

# REZA ARAMESH: MIDNIGHT TO MIDNIGHT SIX MAN

*Reza Aramesh's arresting sculptures have articulated a very human toll of war, conflict and terror, through the salacious prism of contemporary media. In his new project he moves out of the gallery space to install his new works, spectres of death and carnage and within the hedonistic atmosphere of New York's clubland. By Lara Atallah.*

It's a rainy Friday June afternoon in New York City and in a couple of hours an adventure is about to begin. The starting point would be an interview with London-based artist Reza Aramesh at the Leila Heller Gallery in Chelsea regarding his latest work '12- Midnight' project. The work consists of a series of installations combining both photography and sculpture that questioned the idea of violence as mind-numbing spectacle, through the deconstruction of Christian iconography. As one enters the gallery space, one is presented with photographs of men —homeless in some cases— that the artist met at Gare de l'Est in Paris who have agreed to pose for him in Versailles. The artist sought to recreate famous war photographs by juxtaposing these men who for the most part look Middle Eastern to the lavish opulence of Versailles. As a result, these men end up presenting us with an aloof dissonance of our modern world's class divide. The viewer is left reflecting on the idea that the most glorious symbols of our civilizations were built upon the suffering of the majority of people.

Next to the photographs, are placed two of the five wood-carved sculptures that were brought in from different NYC nightclubs where they were initially displayed. Some are still there, in situ, no doubt still perplexing clubbers. These sculptures reference seventeenth century Spanish martyrs and saints that Aramesh seeks to deconstruct in order to then present us with contemporary figures using the same visual language. We're confronted with the faces of unknown soldiers that seem to have an expression of ecstasy and pain on their faces, evoking the mythical rapture that occurs at a martyr's moment of death. (The work seeks to recreate the carnality found in old Catholic iconography, in which the divine was associated to a certain ecstasy that is very similar to a sensual one). An added twist lies in the plinths on which these sculptures rest, featuring graffiti the artist has photo-documented during his travels. This element further adds a layer of textual complexity to the work.

Quintessentially, the artist wished to pay tribute to the 18th century German baroque sculptor, Andrea Shluter's body of work 'Dying Warriors' which expressed his refusal of war, through the

depiction of unknown soldiers. Aramesh's main concern revolves around violence as a human construct and its relation to the whole economy of war. In a way, the work asks us to look at ourselves in a different way. In light of that, the artist asks the questions: Is media a new religion, for which these soldiers are made out to be modern-day saints? And how did we reach the point where we have become so desensitized by the images depicting social injustice and violent deaths that are caused by all these wars?

At the heart of the conceptual element of this project lies another essential factor that pertains to presentation. These pieces were not made to be confined to an art gallery, rather this project is meant to exist off-site. The works were designed to be on display in nightclubs around the city, that range from the tackiest to the most

*ARAMESH'S MAIN CONCERN REVOLVES AROUND VIOLENCE AS A HUMAN CONSTRUCT AND ITS RELATION TO THE WHOLE ECONOMY OF WAR.'*



(Top and left) Details from 'Bossa Nova' (2013) (Images courtesy Leila Heller Gallery)

elite, exclusive establishments: 'Marquee' in Chelsea; 'No.8', in the Meatpacking district; 'Santos Party House', in Tribeca; 'Sugarland', in Williamsburg; and 'Bossa Nova Civic Club', in Bushwick. For the most part, the sculptures are kept inside a large encasing and are to be seen through a peephole. The peephole effect further adds to the idea of voyeurism.

It soon became evident that just interviewing Aramesh would not be enough. These sculptures were created to be experienced in their intended setting. It was time to pay a visit to 'Marquee', a renowned club in Chelsea where one walks in to find a huge, opulent space. On the left hand side, is the DJ who's stationed in front of a huge screen that upon entering was flashing the words 'wasted youth.' The crowd inside seemed to range from mid-twenties to mid-thirties. Suddenly, amidst these dolled-up 'America's Next Top Model' wannabes and 'The Bachelor' lookalikes, as one looks up to the small platform hanging down from the ceiling, there it is. A wood-carved man crouching on a plinth looking down in agony on the oblivious party crowd, seemingly oblivious to the fact that thousands of miles away from here men, women and children are dying by the thousands everyday. At a certain point, a group of three men look up and are suddenly startled. They seem to talk about it for a couple of minutes before their enthusiasm eventually wanes and they resume dancing. **HBA**

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