

Artes Mundi 7

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Founded in 2002 by the Welsh artist Williams Wilkins, Artes Mundi is a biennial international exhibition and prize. Translated from the Latin, *artes mundi* means ‘arts of the world’. Artes Mundi is Wales’ biggest contemporary visual art event, taking place in Cardiff. The prize also happens to be the biggest in Europe, so why is it not better known? One cannot help feeling that the London-centric attitude adopted by many in relation to the UK’s contemporary art scene could be something to do with it. This might also be due to the cultural and media monopoly that the contentious Turner Prize holds, particularly due to the institution’s self-perpetuating embrace of the ‘is-it-art?’ gimmick. Indeed, as critic and curator Morgan Quaintance suggested in an article he wrote for *The Guardian* in December, ‘Why is the Turner prize failing to engage with politics?’¹ Although there is a discussion to be had about the direction of the Turner, it is equally important for critics to engage with instances where this type of engagement *is* being made. Artes Mundi’s mission statement is to ‘identify, recognise and support contemporary visual artists who engage with the human condition, social reality and lived experience’. The prize is designed to ‘enrich the cultural and educational life of Wales and its people, develop and inspire new audiences and build cultural bridges between Wales and the wider world’. Surely Londoners are not so arrogant as to assume that they do not need to continue educating themselves and build both national and international cultural bridges?

The show is divided between two venues: the National Museum Cardiff and the more contemporary space, Chapter. The theme of Artes Mundi 7 was ‘The Human Condition’; considering what it means to be human in contemporary society. The shortlist of artists (John Akomfrah, Neil Beloufa, Amy Franceschini/Futurefarmers, Lamia Joreige, Nástio Mosquito and Bedwyr Williams) was selected by a judging panel comprised of: Élise Atangana (an independent curator and producer), Alistair Hudson (Director of MIMA, Middlesborough) and Marie Muracciole (Beirut Art Center Director), who considered over 800 nominations before narrowing the list down to six artists. The rationalisation for their selection is published in an illuminating in-conversation between the three judges in the exhibition catalogue,

I don’t think we should shy away from the fact that when we are making our selections for this prize... there’s an urgency here. We need to talk about what’s happening now. We need to have artists who are implicated, involved, working around things that are really pertinent, really affecting us now.²

¹ Morgan Quaintance, ‘Why is the Turner Prize Failing to Engage with Politics?’, in *The Guardian*, 3 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/dec/03/why-is-the-turner-prize-failing-to-engage-with-politics>

² Alistair Hudson, ‘A Conversation on Selecting Artes Mundi 7’, in *Artes Mundi 7*, Artes Mundi Prize Limited, 2016, p 22



John Akomfrah, *Auto Da Fé*, 2016, two-channel HD colour video installation, 5.1 sound, 40 minutes 30 seconds, edition of five plus two artist's proofs © Smoking Dogs Films: image courtesy Lisson Gallery

Poetic and political, the British artist John Akomfrah has been creating powerful multi-layered works that show the complex relationship between memory, identity, and the practice of film-making over the last few decades. For his Artes Mundi presentation, Akomfrah chose to exhibit his film *Auto Da Fé* (which translates as 'Acts of Faith'), a two-channel colour video installation that explores issues of mass migration and diaspora. Inspired by a visit to a seventeenth/eighteenth-century Sephardic Jewish cemetery while teaching in Barbados in 2009, Akomfrah became interested in these lesser-known histories of displacement – the 1645 fleeing of Sephardic Jews from Catholic Brazil to Barbados being one of them. In its forty-minute screening time, *Auto Da Fé* connects this story with seven other instances of mass migration, 'this endless homelessness, this always being (re)moved',³ including contemporary situations in Hombori, Mali, and Mosul, Iraq. The film is presented as a 'poetic period drama'. Despite being filmed on location in Barbados, the landscape is rendered anonymous in order to reflect the universal nature of the film's subject. Akomfrah deploys the aesthetics of costume and prop in order to allude to the mutating relationship between diaspora, persecution and religion through the centuries. As with *Vertigo Sea* (2015), the ubiquity of Akomfrah's oceanic ontology filters through; 'the sea is doubly elemental in its roiling, its unearthing and re-earthing, its salvage and surrender in the tidal rhythm of washing up and washing out'.⁴ Akomfrah carefully blurs contemporary issues and historical grievances in an evocative conflation of past and present. Through a process of layering and re-evaluating histories, he creates a counter-history, one that is based on complexity and precarity, rather than canonical stability.

