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Nilbar Güreş, *Elsewhere's Palm Trees*, 2012–18, HD video, color, silent, 9 minutes 2 seconds. From "Rust & Bones."

## "Rust & Bones"

GALERIE TANJA WAGNER

While some things deteriorate with time's passing, others resist its effects. Or so the title "Rust & Bones" seemed to remind us. But this tight gathering of works by Ulf Aminde, Nilbar Güreş, Laurel Nakadate, and Justin Liam O'Brien was more oblique than that. It was an exhibition about relationality and confrontation that asked viewers to privilege efforts at reconciliation and togetherness over the conflict and isolation that often seem their inevitable outcome.

In Nakadate's short video *Exorcism in January*, 2009, the artist, a young woman, visits an older man in his messy, gray apartment. The two met by chance as neighbors; he's asked her to perform an exorcism on him to help alleviate his depression. "Go away, spirits," she commands, as his body, belly trembling, convulses on the bed. Another scene shows her, alone in her room, steeped in the same dusty light and the same sense of staled existence. In the second half of the piece, they change positions. In a denim skirt and pink tank top, she shakes on the floor. "She's a good girl," the man reasons with the spirits. "Leave her alone." Even those who believe in exorcisms probably would not have much faith in this pair's ability to cast out demons. Rather, complicit in the potential for exploitation between an artist and her subject, or a man and a younger woman, the work portrays the uneven territory traversed in our battle against loneliness.

Güreş's video *Elsewhere's Palm Trees*, 2012–18, shows two women wrapping and unwrapping themselves in the same piece of cloth, which becomes a dress for one and a head scarf for the other while tying both of the performers together. What seems like a naive analogy for happy multiculturalism is set on a fake beach with a view of Manhattan, two ruler-straight palm trees framing One World Trade Center mid-construction. Güreş knows the value of absurdity. Amid the Islamophobia that followed 9/11, what happens under these trees is a dream from elsewhere.

O'Brien's four small paintings testified to the private dreams of a younger generation. Blurry light-green-and-orange figures glow from within, their round bodies almost sexless as they try to get close to one another, their phone cameras taking aim at bare skin. One of the works, from 2019, featured Picassoesque bodies intertwining like a landscape of hills, yet still the title begged *Say my name, say my name*. O'Brien's paintings are not manifestations of intimacy achieved, but show it instead as a *fata morgana*, always just out of reach and more beautiful (and true) because of it.

Far from O'Brien's tentative longing, Aminde's video *critical whiteness*, 2017, seemed almost unhinged. In it, the artist, a white man, has the words DENIAL, GUILT, SHAME, RECOGNITION, and REPARATION tattooed onto his arm in a gesture of solidarity with those who suffer from racist violence and oppression. Where Nakadate shows ritual and superstition as vehicles for social interaction, Aminde's position, at first seemingly politically rational, spawns an unproductive conflation of the individual body with societal injustice, which ultimately leads to contact with no one. At the end of the recording, the camera pans up to the artist's own face, one eye ready for affirmation. Whether this means that Aminde now feels cleared, or that he is forever sullied—which, for the masochist, is an equally satisfying verdict—his is a *cul-de-sac* logic. The great strength of this show was that the other works, always underscored by contradiction and disappointment, were quick to suggest why. In the end, the most consistent characteristic of human relations is their instability: They are far too fickle to be ruled by the commitment of ink on skin.

— Kristian Vistrup Madsen

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