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Critic's Guide - 22 NOV 2018

Your Guide to Amsterdam Art Weekend 2018

BY CARINA BUKUTS

From David Claerbout's 'rigged' election to Jimmy Robert's homage to Stanley Broun, the best shows and openings for the annual art event

Gabriel Lester, 'Shake a Face'

Sam Samiee, 'Casino Copernicus'

Galerie Fons Welters

23 November 2018 – 12 January 2019

For 20 years, Galerie Fons Welters has supported young artists by following a strategy of double presentations: while the gallery uses the main space to present works by artists from its regular programme, the front space is always dedicated to a young position. During Amsterdam Art Weekend the gallery presents two exhibitions by Sam Samiee and Gabriel Lester. Samiee, who took part in this year's Berlin Biennale, aims to unite Western visual culture with the literary culture of the East. His installations, often consisting of paintings and objects, break with the iconography of traditional European painting and are instead based on a Persian concept of combining ethics and aesthetics. For his solo show 'Casino Copernicus' he combines the psychoanalytic concept of 'the unconscious', referring to theories by Jean Laplanche and Julia Kristeva, with the idea of painting as a gamble. In the main space, Gabriel Lester's 'Shake a Face' gives an overview of several series of works the artist has created over the past couple of years that all focus on the concept of metamorphosis in relation to contemporary society.

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REVIEW - 20 JAN 2017

Gabriel Lester

CAC Vilnius, Lithuania

BY GEORGE VASEY

In 'The Nine Day Week', his solo exhibition at CAC Vilnius, Gabriel Lester weaves fantastical narratives around commonplace items: a building for stick insects; artificial trees piled in the corner of the gallery; Andy Kaufman's alter-ego Tony Clifton's jacket remade by a Chinese tailor. Recalling theatrical props, Lester's sculptures are often accompanied by back-stories revealed in the exhibition's accompanying interpretation. In 7 (2016), made in collaboration with the artist Valentina Desideri, a line of sandbags on the floor supposedly contain healing rituals based on the seven bodily chakras that the artists have written down, burned and mixed with semi-precious stones. Or have they? Without opening the bags, it would be difficult to verify their contents. Like any compelling narrator, Lester asks us to take a leap of faith.

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Doubt pervades this exhibition, which represents the second part of 'The Itinerary of Twists', a touring show of Lester's recent projects following 'Unresolved', held earlier this year at De Appel Arts Centre in Amsterdam. Including collaboration, works by other artists, and remixes of older pieces by Lester, the show betrays the artist's background as a rapper, musician and film director. Like a big-budget hip hop album, the exhibition is an ensemble, situating Lester as the nexus within an expanded network. While the gallery space is bathed in a crepuscular light, the works are expertly spotlit, amplifying their theatrical qualities. The protean nature of Lester's practice – shifting between moving image, sculpture, text and installation – is anchored in the vocabulary of cinema and theatre.

