man and a woman neatly lying on the pavement; their conversation seems straightforward enough, but we gradually realize that they are not alive, an insight challenged when the woman rises and moves off, on her own, liberated at last (by death?) from constraints. In *Faezeh*, we are uncertain much of the time whether a woman we glimpse fleeing in the distance through the light-dappled garden is a projection of the abused heroine, an alter ego, or another person; only when the "real" figure seems to watch her own violation do the fragments coalesce.

I prefer Neshat when she is most oblique, when we are allowed multiple interpretations of her allusive visions. *Munis* and *Faezeh* suggested that, as she did in the work that established her reputation, Neshat once again trusts her images and sequences of images to carry meaning, rather than, as she did in *Zarin*, have her characters "perform" particular actions. I'm still not altogether convinced by Neshat's still photographs, although in last winter's exhibition, some of the photos, rather than appearing to be key frames from the films, selected for their desirability to potential collectors, seemed to be independent albeit related images that expanded the implied narrative of the videos; perhaps they prefigure future episodes. What the exhibition had in abundance was everything we have learned to associate with Neshat: the trappings of Middle Eastern otherness (or in this case, Moroccan otherness, as a surrogate Iran), the intensely evocative glimpses of particular places, the slow, ritualized pace of storytelling. *Munis* and *Faezeh* made me eager to see future sections of the project. And I must do what I should have done long ago: read *Women Without Men*.

Seeing Double, William Kentridge's exhibition at Marian Goodman, was at once an opulent demonstration of his interest in wide-ranging mediums—drawing, sculpture, printmaking, and filmmaking—and a systematic examination of perception and the way we construct meaning from visual clues. The works on view, all made in the last year, with various collaborators, belonged to three separate projects, but the conversation among them cut across boundaries, conceptually and materially. As the show's title implied, almost everything was presented in multiple guises, reflected in mirrors, or transformed by alterations in

material, process, or scale. Kentridge's touch—the evidence of his distinctive, fluent hand—and his orchestration of brooding tones both seduced the eye and created unexpected connections between otherwise disparate themes, while his investigations of optics forced us to think hard about just what we were seeing.

The heart of the show was an eight-minute film, *What Will Come*, 2006, based on the Italian-Abyssinian war of 1935—haunting, mysterious, and politically engaged, as Kentridge has taught us to expect of him. Fragments of the film's images appeared elsewhere in the show, apparently translated back and forth between several mediums, enlarged or reduced and changing slightly as the result of each iteration. Some became the basis of stereoscopic drawings and prints, including stereoscopic cards that, when we peered through the elegant viewers provided, became three dimensional—or, more accurately, two-and-a-half dimensional, with the strange pop-up book recession peculiar to the devices. Other motifs appeared as anamorphic images—drawings stretched and distorted almost to the point of being unrecognizable, returned to intelligibility when reflected on the curved surfaces of polished steel cylinders. Kentridge's cast of characters included camels, rhinos, a globe on ungainly legs, biplanes, sketchy villages, and more. The rhino appeared again, in one of a pair of large drawings related to celebrated prints by Dürer, installed facing each other and intended to be viewed in mirrors. Once again, our certainties about how we perceive things were challenged, as the mirrors made some of the drawings' multiple inscriptions legible and reversed others. We constantly checked the drawings against their reflections and vice versa, recapitulating Kentridge's own transformations of his images from etching to drawing and back again. The film, *What Will Come*, which provided an ambiguous narrative connecting these fractured motifs, was itself another exercise in anamorphy, projected on a round stainless table as a sequence of near-abstract distortions and reflected on a cylinder in the middle as a haunting evocation of a distant place in another time, with intimations of brutality; tinny music of the period offered an ironic contrast.

Kentridge's optical investigations were engaging, but the questions they raised about the reliability of perception and how we interpret what we see would have been far less engaging if his imagery were not so persuasive and powerful. Had his characters, settings, and situations been less allusive or discomfiting, the stereoscopic views and anamorphic tours de force would have simply been curiosities, tricks conceived to capture the viewer's attention but easily exhausted. Instead, Kentridge, as he almost always does, mesmerized us with the unspoken, open-ended suggestions offered by the animals, the enigmatic machines, the vaguely familiar settings, and the insinuated narratives. Kentridge is a master of conjuring up potent expression with a notably economical drawing style—some images verge on soft-edged, liquid silhouettes—and with the least complex of means—pools of wash,

rough lines, trapped patches of white. He acknowledges the role of his collaborators in his exploration of different mediums, but his distinctive presence and voice are always unmistakable. His images are as lean and as unforgettably direct as emblems, but they are also so nuanced and unpredictable that they reward prolonged attention. Kentridge's animated films enrich the associations provoked by his drawings, developing the implications of his work in other mediums by bringing their subtle fantasies to vivid life.

