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LEILA HELLER GALLERY  
(POP-UP SPACE), DUBAI

# REVIEW: THE WHISTLE OF THE SOULS: A PLAY THAT NEVER STARTS

Reza Aramesh's latest exhibition (March 17-April 17) urged forward his engagement with sculpture, writes Christopher Lord

Behind a red door in an anonymous row of warehouses in Al Quoz was a single white statue sculpted in Carrara marble. It was cut from the same quarries that built the Roman Empire, the marble that allowed Michelangelo to shape his exquisite drapery, and gave Mussolini the towering obelisk that would announce his vision for a New Rome.

Yet the subject is not a biblical hero or an embodiment of the will-to-power. Instead, it is a man rendered in a vulnerably diminutive scale. His trousers have been pulled around his ankles and his t-shirt is pulled across his face like a smothering cowl.

'Action 137: 6:45pm, 3 May 2012, Ramla' is a work orchestrated by Reza Aramesh, who collaborated with the Demetz Art Studio in Northern Italy, famous for its religious sculpture, to produce the piece. It references a single reportage image of a protest in Ramla, Israel, in 2012 in which protestors congregated outside a prison to show their support for a group of Palestinian hunger-strikers held inside. Most were swiftly arrested by police.

But the individual, presumably snapped at the moment of being arrested, is divorced from this context in the sculpture. We know nothing about him, nor the circumstances that have left him gagged and humiliated. Yet with his t-shirt forming a Turin Shroud-like imprint of his face, and the glisten of the Carrara marble that gives the sculpture its vitality, we have the sense of the work as a monument to an eternal martyr – an unknown yet idealised belligerent.

*The Whistle of the Souls: A Play That Never Starts* was curated by Ali Bakhtiari and presented in an off-the-beaten-track warehouse by Leila Heller Gallery during Art Dubai. Situated on the fringes of Al Quoz, some distance away from the gallery clusters of Alserkal Avenue, the interior space was painted entirely black, heightening the glow of the marble under bright lights. A small enclosed space at the entrance housed three 1940s Kodak projectors, their long, thin lenses outstretched like a firing squad.

Reza Aramesh,  
'Action 137:  
6:45pm, 3 May  
2012, Ramla', 2014.  
Installed in Dubai  
in 2014. Image  
courtesy of the  
artist and Leila  
Heller Gallery

Each slide depicted a bound and gagged individual being led away by unseen assailants, with the original image digitally altered to isolate the blindfolded victim.

Throughout his career, Aramesh has made the study of reportage photography of conflict and atrocity the centre of his work. This found momentum in the late 2000s, in which the artist took images of conflict sourced from the media – scenes of Tibetan protestors or an Iraqi woman surrounded by the dead, for instance – and restaged edited versions of them in stately homes and opulent interiors around Europe, largely working with non-professional actors.

Drawing on connections between wealth, historical power and the disasters of war, Aramesh's recent work has evolved into a prolonged engagement with sculpture. He has explored the aesthetic of suffering that is deeply-knit into the history of sacred Christian sculpture and connected that with the spectacle of violence that sparks the world's media networks.

*The Whistle of the Souls* is a continuation of that inquiry – the sacred and the profane is embodied in the material and uncomfortably sexualised stance of the marble statue. Produced in an era when the anonymous protester has been imbued, through the spotlighting power of the media, with a martyr-like status, the exhibition questions that hallowing process. By rendering the anonymous protestor in marble, indicative of wealth and permanence, the artist points us to the power structure that has thrust his image before us: The fleeting flicker of the television screen or newsfeed.

Through that frame, the blinded victim is de-individualised. He's made symbolic, unseeing and the circumstances of his detainment frozen in obscurity. Aramesh probes the machinations of this media machine and, by making us look at his altered slides through a pane of glass, asks us to consider our own unwitting complicity in its nullifying mechanics.

[leilahellergallery.com](http://leilahellergallery.com)