³ Frederick Charles Moten, 'A Turn with John Akomfrah: On *Auto Da Fé*', in *Artes Mundi* 7, op cit, p 27

⁴ Ibid



Neil Beloufa, *World Domination*, 2012, film still, image: courtesy of the artist

French-Algerian artist Neil Beloufa's contribution to *Artes Mundi* is derived from the notion of discussion and debate itself. Beloufa often collaborates with non-professional actors, asking them to undertake surreal game play or task-orientated actions, which he then uses as part of his installations. In *World Domination* (2012), the non-actors are divided into teams of different nationalities, given a different role eg, President, Military Leader, etc, and asked to take part in a political role-play. They are invited to discuss, and 'solve', varying global issues to do with immigration, economics, abortion rights and poverty. Although instigated as a light-hearted, humorous game, the conversation soon escalates into xenophobia and the waging of war. Implication appears to be Beloufa's *modus operandi* – both the participants in the conversation, and the gallery viewers, are made complicit through bearing witness. The film is screened on a crudely made mechanical dinosaur, which moves erratically and unpredictably. Unfortunately this detracts from the viewers engagement with the film, acting as a barrier rather than a filter. Alongside *World Domination*, a smaller work titled *Monopoly* (2016) is exhibited, in which a group of Ukrainian teenagers play the infamous board game. *Monopoly*'s first iteration was invented by Elizabeth Magie as an illustration of Georgian economics and its failed model of private land ownership, an unfettered system which only led to a grinding trajectory into poverty for everyone except the winning monopolist.⁵

⁵ Andrew Berardini, 'Choose Your Own Adventure: Notes and Meditations on a Few Works by Neil Beloufa', in *Artes Mundi* 7, op cit, p 35



Amy Franceschini/Futurefarmers, *Flatbread Society Seed Collection*, 2013–2016, image: courtesy of the artist

In sharp contrast to the politics of Monopoly's capitalism is the ethics and ecology of Futurefarmers – a collective founded in 1995 by the Californian artist Amy Franceschini.

Futurefarmers is a group of diverse practitioners aligned through an interest in making work that is relevant to the time and place surrounding us... We are artists, researchers, designers, architects, scientists and farmers with a common interest in creating frameworks for exchange that catalyse moments of 'not knowing'. While we collaborate with scientists and are interested in scientific inquiry, we want to ask questions more openly... We use various media to create work that has the potential to destabilize logics of 'certainty'. We deconstruct systems such as food policies, public transportation and rural farming networks to visualize and understand their intrinsic logics... Our work often provides a playful entry point and tools for participants to gain insight into deeper fields of inquiry – not only to imagine, but to participate in and initiate change in the places we live.⁶

Since 2013, Futurefarmers has been leading the 'Flatbread Society' – a project which focuses on collecting the grain used to make flatbread from numerous sources in order to focus on ideas of communal space and diverse collectives. Seeds have been 'rescued' from a variety of locations – some of the seeds were saved during the Siege of Leningrad, and archaeologists discovered another collection during a dig in an abandoned sauna in Hamar, Norway. The seeds are then grown and distributed by the collective. During the course of *Artes Mundi*, Futurefarmers will take the seeds via sailing boat from the UK to the Middle East, in an act of reverse migration. Although it is an interesting theoretical project, Futurefarmers physical display does not come across well in the gallery space, and is drowned out by the other work. Described as a 'base camp', they have used vitrines to display boxes filled with seeds and ears of grain. A banner hangs across the ceiling like a makeshift sail, unfortunately gesturing to where the interesting work is actually located: on the boat itself. However, this criticism is something addressed and defended by the selection committee. Hudson remarked that,

these practices don't always get significant attention because their visual component isn't always their strongest aspect... therefore I think it's important, as a matter of principle, that this way of working is acknowledged.⁷

⁶ See www.futurefarmers.com/#about.

