

ArtReview

Gabriel Lester and Haegue Yang: Follies, Manifold

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Gabriel Lester, Living by the Light of Fiction, 2014. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam

Dress a man up like a puffed-up Swiss Guard, and it's considered an avant-garde gesture; remake the costume as a sculpture and it is, apparently, a folly. *Follies, Manifold*, a two-person exhibition bringing together works by Haegue Yang and Gabriel Lester, takes its starting point from the landscape architecture feature of the folly, and the way it can, as the gallery claims, 'animate the landscape and activate fantasy within the viewer'. Yang's *Boxing Ballet* (2013) turns one half of the gallery into a reworking of Oskar Schlemmer's 1922 costumed dance work *Triadisches Ballett*, with replicas of five of the Bauhaus teacher's bulbous and exaggerated figures, from a female figure made of hoops to a circle that looks like a flattened stickman. Here, Schlemmer's figures are reimagined as golden bell-covered shapes on wheels or wire frames hanging by a wire from the ceiling. As they all come with handlebars, it seems we are meant to provide the choreography, stiffly pushing, say, a giant roosterlike creature around like an awkward shopping trolley.

This is counterbalanced on the other side of the large gallery by *VIP's Union* (2014), an arrangement of 72 chairs lent by the 'movers' of Bonn: gallerists, academics, musicians and more than a few directors of some institution or other. A small children's chair carved into the shape of a creepy clown with its tongue out comes from the head of the Bonn Landesmuseum; the two wooden chairs and a table covered in a web of coloured duct tape, from a professor at the University of Bonn's radiology clinic, is the most lively thing there. The rest is a collection of fairly drab office chairs, which might say something about the mentality of the supposed 'movers': who actually chose the list of VIPs is never disclosed. Presenting these together, though, Yang seemed to suggest her sources – the Bauhaus ballet and VIPs – as equal forces that shape our encounters with the art institution and how we are allowed to move within it.

In between all this is Gabriel Lester's darkened cinema space, in which it looks at first glance as if a bunch of potted plants is watching a film. The screen that transfixes them is *How to Act* (1999–2014), a blank, white rectangular space animated only by a set of red, yellow, white and green lights. A soundtrack suggests a Hitchcock-like thriller unfolding, with the sequencing of the lights providing motion (fluttering in time with the sounds of a street filled with traffic), mood (turning green with tense, suspenseful strings, or red with sultry saxophones) and even hints of character (I, at least, begin to imagine a male protagonist being denoted by the appearance of yellow). It's remarkable what just a set of blinking bulbs can conjure, though Lester's use of recognisably Hollywood 'scenes' perhaps tells us more about what conventions of genre narrative we've absorbed than anything else.

The most instructive representation of the audience's role in this exhibition are the 17 imitation ferns and palms on plinths of various heights that are ostensibly, as the title proclaims, *Living by the Light of Fiction* (2014). A group of plastic plants enraptured in the light of a deconstructed film: the most they can do is watch the predictable story play out in front of them. Both Lester and Yang make apparent the structures underlying their clever, theatrical displays; but they also make apparent how proscribed our relationships with those structures already are. Chief among the manifold follies on show here is the fantasy of interaction.

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