

Eyes in the Back of Your Head

The 11th Gothenburg Biennial tells a powerful story about seafaring, colonialism, and racism, but suffers from a certain artistic and intellectual predictability.

By Sinziana Ravini 16.09.21 Review Artikel på svenska



Salad Hilowle, *Vanus Labor*, film still, 2021.

Walter Benjamin once wrote that “every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.” He urged us to ignite the spark of hope in the past, to embrace its ghosts that incessantly haunt the present, and to create a state of emergency, for not even the dead will be safe if the enemy wins. He was aided by Paul Klee’s image of the angel of history, who wants to stay, but is driven forward by a storm into the future, while he turns his face to the mounds of ruins behind him. This storm is what we call progress.

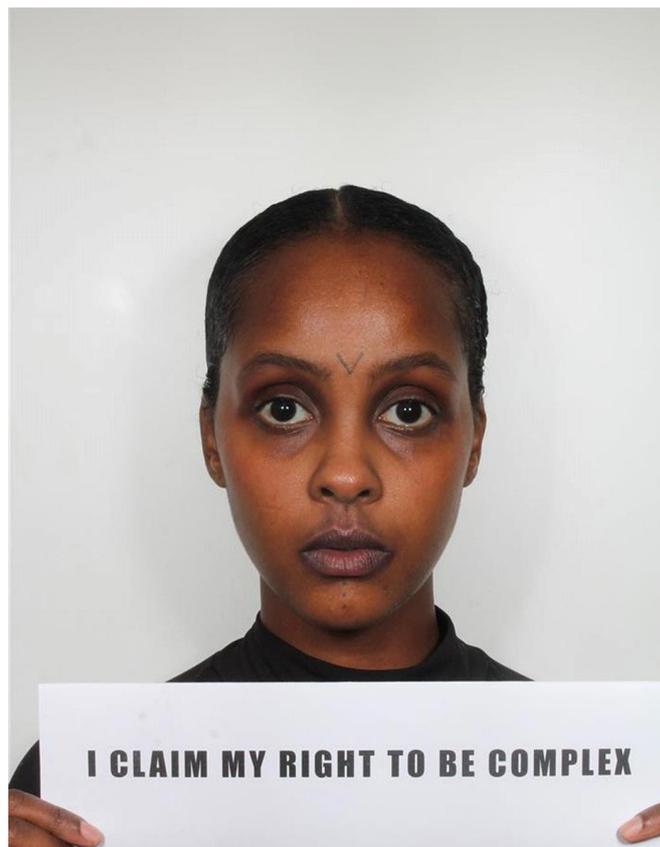
The Ghost Ship and the Sea Change

Göteborgs Internationella Konstbiennial,
Gothenburg
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Curator Lisa Rosendahl’s two-part Gothenburg biennial, that has just opened the doors of its second installment, makes me think of Benjamin’s angel of history. After the more poetic and philosophical register of the previous edition, this year’s exhibition wants to reflect on Gothenburg’s relationship to the colonial slave trade. The stories that emerge and affect our understanding of both the past and our dreams of the future indirectly

reactualise the angel's dilemma. The biennial's title, *The Ghost Ship and The Sea Change*, captures this antagonistic battle between past and future. How does one notice the ruins of history? How do you stop mid-progression? And last but not least: How do you get the angel of history to turn his head towards the future?

The biennial is on view at Röda Sten, Gothenburg Konsthall, and a couple of other institutions and public places in Gothenburg, most notably on the French lot, the part of the port that Sweden exchanged for colonial rule over the island of Saint Barthélemy in the late 18th century, and which serves as the biennial's conceptual starting point. Around the city there are also several strong sound works such as HAMN's (Nasim Aghili & Malin Holgersson) shocking stories about Nazi violence in Gothenburg, Lisa Torell's sci-fi political reverie about the future we are creating here and now, Meira Ahmemulic's heartbreaking story about a father who never found a real home in the new country, and Pia Sandström's polyphonic stories about Gothenburg's subterranean forests and opportunities for rebirth. There is a strong will to reach out here, to have an impact. But how can art reach those who need it most?