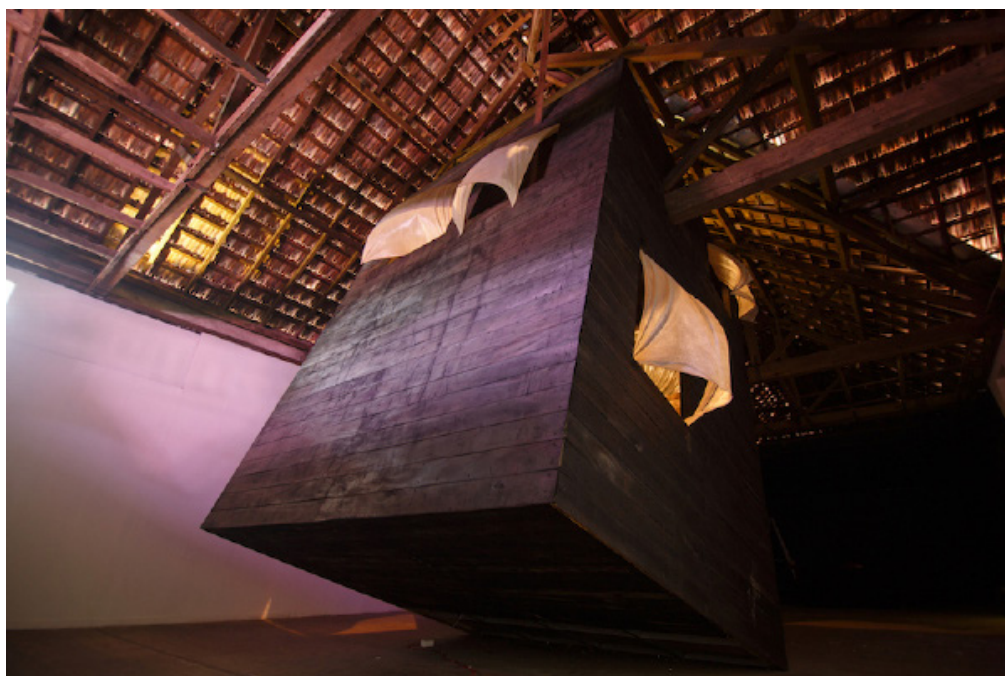
The Tragedy (2016), made in collaboration with artist Jonas Lund, consists of a camera lens embedded in a false wall. As I look through it at the street below, its mechanical iris opens and closes, its rhythm, according to the accompanying text, dictated by a 'moon based algorithm'. The cosmic and incidental merge, with the residents of Vilnius becoming unwitting protagonists in an ad hoc piece of street theatre. As I watch a couple chatting on the pavement I start to feel like James Stewart in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). If I look long enough, will meaning emerge? Life, unlike cinema, rarely provides a convenient conclusion, and Lester's work is situated in this space of ongoing suspense. In *On the Rocks* (2016), a group of nondescript wooden chairs with their legs cut at different points lie crookedly on the floor. The feeling of unease is heightened when I learn that the amputations were performed after Lester's show by staff at the beleaguered De Appel, as a way of lamenting the gallery, which was recently threatened with closure. Damaged but not quite broken, the chairs appear to be on the verge of sinking, yet is buoyed by an ineffable spirit.

The most explicitly political work in the show is *Murmur* (2016), made with Russia's radical theatre company Teatr.doc during the 6th Moscow Biennial in 2015. In the video, a small orchestra is temporarily incarcerated inside a civic building. Small holes have been cut out of the wall to allow them to play their instruments on the other side. The image flicks between their protruding arms and legs and the musicians bickering amongst themselves on the other side of the wall. In the context of the Russian government's increasingly prohibitive attitude towards dissent (Teatr.doc have faced censorship), Lester's film makes a typically wry critique. With artists and musicians like Pussy Riot facing actual imprisonment, *Murmur* describes a situation where creativity may be celebrated but criticality is scorned. The wall hides a deeper discord beneath the performed conviviality. In the sculpture *Open Minded* (2016), Lester has added crude eye-like holes to the back of two Greek plaster busts, offering a clear line of sight through their hollow heads. The work suggests that art can be a way of looking through someone else's eyes – the more we see, the less we know, and meaning can start to proliferate in the lacunae.

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ELEPHANT
THE ART CULTURE MAGAZINE



5 Questions with Gabriel Lester

Text by Emily Steer

Gabriel Lester was born in Amsterdam, where he is currently based. He has shown extensively around the world including Marrakesh, Sydney, Liverpool, Moscow and Venice, and his work can currently be viewed at Kochi-Muziris Biennale.

Lester has a background in experimental cinema, but while many of his works have a cinematic feel to them they often exist in three dimensions as ambitious installations which are also influenced by architecture, music, performance, sculpture and, in recent years, death.

