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Exploring America

How we see America, how America sees itself

Lucy Felder, December 7, 2009

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NOW MAGAZINE

What does America mean in our collective unconscious?

Beirut Art Center's stunning exhibition *America* presents different artists' attempts to answer that question - particularly pertinent in a country that has been polarized for the past four years in part over how to view the US role here.

But this is no clichéd critique of the world's leading superpower, and US voices lead the charge in holding up the cultural construct of an idealized America - as opposed to the United States - to scrutiny.

"It's an exhibition that makes us think critically about America as a concept, an image, rather than a country," says Sandra Dagher, curator and co-founder of Beirut Art Center. *America* does not attempt to be exhaustive. "We present several visions - we didn't want to do either a criticism or an appreciation."

America provides a rare opportunity to see a number of leading international contemporary artists' work here in Beirut. A set of garishly colored photographs from the self-styled "democratic lens" of William Eggleston are a case in point and demonstrate the father of art color photography's love of the bizarre in the banal. A family in a car stopped at the lights, a woman asleep in a bedsit, a black congregation crowded onto the pews of a small, run-down church - Eggleston revels in capturing a moment no one else would bother to remark upon and evokes a strange sense of voyeurism without purpose.

Another giant whose work is on show is German artist Joseph Beuys, with his 1974 black-and-white video *I like America and America likes me*. Beuys filmed himself at a New York gallery trapped in a room for several days with a coyote, a holy animal to the Native Americans. Man and beast develop the trust needed to co-exist in the room's confines. "You get the feeling it's a statement on the persecution of the American Indians," Dagher says. "It's amazing that he was doing this in the 70s. Beuys was one of the first performance artists, and he's one of the most important artists, but not many people here know him."

Other works deal with aspects of the American dream and the way the States sees itself. Particularly arresting are Grete Pratt's photographic explorations of how America commercializes and popularizes its history, from historical re-enactments of the Wild West, to a towering plastic Native American or teepee-style lodgings at a shabby motel.

Matt McCormick's video installation *Future so bright: Motor Hotel* has a similar feel, but a touch of genuine nostalgia accrues in frame after frame of abandoned motels along the fabled but now disused Route 66, their once-bright signs and mascots and drained pools, relics of the heyday of the automobile.

Post-9/11 anxiety

No exhibition on the idea of America could disregard the post-September 11 US preoccupation with security. A series of photographs, pulled from the Internet, shows US sites and the names of those arrested for attempting to take similar pictures. Unsurprisingly, many Arab names appear in the roll-call, while the locations range from security installations such as nuclear plants to the more ridiculous: New York's Times Square or the Statue of Liberty, for example, or the Staten Island ferry taken by an unnamed "Middle Easterner".

Linked to the issue of censorship is Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal's presentation of a video game, adapted by Al-Qaeda from an American game "Quest for Saddam" and tweaked again by the artist, who inserted himself in the game as a suicide bomber. A study in stereotypes, as well as a comment on the plight of the Iraqis, the work when unveiled in New York provoked outrage and protests decrying Bilal as a terrorist.

A different take on a similar theme, in *Case sensitive America*, Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri ask how the Guantanamo Bay prison camp could exist in our time. This absorbing 40-minute video brings together the history of the US presence in the bay and contemporary, related phenomena in juxtaposed shots that roll endlessly like footage taken from a security camera.

A longer view of the US role as world policeman comes from legendary Palestinian newspaper cartoonist Naji Al-Ali, who was assassinated in London in 1987, witnessed as always by the iconic barefoot boy, Handala.

The only Lebanese artist on show is Ziad Antar, with a series of timeless black-and-white photographs taken from the vantage point of historic postcards of New York, using expired film from the 70s. Despite polarized views on America in Lebanese society - as Dagher says, for some it is a model, for others the devil itself - few modern artists are exploring the theme. "It wasn't a conscious decision, we found that there weren't that many Lebanese artists working on America whose works fit the exhibition," Dagher says. "It was quite a surprise."

America runs at the Beirut Art Center until January 16.

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