



Moana Project Space **THEATRES**

Theatres is an international exhibition of contemporary video art which examines the landscape of geopolitical conflict and contention. Taking contested terrain as its subject, the exhibition critically examines both literal and ideological battlegrounds as borders, divides and areas of violent exchange. Featuring recent works by a diverse spectrum of acclaimed international practitioners, *Theatres* interrogates the troubling relationships between the medium of video, modern warfare and theatrical spectacle.

Theatres of war have always compelled people, both by the nature of their intensity and the promised spectacle of death and disaster. Given the devastation wrought by mechanised warfare upon people and the landscapes they inhabit, this compulsive interest in conflict has an unsettling dynamic. A fascination with the images of contemporary conflict has undertones of voyeurism and exploitation, marked by a distance from reality as war is mediated through surveillance footage, drone photography, video games and digital simulations, or through the amateur videos captured by combatants and spectators, and shared online. War is de-politicised, and the consumption of war imagery almost becomes a form of entertainment.

Against this media-rich saturation of images, the artists in *Theatres* have embraced the seductive and spectacular capabilities of the moving image to create videos of disturbing beauty or shocking ugliness. Works such as

Richard Mosse's *United (Iraq)* document the spartan and beauty of landscapes depopulated through the sustained application of violence. Filmed on a disused firing range on the outskirts of an anonymous Iraqi settlement, the work depicts the remnants of obliterated targets as expressive sculptural objects in a desert landscape, whose timeless beauty suggests a grim eternity to the ongoing conflict. A dispassionate voiceover intones the names of sites of conflict in Iraq, some triggering a rush of recognition – Basra, Baghdad, Babel – others as disturbingly anonymous as the site itself.

Other works are even more explicit in embracing theatricality – Cyprien Gaillard's *Desniansky Raion* is a 30-minute opera which depicts the open wounds of the post-Soviet, post-modern European landscape, and elevates it into an opera with a regressive and ruinous vision. Gaillard glibly pairs footage from a brawl between rival fight clubs in St Petersburg with images of decaying failed housing projects across Serbia and the Ukraine, culminating in the demolition of an apartment building punctuated by coloured light and pyrotechnics. *Desniansky Raion* reveals the problem of presenting conflict as an aesthetic experience, and attacks the Western conceit of pointless violence and delight in destruction as a form of entertainment.

In counterpoint, works such as Hiwa K's *This Lemon Tastes of Apple* record the collapse of filmic unreality in the face of real-world conflict. The video is a document of the artist's intervention into a civil protest in southern Kurdistan where, accompanied by guitar, Hiwa wades into the crowd and rallies them by playing Ennio Morricone's harmonica motif from the movie *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The iconic score is transmuted into a signal of

protest, a call to go forth and a song for the unexpressed, but is abruptly brought to an end by salvos of tear gas and live ammunition, which turn the protest into a rout. The resultant video is a play on the contrast between theatrical violence and the realities of a blood-soaked street in contemporary Iraq, which presents rare insight into a brutal conflict during the Arab Spring – largely undocumented and unnoticed by the West.

Timed to coincide with the Anzac Centenary, and in light of ongoing combats across the Middle East, northern Africa and eastern Europe, *Theatres* is a significant and timely reminder of some of the realities, and bizarre unrealities, which characterise these sites of modern conflict.

Dale Buckley, Laetitia Wilson and Guy Loudon

Exhibition Curators

Participating artists:

Cyprien Gaillard (France)
Laurent Grasso (France)
Iman Issa (Egypt)
Hiwa K (Iraq)
Eva and Franco Mattes (Italy)
Richard Mosse (Ireland)
Ahmet Ogut (Turkey)
Baden Pailthorpe (Australia)
John Smith (UK)
Amir Yatziv (Israel)