Fatima Moallim, *Untitled (I Claim My Right to Be Complex)*, framed passport photograph, 70 x 50 cm, 2021.

Despite my conviction that the modern concept of art is a racist invention based on exclusions, I have tried in recent years to approach contemporary art via other perspectives than skin colour, race, and ethnicity. I was long convinced that racism was born out of financial despair, but then realised that wealth and a sophisticated culture did not prevent the Greeks in antiquity from viewing the “barbarians” as inferiors.

Given my training in French psychoanalysis, I believe that the source of desire determines our fears and desires when confronted with the other – long before we have heard of either Marx or Freud. The blind spots of the psyche cannot be accessed by discourses or questions of representation, and people are much more complex than most identity-seeking discourses will admit. The other within us is infinitely more difficult to grasp than the external other, which haunts the bastions of monocultures. This is why I felt so happy encountering Fatima Moallim’s work at Gothenburg Konsthall which consists of a framed passport photo of the artist holding a sign with the words “I claim my right to be complex”. The description of the work states: “The work insists on the right not to be seen as a representative of simplistic categories such as gender, class, skin colour, or national origin.”

I haven’t seen such a simple and powerful work with such a beautiful dialectic between surface and depth in a long time. The ID document, invented by German nationalists in the 19th century, is inverted by Moallim to paradoxically mean a liberation from the compulsion of identity.



Conny Karlsson Lundgren, *Our Trip to France* (*Mont des Tantes*), films still, two channel video installation, 2021. Photo: Eric de Keizer.

But this heroic attitude only serves as an exception. Sometimes you have to look at which bodies have been allowed to inhabit art spaces. Salad Hilowle’s spectacular video installation *Vanus labor* (2021) is on view in in the kunsthalle’s main gallery, featuring a couple of hypnotically beautiful scenes with a Black woman singing opera intercut with images of Black people wandering around in a Neoclassical museum hall and a painting by the seventeenth-century Swedish painter David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl from

which Hilowle has borrowed the work's title. The painting depicts a Black child being washed by a pair of white children, and the title, "vain toil," could refer to the vanity in the children's desire to wash away the child's skin colour. But the painting could also be interpreted as a loving act of care for the Black body, and the title as the futility in reducing the painting to just one interpretation.

Tondo-shaped plasterboards depicting Black men also hang on the wall. The plaster cast has rendered them white, which makes me think of how Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* resented how the colonised embrace the cultures of colonial power. Is Hilowle's work also a story about Black skin seeking white masks? Maybe, if you look at the Black people in the galleries filled with Neoclassical art; their presence is almost inconceivable in a country as segregated as Sweden. But perhaps the work depicts a future when a Neoclassical art gallery will be considered a document of a barbarism among others, as opposed to an art space where Black people are no longer an exception?



Oscar Lara, *Within Heritage Movements*, 2013–2021. Installation view from the World Culture Museum. Photo: Hendrik Zeitler.

Hilowle manages to break out of the Manichaean master-slave dialectic that has been so typical of artists of an older generation, such as Fred Wilson or Yinka Shonibare, by creating a space for thought that renegotiates history, present, and future, while nevertheless emphasising history. The latter also applies to Conny Karlsson Lundgren's poetic film about an underground gay community from the 1970s shown in the gallery next door. A document about a utopian time that has passed, the film follows a group of gay men who withdrew from the world like a *Decameron* society to live as freely as possible on a French farm. This deeply nostalgic and tender, but also optimistic, work brings us back to the place of both physical and mental bareness and alternates images of past and present. Where are these places of exception today and what really happened to the sexual revolution?