Down the hall, in Marian Goodman's project space, a suite of etchings recapitulated bird-catching images derived from Kentridge's engaging production of *The Magic Flute*, seen at the Brooklyn Academy of Music last year—a seemingly playful but profoundly thoughtful admixture of projections, animations, and unexpected inventions; smallish sculptures of rearing horses and enigmatic “riders,” along with watercolors, prints, and a horse-themed tapestry, provided a preview of the motifs the artist proposes for a production of Dmitri Shostakovich's opera *The Nose*, scheduled for the 2009–2010 season of the Metropolitan Opera. The prints and sculptures of the nose perched on horseback were particularly tantalizing. The production at the Metropolitan seems a long way off, alas, but I suspect it will be worth waiting for.

At Betty Cuninghame Gallery, twenty or so of Rackstraw Downes's paintings made between 2004 and 2007 bore witness to his ferocious investigation of the nature of perception, with special emphasis on the gap between true fidelity to what the eye sees and the conventions that we assume to be truthful. A painter committed to working directly from the motif, Downes divides his time between New York and a particularly featureless part of Texas, chosen for its unlikeness to the visually complicated, gritty, urban, industrial edges of the City that are often his preferred painting locales when he's in residence in the Northeast. The recent show included works made in both places. The New York pictures included uncanny views of unlovely sites under the massive steel structures that support elevated trains or cantilevered roadways, locations selected, it appeared, because of their peculiar geometry—unexpected curves or angles, or strange relationships to the street and to other buildings—although it was sometimes difficult to decide whether the peculiarities were dictated by the motif or by Downes's desire to encapsulate experience. (More about that later.) Two paintings presented us with morning and evening views of the steel substructure of the Henry Hudson Bridge, at the northernmost tip of Manhattan; the most recent work in the exhibition made severe poetry out of the dreary old Pulaski Skyway, by showing it to us from below, arcing suavely above the Hackensack River and framing a power plant.

The New York paintings, for all their economy and the essential nondescriptness of their motifs, were, in fact, full of incident, from the intricacy of girders and trusses to the odd resonance of the spaces defined by these great feats of civil engineering. Confronted by Downes's seemingly dispassionate records of the remote parts of the

outer boroughs or the literally marginalized edges of Manhattan, we were reminded of the density of habitation and the intensity of construction throughout the City and its environs. The Texas paintings, by contrast, appeared, at first acquaintance, to be about utterly uninhabited, perhaps uninhabitable places. Where the New York paintings deployed a palette that responded to the colors of sky, buildings, and other urban artifacts, and the wonderful light that so delighted Matisse when he visited the City, the Texas paintings seemed bleached—all lion-colored desert expanses under pale, heat-filled skies.

What the New York and Texas paintings shared was an illusion of eerie fidelity to the complexity of our surroundings, captured with a meticulous attention to detail worthy of a Netherlandish Renaissance painter—without, it goes without saying, any of Netherlandish Renaissance painting's jewel-like color or opulent imagery. Yet Downes shares something important with these unlikely predecessors. If we look for coherent perspectival schema or systematic construction of space in his pictures, we're bound to be disappointed. Despite his sophisticated understanding of the mechanics of illusionism, Downes's approach, like that of his Netherlandish ancestors, always seems empirical—whether or not it is. Rather than fitting the elements of his urban scenes and Texas landscapes into theoretical diagrams of conceptualized space, he makes images that appear to recapitulate his experience of looking. We retrace Downes's intense scrutiny of his motif, now gazing upwards, now down, shifting our heads slightly as we retrace the path of the artist's eyes, restlessly searching the vast expanse of wasteland before him and then recording each focused fragment of reality as part of an apparently convincing but patently synthetic whole.

Among the most compelling paintings at Betty Cunningham were several long, horizontals of a Texas horseracing track in an enormous, flat, empty landscape. Low hills defined the horizon, separating a washed-out sky from tawny, sunbaked near-desert. Tire tracks in what must be dry, sandy soil served as a kind of cursive drawing in one of the series, while in another, the stark planes of scattered, ad hoc constructions, built to provide minimal shade for animals and vehicles, were imposed, together with their shadows, like declarations of the power of the Platonic archetype over the brutal expanse of raw nature. These crisp planes became a kind of ideal, abstract counterpoint to the minimally inflected, ragged landscape. A group of small paintings recording what Downes calls the "circumambulation" of a six-sided bull barn was another highlight, although "six-sided" doesn't begin to account for the building's irrational shape, apparently odd to begin with and made odder still by lean-tos and additions that create new, almost incomprehensible profiles and roof lines. I was also taken by an interior of the Brooklyn studio of an artist friend (of Downes's and mine); formerly a movie theater, the vast, sky-lit space retained the skewed geometry of its former use, at least in Downes's interpretation. Like the rest of the paintings in the exhibition, it sneaked up on us. At first acquaintance, it

seemed, apart from its strange orthogony, fairly uneventful, devoid even of seductive color. Then, the sheer volume of the depicted space took over. The painting became an endlessly fascinating portrait of a palpable, contained void bathed in pearly light, a modern-day equivalent of those eighteenth-century Grand Tour paintings of the interior of the Pantheon.

