

ar Lili Reynaud-Dewar: Interpretation

Kunsthalle Basel

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By Quinn Latimer

Dressed in a long robe of shiny silk, he is impressively serene. A black king, a Roman emperor, an Egyptian god, an Intergalactic Pope. [...] Images flash on a screen: planets, satellites, black children in the streets of American cities, Indians, protestors. Suddenly a ball of fire rises up to the ceiling of the little chapel. Two saxophonists converge symmetrically at the centre of the stage. Sun Ra welcomes them with the sound of [...] waves crashing furiously. A woman in the audience stands up and starts shouting: "What is this? What is this?"

At this point in the monologue – recited dramatically and decisively by a striking older woman with a Dada-ish raven-black bob and an exuberant carnivalesque costume – you might be thinking the same thing. In an elegant white gallery within Kunsthalle Basel, a geometric wood-and-mirror structure – recalling both a modernist spaceship and a Suprematist monument – rises improbably from the floor, a glenlike opening at its centre. Against one of the tall mirrored interior surfaces, a video projection offers up the actress, seated on a throne-like chair covered in African-patterned fabrics, as she relates the story of the Sun Ra concert she attended in Saint-Paul de Vence in the summer of 1970. As the narrative ends, she begins to slowly dance around the throne to the freaky, frenetic sounds of the Sun Ra concert itself, which approximates the sound of glass shattering, images fragmenting.

The actress at the centre of this bewitching *mise en scène* is Mireille Rias, the mother of Lili Reynaud-Dewar, the French artist behind the installation and the constellation of works that support it. These include three huge stencilled pencil-on-cardboard drawings that recreate, word for word, Sun Ra pamphlets like 'I Don't Give a Hoot' and 'A Spook Sho Is a Dragg Man, He's a Dragg'; the impressive throne itself, which nods to both Sun Ra's stage design and Ettore Sottsass's Memphis Group furniture; and a series of screen prints on paper, artfully heaped on the floor, that contain Rias's monologue in full.

The strange and masterful magnetism of this arrangement of works is difficult to describe. If Sun Ra occasioned the show, Reynaud-Dewar takes care not to replay his brilliant, bombastic aesthetics, which have all too often been cribbed and unimproved upon by contemporary artists. Instead, it is the speculative fervour and ardour of his political and aesthetic ideas that she invokes, as channelled by her mother, in a kind of inspired seance that they create together. In the video, as in the proplike works that support it, a myriad of forms (visual, political, musical, social) and ethos play off each other like the crazy-quilt of fabrics that adorn her throne. What results is not a melting pot but its very opposite: each form's contours distinct and definitive in their difference, even as they rub up against their opposite. When Rias states, "We were starving for the art of the times, for contemporary music, for jazz. New jazz. Free jazz," she echoes the hungry clarion call of Sun Ra's project, its demand for freedom of expression and being. Reynaud-Dewar and her mother, despite the difference of race and nationality, expertly and critically echo that call.