

this is tomorrow

Contemporary Art Magazine

Hannah Black: Soc or Barb

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Review by Alexandra Symons Sutcliffe

Today there are many critical voices calling for America to look carefully at the political landscape of Europe in the interwar years. Hannah Black's second solo exhibition in America, 'Soc or Barb,' uses an abridged citation of the communist philosopher and activist Rosa Luxemburg to remind her audience of a previous political precipice, the failed 1918 German Revolution. 'Socialism or barbarism' was Luxemburg's warning against the continuation of capitalist society. In Black's exhibition the duality of socialism or barbarism is deleted and the scene that opens up is a space without coordinates. Black imagines it as one of 'nationalist dreams and YouTube yoga meditations.'

At the centre of the gallery is a cluster of clay figures, ankle height, roughly formed with visible thumbprints. Numbered and identified individually only as 'Creature,' they are neither monstrous nor animalistic: they're vaguely alien, perhaps doll-like, they are humanoid in their uprightness but some are missing faces. The creatures are mostly clothed in white t-shirts printed with infinity signs but the ones that don't wear t-shirts seem unaffected by their nakedness. Each one is positioned outwards and they do not interact with one another, they are mute and cute.

'New Dawn' is a 3-channel HD colour video installation of a flat horizon across which a sun idly drifts. Mounted on three separate walls, it encloses the clay non-society in a disjointed panorama. Positioned on the floor by the gallery entrance is a Philips Wake-Up Light with Sunrise Simulation set to 00:00. It's towards this readymade sun that the creatures are orientated, though if one did not look closely around the gallery the exhibition-goer could mistake them for a welcoming party. The audio from 'New Dawn' plays into the space and over the installation, seemingly un-synched to the monitors. There's a quiet intimacy to the montage of quotations, fragments of songs and conversations, which includes recording of friends, Fred Moten, Celine Dion and the British Union of Fascists.

Black places materials against medias, contrasting their properties and values, and in doing so works over the moulding of form and the making of meaning. As she writes in the exhibition text, 'In recent reality, a perceived collapse or blur of political categories reveals the bare materials that were there all along: flesh, and it's capacity to be made into bodies through thought, deed and subsequent history - flesh and the ideal of flesh.' The exhibition text is important to this show not simply as a registration of the ideas contained or performed through the objects but as a material in its own right. Almost half of the page is given over to exhibition credits: the friends in the audio, the songs included in the video, the texts cited and those who contributed to the production. This text by Black reads as an index of care and collaboration, and as a suggestion that in times of crisis we should not only look back to history to form meaning but also look across to one another.

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