

Perth Festival dazzles with best visual arts line-up in the country

By John McDonald

March 1, 2016 – 2.34pm



It's often said that the Perth art scene suffers by its isolation, but nowadays the pain doesn't seem too intense. In the arts the high point of every year is the Perth International Arts Festival. Of all the festivals that take place in cities around the country, Perth has the best and most dynamic visual arts program. It's largely thanks to curator, Margaret Moore, who co-ordinates the needs and ambitions of all the city's major art venues, producing a display that resembles an impromptu biennale.

This year Moore has pursued artists that celebrate "the visceral, the allegorical and the psyche". The two central attractions are *Bharti Kher: In Her Own Language* at the Lawrence Wilson Gallery, and *The Secret Garden* by Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg, at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (until April 24).



Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg's *The Secret Garden*.

Some may remember Bharti Kher's fibreglass sculpture of a life-sized elephant covered in small bindis (the stick-on dots Hindu women wear on their foreheads), in the 2011 exhibition, *21st Century*, at Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art. It's hard to ignore the elephant in the room, but even without such a drawcard Kher's show embraces a love of spectacle.

A series of large, brightly coloured works resemble abstract paintings, but on closer inspection one finds they are hyperactive collages formed by applying thousands of bindis to a canvas. The dots come in many different sizes, occasionally rising from the picture plane in concentric accretions, like miniature stupas. These pieces have a molecular dimension, as if the dots were coalescing under a microscope to form the DNA of unknown bodies.



Carsten Holler and Mans Mansson's video of Congolese musicians, Fara Fara.

Two large, figurative sculptures, *Warrior with Cloak and Shield* (2008) and *Cloud Walker* (2013) are made from female body casts altered by the addition of curving antlers; a leaf the size of a shield; a pitchfork, and garments dipped in resin. These figures may be seen as allegories for the strong, assertive woman in a society that worships any number of goddesses but still treats a wife as a husband's private property.

This theme is continued by a series of empty saris draped around pillars. These pieces are described as portraits but the actual subject is nowhere to be seen. One gets an impression of personality from the sari itself, suggesting women who are both invisible and strongly present.

The formal elegance of Kher's work is contradicted by the violence and vulgarity of *The Secret Garden* by Swedish duo, Djurberg and Berg. The breakthrough for Nathalie Djurberg came with an installation of sculptures and claymation videos at the 2009 Venice Biennale, where her no-holds-barred style set her apart from the tepid efforts of many other artists.

Since then, Hans Berg, who supplied the music, has become a full part of the act. Together they have produced an acid-trip fantasy with echoes of *Alice in Wonderland*, in which a video of a cartoonish, claymation hare, presides over a "garden" made up of giant leaves, acorns, flowers, cushions and upside-down iceblocks that occupies the entire ground floor of PICA.

This is only the beginning of an exhibition that uses every possible method to grab viewers' attention – from clay sculptures to interactive light displays, atmospheric music and a series of claymation videos that capture the blood-curdling nature of fairy tales as told by the Brothers



Grimm. It's a show that defies categorisation but exerts a grotesque fascination.

Something similar may be intended with Ryan Trecartin's *Six Movies* at the Art Gallery of Western Australia (until May 8). Curator, Robert Cook, who writes like a besotted fan, tells us that Trecartin "has expanded what is thought possible in the realm of art". Cook emphasises the pleasure to be had with these works, and says they are "laugh-out-loud funny".

Once again I'm left marvelling at the infinite flexibility of personal taste. What fills the curator with admiration made me feel like I was having my brain pulped. I watched 3½ of six long videos, and that's not counting the works by Trecartin I've endured in other exhibitions. Despite their apparent anarchy, these films are carefully scripted and structured, but this doesn't make them any more bearable.

The characters are like extras from a John Waters film, reciting skits that MTV rejected. They are gratingly narcissistic, camp and shallow. It's all deliberate – and broadly satirical, but the humour is so self-conscious, so smug and undergraduate that it seems more likely to alienate viewers.

The unusual work is *Junior War* (2013) consisting of grainy footage shot during the last nights of Trecartin's high school graduation in Ohio, showing bored and stoned teenagers smashing mailboxes, getting drunk, and acting like idiots. Is this a sombre document about growing up in America today, or a celebration of youthful catharsis? Either way, it's a depressing view of a generation that has gorged on consumer goods and emptied itself of ideals.

It was surprising to find more simple humanity in Dani Marti's show, *Black Sun*, at the Fremantle Arts Centre (until March 28). Marti is best known for a kind of super macrame, featuring knotted ropes and cables made from



Bharti Kher's Cloud Walker.



Bharti Kher's Warrior with Cloak and Shield.
STEFAN ALTENBURGER PHOTOGRAPHY



coloured nylon and polyester. Through colour and form, these pieces can generate a wider range of responses than might seem possible at first.

Seeing a large body of work allows a deeper understanding of Marti's preoccupations. The stand-out pieces are aluminium frames encrusted with costume jewellery, beads and trinkets. These panels have an astounding density, inviting us to keep looking ever more closely at a mass of cheap, decorative frippery transformed into an imposing work of art. One becomes conscious of the hours of labour behind every set of beads, and the delight that even the simplest item might bring to its owner.

Dani Marti, detail from *The Pleasure Chest*.

Marti also makes strange, unsettling videos, such as one with a blind man named Bob, who simply needed to touch someone and experience an intimacy that most people take for granted. It's rare for an artist to combine vast, looming sculptural installations with such minimal videos, but this exhibition gives the impression that everything is tightly knotted together.

There may be some vague relationship between the artists showing in *Face to Face* at the John Curtin Gallery (until May 1), but one struggles to find common ground between Jon Tarry's abstract, interactive installation that allows the viewer to generate white noise as he or she walks around a room, and Shaun Gladwell's latest video, in which the artist falls off his skate board in Paris, over and over. There will be plenty of art aficionados eager to see this is an allegory for the fall of the rebel angels.

The most engaging part of the show is *Fara Fara*, a dual channel video by Carsten Holler and Mans Mansson, which features a musical duel between two leading pop stars of the Congo. They may live in one of the most desperate places on earth, but when it comes to music, the Congolese are the kind of fans that every artist craves.

I didn't see Fiona Foley's collaborative exhibition at Form, as it hadn't opened when I was in Perth, but I made the trek to Success, a basement gallery beneath an abandoned department store in Fremantle, which has been turned into an alternative space by two hard-working entrepreneurs, Guy Loudon and Dale Buckley. The latter has spent so long in this concrete cave that he's being treated for vitamin D deficiency.

The show, *No Confidence* (at until May 30), provides a justification for those weary months in the gloom, bringing together original, mainly video-based works by artists from many parts of the world. The title refers to liberal democracy, which seems shakier with each new financial crisis and each Republican Primary. It's a big theme interpreted with wit and imagination by a group of artists whose very presence in this show tells us that Perth is not isolated at all, but switched on to a global art network.

For true isolation one must closely examine a multi-channel video display by Felix Kalmenson, who has dutifully recorded the opening and closing ceremonies of Wall Street, every day for a year. It's always a different group of people clapping their hands in front of a different advertising logo. Some days there is a raucous crowd on the platform, but in one lonely panel there is only Tony Abbott and a friend, telling the world that Australia is open for business.