A work that has a revolutionary feature to it, albeit not in an obvious way, is Lisa Tan's *Little Petra* (2021), an armchair upholstered in cream-coloured sheepskin, with an accompanying brochure. The text tells of how, one day, while in a department store in Stockholm, the artist sat down in this expensive chair that she had desired for a very long time, to suddenly hear a woman nearby say to someone over the phone: "I cannot stand society today. And now this Japanese, Korean, Chinese woman or whatever she is, thinks that she is free to sit wherever she wants." In her deeply moving text, Tan describes how this racist incident eats into her and draws comparisons to how Adrian Piper one day had enough of confronting everyday racists and made a business card reprimanding people with a very polite, but thoughtful text. Tan meets the other with the same finesse as the chair's comfortable softness.



Hira Nabi, *All That Perishes at the Edge of Land*, 2019. Installation view from Rödasten Konsthall. Photo: Hendrik Zeitler.

A similar finesse is found in Oscar Lara's work which, together with a video lecture by theorist Ariela Aïsha Azoulay, constitutes the biennial's contribution to the permanent collection of the World Culture Museum. Lara has had a pair of Peruvian textiles from a 2000-year-old desert tomb copied so that the museum's original pieces could be returned to Lima. The dependence of ethnographic collections on colonialism and the laborious efforts of decolonisation are captured in a meditative video work about the Swedish textile workers who produced the replicas. Like many other sites outside the main exhibitions, this part of the biennial is more subdued and reflective.

At Rödasten, the biennial's spectral maritime theme is literally realised in an exhibition architecture designed by Kooperative für Darstellungspolitik in the form of a deconstructed ship's hull that makes the large space look like a giant shipyard in the making. On the walls are several video works depicting both ideological shipwrecks (Tabita Rezaire), high-functioning and dysfunctional cargo ships (Benjamin Gerdes), and Kafkaesque misuses of justice and quests for order and meaning (Marysia Lewandowska). One of the highlights is Hira Nabi's

painterly video installation *All That Perishes at the Edge of Land* (2019), which shows a cargo ship that has arrived at the foggy Gadani ship breaking yard in Pakistan for scrapping. We get to follow the low-paid workers, their toil and joy, but also the ship itself, which reflects on its voyages in a kind of magical realist lament over the sublime of terror and the possibilities that come with disaster.



Alberta Whittle, *RESET*, film still, 2020.

The work that shines the brightest, which manages to point both backwards and forwards, but perhaps most of all towards a possible reconciliation, is Alberta Whittle's *RESET* (2020). In one corner of Röda Sten's main gallery, this sensual and rhythmic film shows a divinely beautiful Black woman moving like a sundial in a white house. Wearing white trousers and a crocheted medallion-like top, she wraps white ropes with seashells around her ankles. A voice says: "I am trying to learn how to heal. Take a big breath. Think of your heart. Send love to that heart." Pictures of flowers, exotic fruits, and images of clouds are interspersed with scenes from Black Lives Matter marches and police violence. The woman rolls a small yellow ball along her body and in and out of her mouth like a giant playing with our planet, a female Atlas making the earth bearable again. Reset. Everything can be restarted. Everything is possible.

I get the same warm gut feeling from 'Comforting the Machine' on the venue's third floor, one of the biennial's side events. There is a lot of joy and affirmation in the air both at the opening and in the voluptuous and absurdist works of artists from the region, such as Trinidad Carillo and Kasra Seyed Alikhani. Joy and humour are otherwise virtually non-existent in this year's edition of the biennial – as are acute fear, ambivalent desires, visceral corporeal and emotional outpourings. The idea of the future does not feel sufficiently processed. The biennial's distant intellectualism and focus on colonial history can come across as a way of circumventing the complex and unpleasant societal changes we face today.

Yet, Lisa Rosendahl has, despite a certain degree of predictability,

managed to create not only a biennial that is rich in compelling stories that look both forwards and backwards, but also an overall feeling that encompasses both reconciliation, trust, and affinity. Can the angel of history turn its head towards the future? Can we? To succeed, you probably have to, as one of the protagonists in Seyed Alikhani's film says, "have eyes in the back of your head."



The 11th edition of the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art. *The Ghost Ship and the Sea Change*, installation view from Röda Sten Konsthall. Photo: Hendrik Zeitler.

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