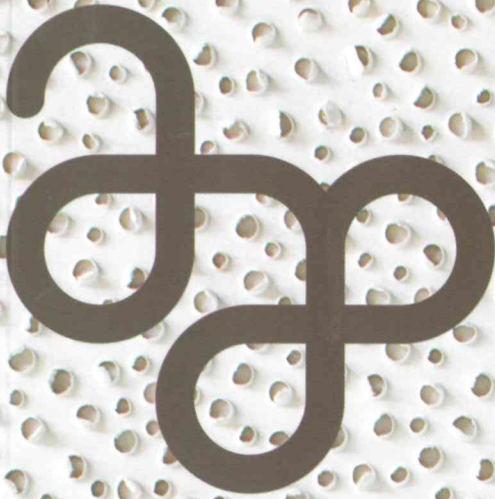


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RASHEED ARAEEN, EI ARAKAWA, HO CHI MINH CITY
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REZA ARAMESH

THE WHISTLE OF THE SOULS, A PLAY THAT NEVER STARTS

Opposite page

SONIA KHURANA

Somnambulist's Song

2008–10

Two-channel video installation: 15 min.

Music in arrangement with

Wasifuddin Dagar and Frøy Aagre.

Courtesy Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi.

This page

REZA ARAMESH

Action 137: 6:45 pm, 3 May 2012, Ramla

2014

Hand-carved Carrera marble, 136 x 40 cm

Courtesy the artist and Leila

Heller Gallery, New York.

Iranian-British artist Reza Aramesh has carved a decade-long, poetically charged, conscientious practice that has explored the themes of autonomy, masculinity and migrancy, articulated through diverse, media-spanning performance, photography, drawing and sculpture. Once known for his performative and incongruous placement of suited masked men against the backdrop of elite private homes, museums and architectural monuments, as an investigation of the disparity in wealth in different places, in recent years Aramesh has turned his attention to researching mass-syndicated images of human suffering caused by war and disputed geographical occupations. The artist reappropriates these images into small polychrome and marble sculptures, which resemble saint-like figures of Western worship, proposing possible “monuments” for the unknown heroes of man-made tragedies, who are subjected to atrocities and humiliation yet are categorically treated as invisible. Subsequently, Aramesh’s art makes these individuals visible and provides a sense of dignity to the “silent majority,” who undergo pain and trauma as a result of war and conflict.

Aramesh’s recent solo show in Dubai, entitled “The Whistle of the Souls, a Play That Never Starts” and organized by Leila Heller Gallery, continued to probe dense, political subjects. Staged interestingly in an unmarked, derelict warehouse on the periphery of the al-Quoz gallery district, it opened during the city’s annual March Art Week. Curated by Tehran-based Ali Bakhtiari, the site-specific exhibition took its inspiration from the late Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous’s acclaimed play *An Entertainment Evening for June 5th* (1967–68), which premiered at the Damascus State Theatre in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli War (also

known as the Six-Day War) in 1967. The plot of *An Entertainment Evening* is centered around the opening night of *Safir al-Arwah* (“The Whistle of the Souls”), a play-within-a-play that is an account of the Israeli offensive retold through text and actors who are engaged in conversation with the audience, which results in an ultimate process of self-reflection. Aramesh extracts the poetic core of Wannous’s celebrated work to create his own take on the dramatization of a conflict plagued by unresolved violence.

At the al-Quoz warehouse, upon entering its substantial space, visitors encountered an acute sense of foreboding that permeated the darkened interior, where the walls had been painted black. One was immediately confronted by *Action 137: 6:45 pm, 3 May 2012, Ramla* (2014), a small, lone, white marble figure atop a concrete block plinth. The carved figure is portrayed as wearing a shirt—half of which has been forced over his head, covering his face and exposing a muscular torso—and trousers that drop around his ankles in a state that suggests equal measures of humiliation and eroticism. Despite the small size of the sculpture in comparison to the vastness of its surrounding space, the work managed to command a magnetic presence coupled with an ironic sense of false eminence. In another corner of the space was *Action 136: Put This in Your Record: I’m Present!* (2014), which comprises a glass case presented like a modern-day cabinet of curiosities. Inside the case are three slide projections showing a blindfolded, partially clothed man crouched down and enclosed within a concrete space. The man and the enclosure are situated next to what appears to be a military checkpoint in the Middle East, as evidenced by the Arabic script visible on vehicles passing by. At the al-Quoz warehouse, these slides were presented in an arcade-like fashion, with three standing cameras pointing at them like interactive video-game guns. The scenario that unravels within the projected slide images is akin to that of an arcade game, where the boundaries of the “winners” and “losers” are clearly demarcated.

Aramesh’s visually powerful pairing of two distinct yet connected works succeeded in creating a museum-quality display, which solicited a satirical deconstruction of the convoluted duality that connects power and violence. Through his beautification of violence, Aramesh creates strong allegorical works that linger in the viewer’s mind, creating a tableau in which the sacred and the profane co-exist in both harmony and conflict.

SARA RAZA

