

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Ruins in Reverse. An Exhibition at Tate Modern (March 1st - June 24th 2013)

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Figure 1: Rä di Martino No More Stars (Star Wars) 33°50'34 N 7°46'44 E Chot El-Gharsa, Tunisia 01 September 2010 © Rä di Martino

In the same week *Ruins in Reverse* opened at the Tate Modern gallery in London, Jonathan Jones asked on his Guardian Blog whether archaeology might be 'the new art' (2013).

He posed this question as a result of two recent exhibitions at The British Museum, namely *Ice Age Art* and *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, both of which sought to emphasise the aesthetic qualities of archaeological objects. As Jones argued, such exhibitions 'popularise' the discipline by drawing attention to the 'stupendous

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beauty of things that survive from the past' (ibid). While visitor numbers go some way to demonstrating the veracity of this comment, it seems restrictive both to art and to archaeology to frame any relationship between the two in this way. The spectacular archaeological find is atypical and potentially deceptive. A more potent line of enquiry - one adopted by several of the artists featured in *Ruins in Reverse* - might be to consider the present itself through an archaeological lens, applying the language of 'discovery' and 'excavation' to artefacts and locations that few would call stupendous or beautiful.

Take the work of Eliana Otta. In *Archaeology as Fiction* and *Materiality as Fiction*, both from 2010, the artist details the existence of a now largely defunct Peruvian record industry. Buildings which once housed recording studios are uniformly photographed and presented alongside the labels which led to their "re-discovery", while associated objects - CDs, cassettes, vinyl records, photographs, lyric sheets - are assembled and displayed in a cabinet below as if recently unearthed. What was a vibrant musical culture - inherently intangible and dynamic - is reduced to the static vestiges of its physical afterlife. As the exhibition curators Flavia Frigeri and Sharon Lerner write in the accompanying leaflet, this work 'poignantly addresses the archaeological condition' of such artefacts, which 'sound almost fictional to those raised in the digital age' (2013: np). Furthermore, many of the studio locations documented by Otta have been recently developed as part of the construction boom currently transforming Lima. The artist provides evidence for what was there before: insignificant to many but part of a wider cultural movement that has subsequently become entangled with her own personal narrative. At the same time, aware of the historical fiction she conspires to create, the archaeologically styled method employed by Otta never assumes an objective stance on the material in question.

This, it might be said, is the overarching theme of *Ruins in Reverse*. Taking its name

from a Robert Smithson quote on 'anti-romantic' structures that 'rise into ruin' (1967: 54–55, emphasis in original), the exhibition sets out to destabilise the monumental and undermine the glorified past by establishing a 'central dichotomy between the matter-of-factness of an archaeological site and the fiction of its interpretation' (Frigeri & Lerner 2013: np). The 'sites' interrogated here range from statues along the Peruvian coastline and the central and southeast Andes to the North African desert, where an abandoned film set lies decaying in the sand. Hollywood detritus, political statements and religious tributes are thus drawn together in a critique on the things we build and the stories they tell - intended and fortuitous.

The film set in question is perhaps one of the most famous in the world, that of *Star Wars*, or, more specifically, Luke Skywalker's homestead in *Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977). R  di Martino's photographs of this location document a site we might expect to draw thousands of tourists, but instead has been left to crumble into the desert (Figure 1). Her images are in the best tradition of the romantic ruin: enigmatic, compelling, quixotic. The rise of Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) has all but done away with the need for such sets, and so here we have a visual record not just of an individual movie's neglected past, but of an increasingly obsolete approach to film-making. That, through her photographic work, Martino might be called an 'unofficial archaeologist' of this 'glorious fictional past' (Frigeri & Lerner 2013) is highly telling. There is no act of discovery here, no excavation, no painstaking object analysis or carbon dating. What makes this work "archaeological" is simply its perception of place, its insistence - through photography - on the materiality of the strange objects found in this precise location - an alien landscape built by humans. Layers of fiction are also drawn out; from the story these structures were built to serve, to possible future interpretations of their pretend technology. One image shows

graffiti scrawled on the abandoned props, presumably by fans intrepid enough to visit this inhospitable site. What they found, and what Martino's photographs document, are the prosaic leftovers of a fantastical world. The galaxy was not so far, far away after all.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, photography and film have been deployed by Pablo Hare and Amalia Pica respectively to confront one of the foremost questions of archaeology: *what do these monuments mean?* The statues, busts and memorials documented and altered by the artists may be of a more recent origin than, say, Stonehenge, but their significance and connotation are still open to interpretation. Hare's work catalogues the profusion of strange monuments (geese, dinosaurs, watermelon) across South America, memorials which speak of a near universal desire to celebrate and remember both the great and the peculiar. An image showing the bust of an anonymous leader covered in bird shit acts as a visceral reminder that such desires can be swiftly undone. As Robert Musil famously proclaimed in his now rather hackneyed aphorism, 'There is nothing in the world so invisible as a monument' (1987 [1927]: 61). In painting the horse of an equestrian statue white Pica attempts to reverse this process, making the monument visible again, but at the same time making it ridiculous - subverting its honorific function. Scrutinising the statue's ability to usefully inform or educate, the artist's video records the act of painting with quotes from Rousseau's treatise *Emile, or On Education* overlaid. Pica's humorous work sits well within the overarching aim of the exhibition, which looks to unseat the authority of material remains with a 'playful approach to archaeology' (Frigeri & Lerner 2013: np).

Jose Carlos Martinat and Haroon Mirza complete the roster of artists featured. Mirza's cacophonous sound installation *Cross section of a revolution* (2011) dominated sensory engagement in the small gallery space, with YouTube clips from a public speaking competition in Lahore, drumming from a marriage

ritual in Kenya, and a dissonant and disembodied electronic whine, all played on antiquated technological apparatus. Perhaps intentionally, the message of the piece was somewhat lost amongst this jumble of competing noises. Martinat's less abrasive work *Pintas* (2013) consisted of a series of resin skins peeled from Lima's city walls, each recording a political logo or slogan. These highly charged items of street propaganda become abstract fragments in the gallery setting, their transience monumentalised. As one-to-one facsimile's rather than original artefacts it would be misleading to suggest they have undergone the same process of aestheticisation as countless archaeological objects in museums across the world, but in the transition from South American street to London gallery their symbolic meaning and value has of course been shifted in significant ways.

Probably the most considered exploration into the relationship between archaeology and contemporary art is that undertaken by Colin Renfrew in *Figuring it Out: The Parallel Visions of Artists and Archaeologists* (2003). Renfrew's main argument in this work rests on the belief that the radical viewpoints put forward by recent artists might offer valuable new analytical tools for the archaeologist and 'fresh opportunities to [...] understand the human past' (ibid: 8). While *Ruins in Reverse* ably demonstrates the dense back-and-forth of this relationship, I would like to conclude on a slight note of caution. Beyond the banal obsession with beauty characterised by Jones, there is undoubtedly room for fruitful cross-fertilisation between art and archaeology. We must however remain attentive to the almost inevitable mutual misunderstandings that can occur in any such relationship. At the risk of contradicting my introductory paragraph, the value of archaeology as a painstaking, laborious and largely thankless task is in danger of being diluted in the fashionable quest for a new "lens" through which to comprehend the past (or indeed the present). Just as a focus on beautiful

objects can only be of partial relevance to our understanding of past lives, so the limitations of this admittedly broader approach must be acknowledged and problematised.

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