

from a speaker in the ceiling also alternates between languages as it expands on the themes of displacement and loss. In another show, the work might come across as a thoughtful meditation on the personal and collective costs of migration. Here, alongside pieces like *Saacha* and *Arise*, it seems to lack historical thickness and specificity; and compared with the work of Surve and the rapping of the trio in Delhi, the spoken text seems flat and its delivery ponderous. Mithu Sen's book of gibberish, *I am a Poet*, 2013, is more seductive but, as Sen writes herself, it 'invite[s] you to embrace "nonsense" as resistance', suggesting that ordinary speech is too compromised by the intentions it routinely carries to serve, as Larsen and Monteiro & Jayasankar assume it does, or at least can, as a tool of dissent. While Bervall and Sen focus on language as a given system, Larsen and Monteiro & Jayasankar examine specific efforts to master and use language. These works do not express opposed positions as much as they face in different directions, building on entirely different concerns and premises.

Similarly, Lawrence Abu Hamdan's *Conflicted Phonemes*, 2012, though powerful in itself, addresses issues that are only superficially related to the questions that animate other works in the show. It looks closely at the voice analysis techniques used by the Dutch immigration authorities to assess the claims of Somali asylum seekers, who are more likely to be accepted if they come from the strife-torn south of the country. Abu Hamdan shows, with an array of densely informative diagrams that disconcertingly resemble decorative designs for rugs or mosaics, that Somalia has seen successive waves of internal migration and that, tragically, the test is therefore founded on flawed premises: few Somalis can be expected to speak in unadulterated regional dialects. So while most of the works in the show take it as read that the voice serves the speaker, Abu Hamdan treats it as a faculty that is (also) expressive independently of his or her will.

Of course, shows are not arguments, but they can delimit their territories and highlight common lines of enquiry, so that even works that draw on wholly different resources can resonate with (or against) one another. This show does none of that. It sets out to consider questions that are too broadly and vaguely defined and, as a result, the various fault lines that emerge seem accidental rather than willed and significant, and the pieces that come off best are the fully immersive ones that isolate themselves from the works around them. ■

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## London Round-up

### South London Gallery • ICA • Waterside Contemporary • England & Co

As I started drafting this review, the woman in the aeroplane seat next to me peered at my laptop and said, 'Oh, you're writing about Oscar Murillo?' She didn't work in the art world, yet she knew the young Colombian artist, who graduated one year ago. Then again, the zesty swirl of publicity (mostly not in art magazines) around Murillo is probably discernible from the moon: the David Zwirner signing, the six-figure sums for his paintings, the lazy-but-then-look-at-his-hair 'new Basquiat' tag, the social-diary appearances. Amid all that, Murillo's first London institutional show both delivers what he is known for – importing his studio into the gallery, making bluntly distressed abstractions, literally dragging

painting down to earth (with the footprints to prove it) – and suggests an artist reflecting on his career's breakneck first act.

Downstairs is pungent rawness. The flooring is lumpy with grey gunk and dotted with open sacks of corn, buckets, porcelain sculptures that resemble upturned vases with globular feet and stacks of plastic chairs awaiting an audience (indeed, Murillo is performing here). On worktables are in-progress oilstick drawings, greyish ball-shaped casts, and strewn handfuls of beer bottle caps and poker chips; the finished works hung around look only tentatively so; and running along two walls is a frieze of, among other things, packaging for inexpensive South American foodstuffs, Miami takeaway menus, slimming herbs and a package from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Murillo titled this show 'if I was to draw a line, this journey started approximately 400km north of the equator' – Colombia, surely – and it embeds him and his art in a network of trade relations and migrations, leveraging his ethnicity but in a mumbling fashion, while also setting up what feels like a faintly anxious poetics of displacement and imbalance. Upstairs, *Ramón, how was trade today? enjoy the food but you're not welcome at this table*, 2013, a video in which Murillo, in his Colombian hometown, follows a local lottery-ticket seller on his footsore rounds, is accompanied by a real-life lottery, complete with golden, oversized tickets. Psychoanalyse that, if you like.

It has taken Lutz Bacher four decades to have her first show in a London public space, but the famously elusive Californian artist – whose moniker may be pseudonymous, and who definitely traffics in allusive aesthetic enigmas – operates on her own terms. At the ICA Bacher turns the ground-floor space into a negative desert, constructing dunes of black silicate (*Black Beauty*, 2012). Into this she inserts a murkily erotic black-and-white photograph (*Untitled (Mudra)*, 1975), a distressed metal robot (*Ashtroy*, 2013), a resolutely smashed mirror (*Angels*, 2013) and *Puck*, 2012, a recording of a man with Down's Syndrome reciting part of Puck's monologue from the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'if we shadows have offended / think but this and all is mended.' Puck is beginning to say, graciously enough, that what has preceded has all been a dream, a reverie with no truth behind it. The same goes for Bacher's contradictory, smartly skewed artworks, whose meditations on how unfixed, how *between*, things can be, have often been seen in terms of identity. But for an 'identity artist' (if she is one, another question one could ask of Murillo), Bacher can also be very funny. Witness, upstairs, *Chess*, 2012, in which cutouts of Elvis Presley and a Tyrannosaurus rex, two giant, shell-like chess pieces, a querulous model camel, and a Duchampian bicycle wheel and stool pause in surreal battle on a chequerboard floor, while a loop of Elvis's unearthly falsetto on *Blue Moon* floats over everything endlessly. At moments like this Bacher's art performs the mysterious magic of holding everything back while seeming to spray gifts. I came out feeling ebullient and not knowing why.

Ebullience is rationed at Waterside Contemporary, where the group show **Long ago, and not true anyway** muses soberly on what happens to historical narratives when they are scrambled by, we are told, 'migrations, invasions, economic interactions, time and memory'; and when the alternative ideal of multiculturalism gives way to parallel migrant or displaced (for example) communities living cheek-by-jowl yet adhering to their own codes. How one finds oneself, and sustains oneself, within this is the burden of Mekhitar Garabedian's video, *MG*,

