

MARIO PFEIFER

Mario Pfeifer
KOW Berlin
10 September – 28 October

How does the Western mind, or eye, perceive the ‘exotic’ or ‘other’? Are the lines between documentary, art and commercial film blurring? Dresden-born, Berlin-based artist Mario Pfeifer addresses these issues here in *A Formal Film in Nine Episodes, Prologue & Epilogue*, a series of nine films from 2010 that meander through modern life in Mumbai. The exhibition shows a series of film segments on large screens strategically set throughout the gallery’s concrete rooms. Some run on a single loop, others are grouped; all seem related merely in that they were shot in and around the same city. But only at first.

In the gallery’s ground-floor space, the largest screen shows a film of Indian men – and one woman – slowly moving huge blocks of ice through the vast halls of a factory. Shot on 35mm and featuring lots of fogs and lush shades of blue, the footage is atmospheric enough to be a standalone art piece, but there’s more: on the gallery’s lower level, the remaining segments appear on three slightly smaller projection screens. As the show progresses, a vaguely narrative thread emerges and the films reveal themselves to be partially staged and scripted.

One male and one female actor appear in scenarios shot in extended single takes. In one meditative loop, the actor’s head is slowly shaved, in extreme close-up, before the scene cuts to the actress lying on a bed, having her hands hennaed at dusk. Some episodes are slow and measured, such as that of a fisherman’s boat slowly traversing the water under two highway bridges. Others are loud and fast: a *hijra* (‘third-gender’ person) pokes his/her head into a rickshaw asking an unseen passenger for money. The amateur actors meet in a scripted quasi-love scene at an outdoor temple (some of whose subtitles are hilarious: “Do you like cucumbers?” “Oh, so much.”). She goes to the eye doctor. He rehearses a phone conversation on a balcony, with the cityscape as a backdrop.

The mix of seemingly documentary and reenacted segments calls the work of Jeff Wall to mind. But unlike Wall, Pfeifer’s visual postcards from modern Mumbai offer neither critique nor orientation. The viewer can thus choose how to react – seeing the work as a kind of stereotype-driven travelogue that uses high production values to create something almost pretty (even if the series has its share of socially loaded situations, such as a walk through one of the city’s slums); or surmising that Pfeifer is very aware of what he’s doing with not only clichés but filmmaking techniques in themselves. Also on view in the gallery’s lower level is a video of Louis Malle’s 378-minute documentary *Phantom India* (1969), whose raw depiction of Indian life angered the Indian authorities so much that the BBC (for whom the French filmmaker was shooting) was banned from the country for several years. Malle himself, however, was very proud of the work, in which he explored his own limited Western view. In contrast, Pfeifer’s vignettes offer the viewer – ‘the other’, in both the sense of being an outside observer to the filmed goings-on and, in this exhibition venue, most likely a non-Indian Westerner – a certain dispassionate distance that liberates from limitation. By taking a formal stance, the artist allows himself and his audience to simply *see*, any way they will.

KIMBERLY BRADLEY

GAO LEI

Gao Lei: *The Principle*
White Space, Beijing
4 September – 30 October

***The Principle* occupies** White Space with clinical conviction. The assembled installations and mixed-media works on canvas discharge an aura that is at once intriguing and discomfiting; it is difficult to pin down, not least because the dominant sensation is of unsolicited lightness.

The centrepiece is a white octagonal kiosk, above which hangs the black torso of a diver, rotating noiselessly with its head upturned. Inside is a stuffed macaw with vivid blue and yellow plumage that provides the only real colour in the room; on platforms interspersed with openings in the wall panels are pairs of clear acrylic feet with instruments or tools set inside them in place of bones. Here, as is true also for the other works – the larger canvases have perspectival grids drawn on them to articulate boxlike interiors; there are two square booths with peepholes and a periscope – one finds oneself always looking in on something. Against this strong division of inside and outside, the oddness of the works’ content gives way quickly to a second dichotomy: that of the in-looking subject and its ‘other’ – which entails not only what one sees, but also its creator or instigator. The smaller canvases, which marry an image with real readymade additions, such as a metal catch or a handle, imply an imperceptible schema. The sheer strangeness of the large black booth wherein the feet and trunk of an elephant are tied to a pendulum suspended over



Mario Pfeifer
A Formal Film in Nine Episodes, Prologue & Epilogue, 2011
 (installation view), 35mm film & HD-multiple-channel-projection for exhibition space, colour, 50 min.
 Photo: Alexander Koch. Courtesy the artist and KOW Berlin

Gao Lei
The Principle, 2011 (installation view). Courtesy the artist and White Space, Beijing

shards of glass and blasted with white particles at the press of a button is puzzling. Amid this nonanthropocentric environment where grids and numerical titles contend with unreal compositions, and faced with the soft, methodical coldness of the works, one is led repeatedly to ask: why?

Imprisonment, surveillance and systems of control are key to Gao Lei's conceptual practice. The artificial containers he constructs in 2D and 3D are designed to engage the viewer without revealing their rhyme or reason; he aims to construct a metaphorical cage between the audience and the work. Elements of game – particularly in the encryption of the character for 'prison' seen through the doctored periscope – and a dark absurdity infusing the compositions tease one's attention around the room. Crucially, the degree of engagement never tips into fascination or absorption, so that, as is Gao's design, the audience is held in a sort of balance with the object. The final effect of an encounter with this conceptual situation is striking. For some, the conditions the artist has established convene on the threshold of a realisation: as one looks into the works from the stability of the gallery space, the thought arises – what if you are in fact looking out?

IONA WHITTAKER