Death is the central theme of *Dwelling Kappiri Spirits*, which is currently showing as part of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, and follows on from a series of works which began with *Melancholia in Arcadia*. Within this installation, a floating room captures a non-existent breeze, with curtains billowing and a cigar left burning. *Dwelling Kappiri Spirits* resonates on both a cultural and a personal level for the artist, who commemorated the passing of a friend and fellow artist within the work.

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Can you tell me a bit about the work you're currently showing at Kochi-Muziris Biennale and how the piece responds to the title *Forming in the Pupil of an Eye*?

The art installation with frozen curtains, like the one I made for the Kochi Biennale, has a long-standing history in my practice. The very origins of this work, so also the work in Kochi, is the notion of a moment in time, a frozen moment in time as it were, between life and death. In my family tradition whenever someone passes away, almost immediately the windows of the room will be opened so that the soul may travel from the earth to the heavens. I have captured exactly this moment in a series of works, starting with *Melancholia in Arcadia* (2010).

For the Kochi biennale, I revisited this body of work, this ritual if you like, by looking into the local myths and history, and was immediately inspired by those souls of Kappiri spirits still wandering around. These are the souls of African slaves that were once killed by the Portuguese, so their souls would protect the treasures they had hid from the Dutch who concurred Kochi in 1662. The local people believe that these souls are still wandering around and in order to alter these spirits, they light cigars on dedicated shrines.

The fact that this is strongly linked to the country of my origin, the Netherlands, is one of those coincidences that I believe determines much of an artistic practice, being that sometimes one chooses a topic, but equally the topic can choose the artist. As such I believe the spirits found me.

As for how the piece responds to the title *Forming in the Pupil of an Eye*, I could say that the entire set up on my installation, the billowing curtains frozen in time, the tilting house as if tumbling and the eternal cigar smoking, proposes ideas to form as a result of perception. One imagines movement and time, through the way these have been halted in the installation. But in all honesty, titles of exhibitions are ways to frame a collection of ideas, rather than the artworks becoming illustrations of such titles.

The piece addresses death, in this case, a personal death for you. Was this something you knew you wanted to include from the beginning or was it an element that came through on a more subconscious level as you worked?

In this case, I was actually requested to continue with the work I started some years ago, *Melancholia in Arcadia*. So I was really travelling a road I have taken before and meanwhile looking for new impulses and forms. As a matter of fact the subject of death, or life, is something very present in my work. I have always been fascinated by things that appear and disappear, by being and not being. Earlier in my work, I wasn't aware to what degree the subject was present. Later on, it did gain prominence as I started to communicate with both the world of the living and dead. I think an artist can do such a thing in a very special way, unlike religion or other dogma. Addressing the subject of life, death and afterlife is something I feel is important to investigate and is a very rich subject.

You work across many disciplines. Is there one that you feel most at home with, or that you often turn to when beginning to form ideas?

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My background is experimental cinema. When you think about cinema, and I'm not the first person to mention this, of course, it is an art form that actually embraces all art forms. Cinema has also been referred to as the impure media, exactly because it's never just cinema—it's always a combination of media and art forms. Thus cinema is photography, literature, theatre, sound, light, scenography, choreography and so forth. My art is in many ways like cinema, always a combination of different art forms. If I have to mention the most important art forms to my practice, I'd have to say music, cinema, literature in architecture—and in that order.

You often work to a vast scale, both in size and ambition. While forming works, do you have many planning or sketching stages and is the development process quite free or do you have clear ideas of the direction a work will take?

Most of my ideas start with an essence, something that completely makes sense to me. Such a first thought has to be so powerful, that whatever happens after will only enrich it. I guess this would be the stage of the basic concept, where an idea is so clear and strong for me that I want to make it and start thinking about its form. Then, depending of course on the kind of media that I'm using, it does need a lot of stages and it does need a lot of sketching. I have people that work for me, people that are actually good at visualizing my ideas. It's never immediately spot on but little by little things to do tend to evolve into the final form I envision.

