

FRIEZE



FEATURE - 01 FEB 2012

In Focus: Neil Beloufa

Documentary films and sci-fi encounters;
assumption, truth and magic

Let us imagine that *Plato's Republic* (c.380 BCE) is the first example of Utopian science-fiction, albeit one best known for its curiously dystopian set-up. This episode comes in Book VII: a dark cave, a large fire, a group of manacled prisoners watch a tableau of shadows flickering across the cave walls, created by a procession of people 'carrying vessels and statues and figures of animals'. Forced to view this perpetual display, they become accustomed to the shapes of the objects through their silhouettes. When the prisoners are set free from their screen-based existence and can see the real objects in natural light, they no longer recognize them.

Skip some 2,400 years to present-day London. A ramshackle plywood construct houses a screen on which we see a film of figures looking out on a vista of tropical vegetation through the windows of a Modernist house. A large banana leaf bobs limply in the breeze. Curiously, air bubbles and creases start to appear in the landscape as our eyes become accustomed to the gloom. This film, Neil Beloufa's *Untitled* (2010), shown at The David Roberts Art Foundation last year, is based on an anecdote the artist heard about a house near Algiers, which was abandoned by its wealthy owners during the political unrest in the 1990s and occupied by a terrorist group. They lived there for three years and left it spotless. The idyllic landscape we see is in fact a series of full-scale inkjet prints, which the artist



Kempinski, 2007, DVD still. Courtesy Balice Hertling, Paris, François Ghebaly, Los Angeles, and ZERO ..., Milan

photographed and used to wallpaper a life-size model of the house for his film set. Actors playing the landlord of the house, the gardener and the neighbours imagine what the terrorists had done there, how they lived, how they ate. More importantly, they question why the group chose to live in a house with floor-to-ceiling glass windows on all sides.

This re-imagined scene is typical of Beloufa's exploration of the hazy shades of narrative, make-believe and truth that underpin the representations of real-world events. Suppositions, assumptions and conjecture lie at the heart of his films' often unscripted dialogues and interviews, while carefully borrowed tropes from sci-fi, TV, advertising and theatre make his sleight-of-hand slippages from purported documentary to fantasy all the

more convincing. Beloufa insists on the presentation of his videos as objects, more so than as legible narratives. Assemblages of plywood, paper and metal; angularly positioned PVC and glass screens; littered sculptural assemblages and photographic prints foreground, surround and fracture the viewing experience of his films.

For his exhibition 'Les Manques Contenus' (The Missing Content), which opened at Balice Hertling, Paris, in September, Beloufa presented two films within a modular arrangement of screen dividers and shelving units. *People's passion, lifestyle, beautiful wine, gigantic glass towers, all surrounded by water* (2011) is, ostensibly, a series of interviews Beloufa carried out with apparent residents of a newly built residential development in an unnamed North American city. The artist's footage shows large high-rise apartments overlooking pristine lawns and meandering pathways, evoking a middle-class paradise of sunshine, cyclists and joggers. Each interviewee seems unflinchingly positive about the place, further raising suspicion about the truthfulness of their accounts and whether they are, in fact, paid actors in a promotional video. It turns out they are people the artist approached in Vancouver while on a residency there. Beloufa asked them to talk about an ideal place where they would like to live - either fictive or real - the only directive being to maintain a cheerful disposition.



'Les Manques Contenus' (The Missing Content), 2011, installation view, Balice Hertling, Paris. Courtesy Balice Hertling, Paris; photograph: Guillaume Zicarelli

Using a similar ploy of uncoupling what is shown onscreen and what his subjects describe, the film *The Analyst, the researcher, the screenwriter, the CGI tech and the lawyer* (2011) shows what we immediately assume to be footage of a crime in progress shot from a police helicopter. Four experts from each of the professions cited in the film's title give their commentary on what they believe is taking place. Coherence and probability seem the only checks and balances on the authority of their accounts. But their baseless assumptions and stylized imaginings overtake what we see in the actual footage: the first narrator muses that the driver of the red truck the camera follows has had a fight with his girlfriend and has followed her 'across the river, over the bridge'. The lawyer is cagey, reasoned and analytical; the others far less so. One claims that this sort of area is a perfect place for terrorist organizations to be creating weapons of mass destruction. The film's focus is on the assumptions, prejudices and fantasies that arise when the viewers are given no background information.

In Beloufa's earlier works, such as his films *Kempinski* (2007) and *April the Second* (2009), he employed simple but disruptive commands to eke out the proximity of the more obviously fantastical aspects of belief - those of magic and science-fiction, respectively. Shot near Bamako in Mali, *Kempinski* is a series of interviews with people illuminated by a lamp they hold or place near them while the cold blue neon

of a searchlight at the top of a large metal tower ominously watches over them. *Kempinski* hinges on the neat conceit of asking the interviewees to talk about the future in the present tense. A man describes making love to his wife by thinking of her; another describes sentient cars that act of their own volition. For *April the Second*, the artist planted a large white monolith in the middle of a Parisian street and documented the resulting bewilderment of passing motorists using three hidden cameras in parked motorbikes. Both the monolith and the metal tower act as ciphers for a strange, alien presence - material signifiers of the uncanny quality that pervades Beloufa's films. These mysterious objects, much like the jars and vessels seen by our cave dwellers for the first time, are a reminder that the flickering forms of representation are perhaps the safer, more comforting illusions after all.

Neil Beloufa lives and works in Paris, France. He has had recent solo exhibitions at Balice Hertling, Paris; Kunsthaus Glarus, Zurich, Switzerland; The Western Front, Vancouver, Canada; Saprophyt, Vienna, Austria; and ZERO ..., Milan, Italy (all 2011). This year he will have solo shows at the Institut Français, Amman, Jordan; Kunstraum Innsbruck, Austria; and François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles, USA.