Psychic space allows us to untether ourselves

It shouldn’t be surprising to stumble upon the work of an Italian artist, Giovanni Ozzola, in a Stellenbosch gallery, yet it is uncommon.

This is probably due to the fact that even galleries in our cultural centres (Johannesburg and Cape Town) remain insular, though gallery owners are trying to secure artists from elsewhere to join their stables in an effort to appear more in touch with the continent and the international scene. This drive has oddly been coupled with a tendency to encourage these artists to respond to South African conditions or history. As such the subject-matter remains familiar – are SA audiences really able to take an interest in matters beyond our shores?

Ozzola, too, was invited to make art that responded to Southern Africa, though a six-month residency in Cape Town was a plausible request. Drift, the title of his Smac show at their Stellenbosch gallery, draws attention to his outsider status and perhaps even a struggle to position himself and his art in a foreign context although self-consciously insular.

As a multimedia artist Ozzola approaches this task via different mediums or tools. He uses photography, video and found historical objects like maps, a bell, and propellers, which provide physical anchors. The maps reference geographical navigation and domination during the colonial era. The bell, which is hung with shipping rope, evokes sea travel too, but it is also a tool used to summon citizens to a central place and the propellers naturally bring movement to mind. All of these objects are “unmoored” from their original contexts, so while they seem to work at grounding the viewer, the artist and his sense of isolation they seem to further insinuate this persistent sense of being adrift. They are floating anchors, if that makes any sense.

The photographs and videos that stand out. They all present a similar motif: a doorway to another place, that offers the view of a natural landscape. In About the Sky a natural horizon is presented through the open doorway of what appears to be a dilapidated room or building. The paint on the walls is chipped, the door is missing.

In Sand, Warmth and Light, the viewer is once again confronted with a run-down building that has become dysfunctional – it is full of sand (probably shot in Namibia). In this instance the natural horizon is contained inside the building rather than through an opening, though the dusty sunset that glows through the dark silhouette of the window frames invites your gaze to the outside.

Ozzola appears to be fixated on threshold spaces, the gateways, barriers or boundaries between one world and another. Most often one is a built world that has collapsed and the other is a natural one. There is science fiction, yet he is mindful of the way we necessarily yearn to return to or dream of exploring.

This idea is perhaps best expressed or has the most impact in the video titled Garage: Sometimes you can see much more (2010-2011). As the title suggests the setting is a garage and the action is simple: a garage door opens slowly to reveal a stunning vista of a sun-kissed seascape. Like the uniform ebb and flow of waves, the opening and closing of the garage door invites you to a comfortable and easy meditative space – you can watch this video for hours on end.

The titles of Ozzola’s works don’t refer to specific places, encouraging the viewer to dream beyond the confines of particular places. He leads us into a universal kind of psychic space, allowing us to untether ourselves from specific socio-political contexts and float in this limbo space and consider where we would like to step next.

Ozzola’s works may have been made in response to his travels around southern Africa but its charm lies in how he expresses and exploits not being rooted anywhere specific.

Drift is at Smac, Stellenbosch until May 28.

Mary Corrigall

Art

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