At the ambitious, eccentric Storefront for Art and Architecture, in Soho, an exhibition of powerful photographs and quirky collages by Ramak Fazel—an Iranian-born U.S. citizen who arrived here at the age of two months, was educated at American schools, and now lives in Italy—offered an illuminating portrait of the present-day U.S. at the same time that it raised disquieting questions about this country's current attitudes toward the rest of the world. The photographs document Fazel's 2006 project of traveling across the entire U.S., mostly in a white Chevy van (which appears in some images), researching, visiting, and photographing the capitol building of every state; the collages, improvised with sheets of U.S. stamps collected by the artist as a teen-ager in Fort Wayne, Indiana, are giant postcards mailed from one state capitol to the next, their arrival time dictating the rhythm of his journey. Forty-nine capitols are recorded; Alaska is missing because of lack of funding.

The collage/postcards play wittily with the images on the stamps, deploying the variously sized rectangles like mosaic tiles or Cubist planes. One postcard turns stamps honoring the space program into a kind of diagonal rain of floating astronauts; another uses a series of folk art coffee pots and canisters as components in an orderly, loose-limbed still life. Christmas stamps with flying doves are scattered across the page like a flock of migrating birds, with each stamp's calligraphic "Peace on Earth" gaining hideous irony in today's political climate. That climate's unpleasant repercussions for Fazel were recounted in a *New York Times* article, shortly before the show opened. On a plane from Sacramento (capital of California) to Honolulu (capital of Hawaii), the artist described his project to a fellow passenger. Deciding that the dark-haired vaguely "foreign" person beside her was up to no good, this conscientious citizen photographed Fazel while he slept and reported him as a suspicious character. As Fazel attempted to complete his project, he discovered that he had been placed on a "watch-list"; when he tried to gain entrance to the capitol buildings, he was frequently stopped, interrogated, and harassed by local law enforcement officers and even by members of the F.B.I.

Fazel's photographs of the capitol buildings reflect this problematic situation. Some are images taken inside the buildings on the guided tours of the buildings he routinely joined; we see intimate views of the desks of state officials, decorated with family photos, or revealing shots of the elaborate interiors of public spaces, monuments to local pride, often populated by tour guides and visitors. But other capitol buildings were clearly unapproachable. Fazel photographed them from a distance, capturing glimpses of rhetorical domes seen behind parking

lots, looming in narrow spaces framed by trucks, or hovering above muscle cars. Collectively these distant views can be read as a kind of autobiography; the foregrounds celebrate the American vernacular that informed Fazel's Fort Wayne years, but the symbols of local political power in the country his family chose to adopt and where he was raised have been made inaccessible to him. They remain visible but far away.

The story of how Fazel was treated by law enforcement officers in the course of his project is appalling, but it is not what makes his work worth paying attention to. The collages have an antic charm in their own right, and the photographs, real power. Fazel has an unflinching eye for the eloquently incongruous—elegant architecture equipped with the most expedient furnishings and kitschy embellishments, formal settings inhabited by people wearing cheap, casual clothing—yet he presents these fortuitous absurdities uncritically, as rather touching visual phenomena. He offers us affectionate but unsentimental images of tour guides and officials in silly or unbecoming uniforms, reports on public spaces adorned with naïve wall paintings and really dreadful life-size color portrait photos. A no-nonsense female tour guide in a red shirt glares at a cage of stuffed eagles in Cheyenne, Wyoming. An elegant woman with silver hair clutches a coffee mug and reaches with apparently unnecessary drama across some dignitary's massive desk in Boise, Idaho.

These tacit narratives are subsumed by Fazel's elegant, deceptively straightforward compositions and his sensitivity to color. A memorable image of Salt Lake City, Utah, records a tiny but immaculately kept house with a table and some mismatched chairs on a patch of bare dirt in front of it; small to start with, the little house is dwarfed by the imposing dome-capped bulk of the state capitol rising behind it—High Baroque meets the cartoon. The photo is made compelling not only by the weird coexistence of the two buildings, but also by the way Fazel has fused them into a single massive form, his orchestration of a range of greys against a theatrical twilight sky, and his alertness to a subtext of orange elements that flicker through the foreground. A book documenting the project, its images, and its political ramifications is in its early stages. Anyone who missed the show should watch for news of its publication.