What's next for you in 2017?

For this year I have a number of exhibitions planned. Last Friday, 20 January, the Frans Hals Museum in Harlem opened an exhibit of a work they have acquired, called *How to Act*. The next thing after that will be a solo show on 13 April at my gallery in New York, RYAN LEE Gallery. Then 1 May *Big Social* will open at a museum in Groningen. Here I will show a number of new films in an architectural setting I will design. Then the rest of the year has a number of projects and possibly a solo show at my Shanghai gallery Leo Xu at the end of the year. Let's see, there's always very many things to do, fortunately. And then, of course, I teach at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. Oh and not to forget, a number of commissions with my company PolyLester, eleven new sculptures for the University of Sport Science in Oslo and a small little square in the south of the Netherlands.

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ARTFORUM

Gabriel Lester,
Robertas Narkus, Lisa
Rosenblatt, and Freek
Wambacq, *Bermuda*,
2016, mixed media.
Installation view.



steadfastly continues to do what he's always done—namely, work with others. The exhibition was curated and produced by the artist himself—Lester had been invited to do the show by de Appel's director, Lorenzo Benedetti, but when Benedetti was controversially dismissed last year, Lester decided to proceed on his own—and includes the contributions of more than twenty artists, musicians, programmers, architects, writers, and friends. *Distanza e mezzogna* (Distance and Perspective), 2007, with Mariana Castillo Deball, and *Amorales vs. Amorales*, 1996, with Carlos Amorales, are apt examples of this collaborative spirit. The first is a set of four porcelain door knockers hanging on the wall while resting against rounded mirrors, a lesson in material and functional suspense. The latter is a video showing Lester and writer/filmmaker Diego Gutierrez wearing masks that cast both of them as Amorales. In taking on this identity at the request of Amorales, Lester crossed over from commercial film work to artistic practice, and the interchanging of diverse identities is a theme to which he regularly returns.

Lester's collective impulse is displayed most patently in the new installation *The French Horn*, 2016. It's a kind of summa of the exhibition: a small back room filled with a collage of images and different marks composed by others and Lester himself. It reads like a map of invisible associations and hidden implications. Like the instrument named in the work's title, the space feels like an intricate construct capable of the most beautiful notes as well as the most discordant sounds. Its location just behind the wall that hosts the video *Murmur*, 2015, reveals another strength of Lester's practice: his aptitude for scenography. In this work, classical musicians play a piece of music through complicated openings in a white wall much like the one the video is projected on, evoking a claustrophobic and contentious backstage social world.

The exhibition only gradually discloses its many layers and implications, giving the visitor a certain self-consciousness about his or her own movements and actions. Where the stage begins or ends is never really clear. This ambiguity finds its culmination in another new work, *Bermuda*, 2016, an all-encompassing installation consisting of a cabinet of compartments filling an entire wall of a large, darkened space. A disembodied voice tells a stirring and at times disorienting tale of disappearance, transformation, and encounter among a group of castaways on a small island. Inside each partition is an object that is lit up as if by magic to illustrate details of the story.

Lester's hand seems to have touched every aspect of this exhibition, seen or unseen, but less in the manner of an artist or even a curator than of a movie director. This "Unresolved Extravaganza" is a total production that could only have been realized by a team of collaborators under a strong leader. It demonstrates the scope of Lester's ambitions, but also his cunning and finesse in constructing an alternative world riddled with equivocal clues and uncertain identities.

—Huib Haye van der Werf

AMSTERDAM

Gabriel Lester

DE APPEL ARTS CENTRE

To classify Gabriel Lester's "Unresolved Extravaganza" (also known as "Unhappen," "Apple Z," "Præmonitions," "The Nine Day Week," and "Seven Hills Secrets") as a solo show would not be correct, but it is exactly this fallacy that reveals his distinctive métier. For this overview of Lester's collaborative works of the past twenty years, the artist