⁷ Alistair Hudson, 'A Conversation on Selecting *Artes Mundi* 7', op cit, p 14



Lamia Joreige, *Views of Museum Square*, 2013, pinhole camera, two unique prints, © Lamia Joreige

Beirut-based artist and film-maker Lamia Joreige's work, *Under-Writing Beirut* (2013), is split between Chapter and the National Museum Cardiff. Joreige interweaves archival documents and elements of fiction in order to reflect on the relationship between individual and collective histories – particularly focusing on the instabilities and aftermath of the Lebanese wars. *Under-Writing Beirut* started as a research project, with Joreige investigating the effects of the war on certain areas of Beirut. In the first chapter of the project, 'Mathaf (Museum)', Joreige focuses on the National Museum of Beirut. During the wars, the building was destroyed and parts of the collection were damaged, looted or lost. *Under-Writing Beirut – Mathaf* addresses the inaccessibility of the museum's archived collections – an institution that is designed to represent national history and identity. Through addressing these complexities, she reflects on the city as a diachronic landscape with a very ambivalent relationship to modernity.⁸ The only object that the National Museum made available was a damaged Roman Mosaic that had been hit by a sniper – the museum became a vehicle of vision for snipers during the war.⁹ In *Views of Museum Square* (2013), Joreige has re-staged the sniper's line of sight using pinhole photography. Another side of the project, the films *The River* and *After the River*, explores the history of the Beirut River, looking at the history of migrant settlements and the current gentrification of the area.

Chapter is also where the Angolan artist Nástio Mosquito is premiering 'The Transitory Suppository': a four-part project that revolves around the construction of a fictional scenario, in which a despotic leader of a country called Botrovia begins to propose what he sees as fast and practical solutions to world problems. As has become customary with his practice, Mosquito embodies the central character – the political leader A L Moore. In the video *Transitory Suppository: Act # I Another Leader* (2016), Mosquito represents Moore as the antithesis of political correctness;

⁸ Marie Muracciole, 'A Conversation on Selecting Artes Mundi 7', op cit, p 22

⁹ Françoise Parfait, 'Beirut Forever – Suspended Space in Suspended Time', in *Artes Mundi 7*, op cit, p 53

his work is vulgar and profane... [his] practice encapsulates a rage and engages a much broader politics... it's almost like this is the art our Ted Talks, Youtube, Soapbox, GIFF era deserves.¹⁰

In a setting not dissimilar to a bar, the video is screened from a small television monitor affixed to the wall. Plastic café chairs are laid out among crates of beer. *Transitory Suppository: Act # 2 No.Pruritus. No.Ani* (2016) is installed next door – a large pile of anti-piles suppositories. The viewer is encouraged to take a box away with them, the text on which reads ‘These drugs soothes, shrinks, pain relief, locates and awakes god’. The light box, *Transitory Suppository: Act #3 Light.Boxed* (2016), a large-scale representation of the suppositories box is affixed to the outside wall of the gallery. The last section, *Transitory Suppository: Act #4 Stockholm Antidote* (2016) is a text-based work that appears on the walls of the Chapter Bar, and is also published in the catalogue. The ever-elusive Mosquito has used the pages of the catalogue as a continuation of his work, as opposed to inviting a writer to comment on the work.



Nástio Mosquito, *Transitory Suppository: Act # I Another Leader*, 2016, video still: courtesy © Nástio Mosquito

In his idiosyncratic practice, the Welsh artist Bedwyr Williams plays with the serious and the profane, often mixing comments on serious issues with moments of levity and banality. For Artes Mundi he has exhibited a huge (4K) video installation, titled *Tyrrau Mawr* (2016). By using computer technology, Williams has created a fictional city around Cadair Idris near Dolgellau in North Wales. The invented metropolis is based on a ‘fast-track city’, akin to ones built in the Middle East or China, to house expanding populations and to sate economic boom and burgeoning state ambition; ‘Tapas and Sushi in the clouds, business people smoking in the heather and just general hoots and rumbles of a city transported to a place of beauty’.¹¹ Fellow artist Ryan Gander refers to it as ‘a dysfunctional conformist yet supposedly utopian Playmobil world’.¹² The film slowly shifts from day to night. The hue of the sky gradually changes, while lights turn on and off

