

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Lessons as Ancient as Babylon



Cyprien Gaillard's film "Artefacts," part of his MoMA PSI show, was partly shot with his iPhone in the Babylon province of Iraq.

A mood of romantic ennui suffuses the films of the French artist Cyprien Gaillard. In his eyes the human world is little more than a sublime accumulation of ruins. The myth of progress has no purchase on his philosophy. He is like a preternaturally old man who has seen it all and knows that what humanity has wrought does not amount to a hill of beans, as far as the universe is concerned. A visitor infected by the cosmic melancholy generated by Mr. Gaillard's exhibition "The Crystal World," at MoMA PSI, is left to wonder, what is there to hope for?

A funny thing about this is that Mr. Gaillard is only 32. His film "Desniansky Raion," on view in this show, was one of the hits of the New Museum's "Younger Than Jesus" exhibition in 2009. He is a canny player with post-modern aesthetics, semiotics and technology, and his dim view of humanity is as fashionable as his underproduced, avant-garde filmmaking. For all that, his show casts a spell of gloomy poetry.

The main event of the show, his first solo one in New York, is "Artefacts," a montage of scenes shot by Mr. Gaillard using his iPhone in the Babylon province of Iraq and at the Pergamon Museum in

"Cyprien Gaillard: The Crystal World" runs through March 18 at MoMA PSI, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens; (718) 784-2084, momaps1.org.

Cyprien Gaillard
The Crystal World
MoMA PSI

Berlin. He transferred the digital imagery to 35-millimeter film, which runs as a loop on a large projector in the gallery. The imagery fills a wall close to the size of a drive-in movie screen.

In disconnected scenes, we behold soldiers on duty in Iraq; different ancient sculptures in varying states of disrepair in museums and museum storage areas; and rows of apparently long-neglected earth movers. We visit the Ishtar Gate at the Pergamon and, back in Iraq, look out over desert landscapes and wander through deserted ancient ruins in the company of rifle-toting modern warriors. Speakers in the gallery hypnotically broadcast over and over the word "Babylon" from a song by the pop musician David Grey. You can cut the bleakness with a knife.

It is useful to know something about the Ishtar Gate. Built for King Nebuchadnezzar II around 575 B.C., it was one of eight big gateways into the city of Babylon. Made of blue-glazed brick with rows of golden, bas-relief chimera and aurochs (a kind of wild cow) decorating the flat walls flanking the arched portal, it has a theatrical look, like a set in a Broadway musical. Early in the 20th century, German archaeologists excavated it and whisked it off to Berlin, where its reconstruction was completed in 1930.

In Iraq toward the end of the century, Saddam Hussein ordered a major re-creation of the ancient city, including a simulation of the Ishtar Gate, but did not finish it.

The moral of Mr. Gaillard's visual poetry is easy to read: the hubris of every civilization, including ours, will have its just reward. The mythic Tower of Babel was built and destroyed by God in Babylon. Imagine the United States in ruins: it may be hard to accept, but our time will come.

"Desniansky Raion," the 30-minute film that made Mr. Gaillard's name in New York, offers a similar lesson in humility. In the first of its two parts, we witness from a faraway rooftop a daytime altercation between two gangs of young men in a parking lot and on a pedestrian bridge in Belgrade, Serbia, with high-rise apartment buildings hulking in the background. Symphonic music by the French composer Kouzoum creates an atmosphere of epic grandeur.

In the second half, also shot from a distance, a fireworks-and-light-projection display around an oblong apartment building culminates in the collapse of the building in terrific clouds of smoke. (A wall label says that authorities put on the pyrotechnic entertainment to appease local people upset about the building's planned demolition.) Pointless violence and delight in destruction: these seem to be driving forces of history.

Is that all there is? There may be some consolation to be found in envisioning human history embedded in archaeological time, as

did the earthwork artist Robert Smithson, obviously a major influence on Mr. Gaillard.

In different rooms of the exhibition you come upon sleek, narrow pedestals topped by glass cases enclosing metal objects resembling ancient sacred artifacts. Each object is, in fact, a different detachable tooth from the business end of an excavating machine. They are not especially interesting to look at, but the self-reflexive concept is catchy: a tool of archaeology becomes a halloved icon for a civilization that seeks to understand itself in the mirror of archaeology.

The rise and inevitable fall of the new, and of hubris.

Also, a series of collages called "Geographical Analogies," each a composition of nine Polaroid photographs in a diamond-shaped configuration, are presented in low cases. Selected from thousands of Polaroids Mr. Gaillard has taken during his travels, the collages revolve around the repetition of associated motifs from nature and culture, like cave entrances and the front doors of old buildings, or gnarly trees and weathered classical columns.

It is not just incidental that the Polaroid photograph is the product of an obsolete technology, an artifact of the waning age of analog. All things must pass.