

GRAZ, AUSTRIA

"Body Luggage"

KUNSTHAUS GRAZ

Anyone annoyed by Ai Weiwei's photographic impression of a drowned Syrian child refugee could find tremendous hope in "Body Luggage: Migration of Gestures," mounted as part of the Steirischer Herbst, an annual festival of dance, theater, art, and music in Graz. Here, art-historical tropes of continuity and mutation propagated by Alois Riegl and Aby Warburg politicized an international gathering of migration-themed, performance-centric commissions, which deftly invited one to rethink classical notions of innovation and originality. Indeed, many



Gernot Wieland, *Thievery and Songs*, 2016, video, color, sound, 25 minutes. From "Body Luggage: Migration of Gestures."

of the works explored ways in which artists and art practices survive displacement by becoming mobile containers of a kind—just as dispossessed migrants retain their body language even in new, unstable surroundings. The show included several pieces alluding to *Ausdruckstanz*, Germany and Austria's Expressionist dance scene of the 1920s, and tethered to the key figure of dancer Hilde Holger, whose archive of peregrinations in Bombay in the 1930s and '40s provided curator Zasha Colah and associate curator Birgit Pelzmann with what Colah has called "a kind of blueprint" from which to work.

Gernot Wieland's *Thievery and Songs*, 2016, a portmanteau of watercolor, clay animation, found images, potato prints, and staged

performance shot on Super 8 film, embeds Holger into a narrative featuring a therapy session, a discussion about NASA, and the Brothers Grimm fairy tale "The Town Musicians of Bremen." Nested deeper is the chronicle of the artist's grandaunt being sold as a child under Nazi oppression during World War II. Descriptive first-person subtitles exuding nostalgia, pain, and astonishment let the fragments speak across varied media, as if in proxy for the consciousness of a migrant traversing varied terrains.

Sawangwongse Yawnghe's *Spirit Vitrines (Memoirs of a Shan Exile)*, 2016, showcases hundreds of earth-colored amulets made of clay, wax, soap, mud, rice paper, felt, fiber, pigment, water, oil, and spice. Designed to be worn and shaped like figurative statuettes, the amulets were arrayed in a long vitrine to evoke an exodus of exhausted souls, some accompanied by excerpts from investigative reports and short passages from Yawnghe's father's diaries, among other texts, that served to reveal the artist's political pedigree. The fact that Yawnghe's grandfather, Burma's first elected president, was assassinated during a military coup in 1962 for contesting the exclusion of the country's Shan ethnic minority from Burma's national fabric, and that the artist himself was born in an exiled-Shan forest camp within a remote region of Burma, nonetheless unfold only metaphorically in the pulsing tension between each amulet's diminutive size and the vast community to which it belongs. The work drew the viewer close to examine minute figurative details, then induced her to retreat to a distance and absorb the array as a whole, as if confirming that biography and artistic talent are always locked into a larger, more significant political memory.

In contrast, the subject of personal inheritance was addressed in a far less satisfying manner in another work touching on Holger. Simon Wachsmuth's large, two-channel video *Qing*, 2016, shows a slow-moving, Butoh-like dancer named Loulou Omer slipping on a Qing-dynasty robe before organizing a scatter of blue-and-white Chinese teacups into a neat set. That Omer's mother was a student of the *Ausdruckstänzer* Gertrud Kraus, and that the robe and tea set are among the few mementos the artist has left of his grandmother, a contemporary of Holger, make for a great tale. But stripped of this backstory, the video, a tastefully shot vignette of exquisite things—a lean dancer, gorgeous Chinese brocade, delicate porcelain—accompanied by a high-fidelity track conveying every swish and clink of the minimal action's moving parts, is little more than an overly precious reprise of Oriental clichés.

Underscoring the show's humanism, while whispering its unspoken fears, was Chaw Ei Thein's video *Body to Body*, 2016. Here, the artist reenacts passages from seminal instances of dance-inflected Burmese performance works staged during the repressive period between 1996 and 2012, prior to the democratic election of Aung San Suu Kyi. Like the gender-fluid historical jaunt of Virginia Woolf's fictional character Orlando, the artist's own figurative journey across Burma's political chronology, as she performs highly visceral actions by male and female artists, reiterates the sheer force of free will. Yet the repeated visualization of her body, tied and pulled at, mouth taped, also insists that migration deeply impairs body language, and thus inevitably challenges the show's irresistible promise of continuity and survival.

—Prajna Desai