

Art in America

UNREST: REVOLT AGAINST REASON

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APEX ART

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This politically motivated exhibition took its subtitle from leftist philosopher Herbert Marcuse's assertions about the necessity of challenging not just the dominant sociopolitical order, but, as curator Natalie Musteata puts it, "Reason itself." Featuring the work of a small group of international artists concerned with reflecting upon and fomenting geo-political unrest, the exhibition was timed to coincide with the anniversary of the World Trade Center disaster. By the end of its opening day, the show's timeliness had already been affirmed by an attack on U.S. diplomatic compounds in Benghazi and a black Islamic flag flying over the U.S. embassy in Cairo.

Moroccan-born Mounir Fatmi's *G8-The Brooms (Contamination)*, 2008, which focuses on flags as symbols of national power, appears especially relevant in light of these events. The work comprises 12 push brooms with flags affixed to their extra-long handles. Intermingled among the familiar colors of the G8 nations are four black flags. Whether these "contaminating" interlopers are placeholders for nations excluded from the G8 or, instead, suggest the potential for an all-out subversion of the dominant political-economic order remains unclear. Less ambiguous is the implication that the future community of nations will depend in one way or another upon working-class labor, as symbolized by the quotidian objects Fatmi has used for flagpoles.

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The theme of contamination reappeared in a 2009-12 video by Slovakian artist Tomáš Rafa documenting a Swiss anti-abortion rally and its counterprotest. Manifesting a moment of collusion between church and state, the video cuts between the crosses held by rally participants-several clergymen among them-and the weapons used by police to fend off pro-choice activists. At one point the officers turn a fire hose upon a group of marchers, bedraggling the bearers of a sign supporting women's rights but failing to prevent them from contaminating the solemn atmosphere of the state-sanctioned rally. This video is just one in a series by Rafa that also documents a queer parade in the Czech Republic, a May Day celebration in Germany and an Occupy protest in the U.S.

While these videos highlight the boisterous side of political action, Indian artist Shilpa Gupta's *Tryst with Destiny* (2007-08) demonstrates how soft-spokenness and subtle intonation can also speak volumes. This elegant work, which was installed in a small room near the front of the gallery, consists of a vintage microphone emitting Gupta's barely audible, sung rendition of the speech given by the first prime minister of India following the country's independence from British rule. When Gupta sings, "The service of India means the service of millions who suffer," her wavering, off-key voice indicates the yawning chasm between idealistic sentiment and sociopolitical reality.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the works that seemed most closely allied with a Marcusian "revolt against reason" were also those whose political messages were less outwardly apparent. Franco-British artist Alexandre Singh has sliced up an issue of *The Economist* magazine and rearranged its words into cryptic messages on a piece of plywood. In a painting and an animation by Tehran-born Tala Madani, cartoonish figures take part in bizarre acts of autoeroticism and violence. A series of inkjet prints by Egyptian artist Iman Issa, based upon Mubarak-era election posters, reassemble their appropriated iconography into indecipherable formal abstractions.

The show's remaining works included a group of protest signs by the Paris collective Claire Fontaine and a video by Kurdish/Turkish artist Ahmet Ögüt. Shot on location at Zuccotti park in the days leading up to Occupy's eviction, Ögüt's work memorializes the tents that have yet to reoccupy Lower Manhattan.

Photo: Alexandre Singh: The Economist (Chosen to Emit), 2007, collage on pressure-treated plywood, 24 by 36 inches; in "Unrest: Revolt Against Reason" at Apex Art.