

Ruti de Vries – ‘I saw a lot of people in the street, one of them asked me what time it was’

Artists Residence Herzlyia, 23 March – 4 May, 2019

Curator: Tali Ben Nun

Streets are spaces of passage. Sites of self-managed human ritual. An arena that offers random encounters between strangers on the move. Their “togetherness” is almost incidental. Usually unexpected. At times, pedestrians remain indifferent to each other. Sometimes, the movements of one affect others.

The street, if you would, is a microworld: a sequence of passageways from one space to the next, one place to the next, from period to period. A series of transition rites strung along time.

The sculptures Ruti De Vries positions in the Artist’ Residence gallery – an enigmatic almost-encounter between a group of autonomous figures in a sculptural event that adheres to no familiar order – are rooted in a static scenario, a space of vacillation. The composition that structures their relations is that of the passerby. The street users. They are still figures, but had De Vries animated them, they surely would have walked and walked and walked (motion is elemental to human nature. Man keeps going, with cause or without, with a destination or none at all). But even should they diverge to different directions, their momentary gathering has meaning.

De Vries responds to the imaginary demand for belonging from her creations by composing an archetypal collective for them, then placing it within a utopian architectural model. The result seems a cross between a fashion show and fantasy, a theatrical scene or homage to existential state. A pair of terrorists, a pope, a female police officer, a bimbo, a blonde, a street sweeper, a Clock-man, Ladder-man, and a Rag Man, and a Helicopter Lady – these are but some of the figures that inhabit her unplotted “play”, one that makes no distinctions between leading and supportive characters. Everyone plays a part.

The core of this sculptural ensemble created by De Vries is comprised of quick, spontaneous links between raw materials and accessories bought in dollar stores to junk collected from street pavements and dragged to her studio. There, in the basement floor, without natural light or fresh air, like a scientist in an old horror movie, she constructs human figures from anonymous (but useful) trash tossed to the street.

These human sculptures are trapped between realism and fantasy. They wait, some alone and others in pairs. Without direction and without purpose. Like sheep lost without their shepherd. They desire to go outside but remain stuck in place, in no-where, in any-where.

They try to find some rest, an anchor, a grip on this latticework of time and space. And yet, what dwelling can design itself to be home to both those who wish to stay and those wishing to go, those that anchor and those that wander?

The clash between the static nature of non-place and a reality that demands constant motion and rapid changes is similar to a frontal collision. The figures in the exhibition are like accident victims, caught in time and place.

The sculptural gestures are sharp and frozen: they stare, kneel, pray, bend their heads. There is only one focus of movement and sound in the exhibition – the animation work seen on the television screen in the “living room” of one of the figures. Titled **Fifth Time I Met You**, this animation depicts the love story between a man and a woman in five acts as they float in a space of geometric shapes to the soundtrack of ambient music, like extras in a happy clip played to a sad love song. He and she, together and apart, on their way to nowhere and coming from nowhere. Black eye balls roll into tears, limbs wilt, two become one, one becomes nothing.

Like an animal marking out territory for its offspring, De Vries establishes a residence within the residence for her sculptures. She takes over the structure in its entirety, inside and out. She plays with the double entendre of dwelling/residence, as if it were a functional component of the installation. She instills in it a homey atmosphere – a space for living – and then also implements practices of religious-ceremonial edifices. The blurring of the two functions intensifies the sense of alienness, then is enhanced further with De Vries’ use of everyday materials. The contrasts coincide in their physical and contextual dimensions alike: a sofa and TV screen face an altar and various offerings; a large painting is hidden behind a curtain, hinting at a living room window, but perhaps also a Torah cabinet; a modular garden shed (a symbol of rural bourgeois life) is positioned in the Residence garden, functions as a workshop or a worship site.

De Vries dresses the space as she dresses the figures. Thus, she separates the actual residence and the metaphorical one, marking and demarcating its territory. A home. An image that functions as architecture; architecture that functions as an image. The residence takes on the appearance of a tribal gathering place, with newly formed and unique observances: human totems reaching for the ceiling, wall art hung as altars, objects forming a talisman collection.

De Vries’ works are vaguely sweet, sloppy and intentionally inarticulate. They seem portentous, as if awaiting some fate, despite their colorful and amusing veneers. Not a monumental catastrophe, just the ongoing pathology of routine, monotonous anxiety.

For De Vries, craft is not merely a useful practice; it is a political, ethical, and aesthetic stance. With it, she maps the intimate, the singular, and the individual – and confronts it with the

collective and mass produced. Her artistic endeavors cannot be summed up with a single definition. She is a sculptor, painter, collage artist, seamstress, graphic designer, and animator. Her realism results from reciprocal action and reaction between media, materials, cultures, traditions, inspiration sources, and influences. She probes beneath the immediate layer of the consumer culture, delving below its surface to marry it with myths, superstitions, sorcery, fashion, pop, punk, superheroes, obsessions, and clichés. Lack of hierarchy, ingenuity, and an ad-hoc attitude to creating art are values that form the roots of her work, those define her. It is an art fed from compulsive collecting, hoarding, and stockpiling. Art that sketches an alternative culture, undermining accepted methods but doing so without defiance, simply with the wonder and joy of this role reversal and the possibility of revitalizing street junk with new life, creating a new wealth of meanings in something grown worn, used, redundant.

In the studio, the complete assimilation between the artist and her sculptures seems chilling. Alongside shelves, heaps of materials, boxes and paraphernalia, De Vries is also surrounded by pseudo-human figures. She becomes one of them, and a figure of the artist herself, a woman with a long black ponytail that provides her with her superpowers, appears in paintings and animation works.

Historically, the link between her works and that of popular culture and its typical consumer goods is reminiscent of the Dada movement, Duchamp's ready-mades, Pop-Art and the local Israeli "Want of Matter" theory of perception.

In her aspiration to bring the transcendent down to street level, much like her choice to use commonplace and daily materials, De Vries is the 21st century version of a "Want of Matter" artist. "Version 3.0", if you wish. Her choice of leftovers and remnants stems from a fantastic, infectious fascination with extracting new cultural depths from the simplest and lowest materials. Things discarded as objects are now