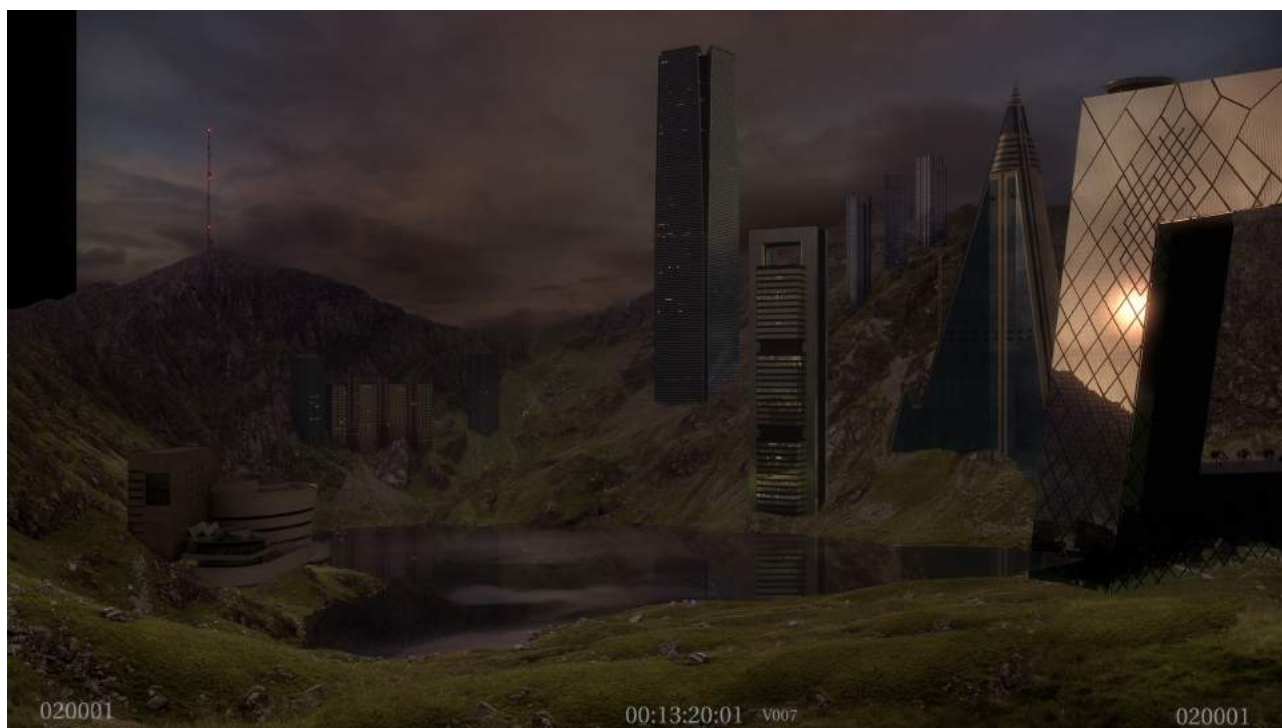
¹⁰ Alistair Hudson, ‘A Conversation on Selecting Artes Mundi 7’, op cit, p 19

¹¹ Bedwyr Williams, ‘Email Conversation between Ryan Gander and Bedwyr Williams, 2016’, in *Artes Mundi 7*, op cit, p 72

¹² Ryan Gander, *ibid*, p 71

in the tall skyscrapers and glass buildings that surround and are reflected in the lake. Williams's use of technology is inspired by the medium of matte painting – a cinematic trick that is added to live-action footage which has enabled film-makers to create the illusion of environments which are impossible to create physically. Now eclipsed by radical improvements in computer technology and CGI, matte painting is rarely used, but it comes towards the end of an interesting trajectory that began with the tradition of classical landscape painting. The National Museum of Cardiff has a particularly striking and broad collecting of landscapes. By building these connections, and situating Wales within the global metropolis, *Tyrrau Mawr*, more so than the other works, appears to be significantly invested in the aims of the Artes Mundi prize: to 'enrich the cultural and educational life of Wales and its people, develop and inspire new audiences and build cultural bridges between Wales and the wider world'. As Élise Atangana writes,

Bedwyr's vision of the world is fabulous, in the literal sense of the word: out of the ordinary, but at the same time deeply rooted in reality. His disturbing universe, with its acerbic outward appearance, is overlaid with an analysis of human behaviour and of the mechanics of today's society that is radical, power and, at times, touching.¹³



Bedwyr Williams, *Tyrrau Mawr*, 2016, 4K video installation, 20-minute video loop, image: courtesy of the artist and Limoncello Gallery

The global and multidisciplinary scope of Artes Mundi makes it a valuable and engaging exhibition. Through their work, each artist strives to examine important issues – migration, capitalism, power structures, history and memory – questioning 'what it means to be human in our complex, contemporary world... [through] humour, surrealism and provocation'.¹⁴ Having opened last October, Artes Mundi runs until 26 February 2017. The winner of the prize (£40,000) will be announced on 26 January 2017.

¹³ Élise Atangana, 'A Conversation on Selecting Artes Mundi 7', op cit, p 21

¹⁴ Quote from Karen MacKinnon (Artes Mundi's Director and Curator)

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