

ARTFORUM

SUMMER 2014

POINT IN MY
LIFE...

I'M
EXACTLY
WHERE I
PLANNED
TO BE, IT'S
AHMEE-
ZING !!

I SEE.



WARHOL'S COMPUTER
AFROFUTURISM
ART AND ANIMATION

BUT
HONEY,
YOU
KNOW
...

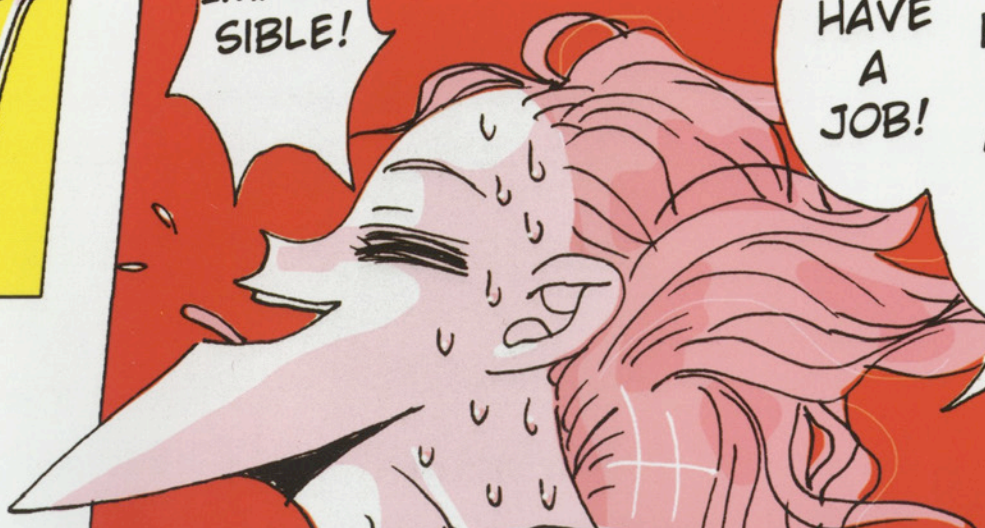
WHEN
NO ONE IS
LOOKING, YOU
HAVE THIS
SAD LOOK ON
YOUR FACE...
ARE YOU
SECRETLY
HURTING?



IMPOS-
SIBLE!

I
HAVE
A
JOB!

I ALSO
HAVE MY
STYLE,
MY MAN,
SORT
OF...



HA
HA

\$10.00



Reza Aramesh

LEILA HELLER GALLERY

Although Reza Aramesh draws on an extensive archive of media images of wartime atrocities for representations of male bodies in moments of pain, suffering, and forced submission, his performances, large-scale

Reza Aramesh, *Action 136: Put this in your record: I am Present!*, 2014, three-channel 35-mm slide projection, color, silent.



black-and-white photographs, and, most recently, sculptures (all of which he refers to as “actions”) are never strictly mimetic. The London-based Iranian artist extracts victims’ poses, gestures, and expressions from documentary images and then enlists amateurs—young, fit, and dressed in everyday street wear—to reenact them. These reenactments, carefully choreographed tableaux that include numerous actors and poses derived from multiple sources and are staged in stately mansions and art-filled museums—induce an extreme tension between abjection and opulence, fact and artifice. The polychrome limewood sculptures, which isolate single figures, achieve a similar tension by uncannily assimilating specific expressions of pain and suffering portrayed in the media with important precedents from the history of Western, and specifically Christian, art.

Produced through the translation and distillation of an existing image, the sculptures feel refined and dense with reference. Aramesh has displayed them in different contexts, experimenting with the specific viewing conditions of each venue to emphasize, in ways that are provocative and problematic, distinct modes and ethics of looking—aesthetic, religious, or even erotic, as the case may be. In addition to a gallery in Dubai in 2011, the sculptures have been exhibited in a church in London in 2011, and in five nightclubs scattered across New York City in 2013; notably, in the last instance, direct visual access to the works was limited by their presentation in various types of enclosures. The shifting displays and the types of audiences they enable, from art-world insiders to unsuspecting clubgoers, suggest a growing interest in investigating how these sculptures might signify in increasingly public spaces—as civic memorials or monuments—where viewers largely lack any prior knowledge of Aramesh’s ongoing aesthetic and political concerns.

Aramesh’s latest exhibition, “The Whistle of Souls, a Play That Never Starts”—conceived of as a “proposal for a public sculpture” and presented in Dubai’s industrial Al Quoz neighborhood in a nondescript warehouse that had been rented for the occasion by Leila Heller Gallery—seemed to follow this trajectory. Evoking a Baroque altarpiece, the show’s centerpiece, *Action 137: 6:45 pm, 3 May 2012, Ramla* (all works 2014) is a gleaming white marble sculpture of a young man stripped down to his underwear, his pants bunched up around his ankles and his T-shirt pulled up over his head, masking his face but exposing his body. The figure, less than life-size, stands atop a cast-concrete column; ostensibly a plinth, the base also suggests a cell or a coffin. However, with his arms stoically pinned to his sides, he is helpless and defiant, vulnerable and proud. Theatrically spotlighted amid the black-painted walls of the warehouse, the figure appeared unexpectedly majestic. While the subtitle, probably adapted from the caption of the source image, locates this body in the specifics of time and place in the

Palestinian-Israeli conflict—the humiliation of daily strip searches endured by Palestinian men—the sculpture’s anonymity and lack of color universalizes it into a counter-monument of sorts.

An installation—titled *Action 136: Put this in your record: I am Present!*, after Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish’s 1964 poem “Identity Card”—of three slides of media images showing other blindfolded and bound men, digitally manipulated so that the figures appear eerily alone, accompanied the sculpture. Projected on a wall inside the warehouse’s locked former office—a freestanding two-room enclosure within the larger structure—these images could be viewed only through a large window, with the sculpture looming behind us reflected, spookily, in the glass. If, following Emmanuel Levinas, the origin of ethics is the face-to-face encounter, then how, as viewers and witnesses, can we ever achieve ethical or even empathetic access to these humiliated men, robbed of the dignity of their sight? Despite our desires otherwise, we remain implicated in their oppression. Hovering ominously in our field of vision like some hooded angel of death, the sculpture seemed to emphasize this, demanding retribution for the countless others like him.

—Murtaza Vali