

Nine artists in citywide Artes Mundi exhibition bring international biennial feel to Cardiff

By Mark Sheerin | 04 November 2014
Tags:

Exhibition: Artes Mundi 6, National Museum Cardiff, Chapter (Cardiff) and Ffotogallery (Penarth), until February 22 2015



Old Boiler Shop: Proud and Shaun, (2008), Sharon Lockhart

© courtesy of the artist, on show at Artes Mundi 6, Chapter Art Centre, until 22 February 2015.

A seaside town five miles outside Cardiff is not the first place you would expect to find world class contemporary art. But visitors to Penarth can now see work which comes to local Ffotogallery via Bilbao in Spain and Kassel in Germany.

Artes Mundi prize is back in its sixth iteration. The biannual prize returns to Cardiff with a biennial feel. There are nine shortlisted artists for the £40,000 prize and they can also be found at Chapter and the National Museum.

The international outlook is in stark contrast to a certain inward looking art prize back in the UK. The plentiful film here in the Welsh capital compares favourably with that in the Turner Prize at Tate Britain. It is by turns more immersive (thanks to Ragnar Kjartansson), more edgy (in the case of Karen Mirza and Brad Butler), more intriguing (Omer Fast) and more relevant (hat tip to Renzo Martens).

Ragnar has a nine-channel film installed at Ffotogallery, Penarth: the UK premiere of a piece recently on show at the Guggenheim. The Visitors takes its name from an ABBA album, and if that weren't disarming enough, the surrounding performance of some minimal neo folk by a crowd of Icelandic musicians builds to a goosebump inducing climax.

Meanwhile, Iveković tackles fascism and resistance with a work from Documenta 13. Toy donkeys are mounted on shelves and labelled with the names of famous revolutionaries. But there is more to this piece of bathos than meets the eye because not far away is an archive photo of the Nazis making an example of a real donkey in a German town square. This piece of anti-semitic propaganda is enough to make donkeys of us all.

Chapter is a cinema, café, arts centre and, currently, another stage for Artes Mundi. It is here you can come across an installation and film by Karen Mirza and Brad Butler. The sculptural aspect of their piece is a small exam room set with scholarship papers from Eton College. You are the Prime Minister, each one begins, at which point follows a very leading question about quelling a riot. The film component is put together using CCTV footage and recorded phone calls made at the time of a 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai.

Sharon Lockhart also shows a film. EXIT uses a fixed point camera to follow the progress of workers leaving the Bath Iron Works in Maine. Together with a display of photography, this piece reflects on the survival of blue collar jobs in an information age and gives the viewer direct access to the lives of those employed in a US shipyard.

They have it good compared with the overworked plantation workers in the nearby film by Renzo Marten. The Dutch artist is concerned that contemporary art only impacts the metropolitan centres of the West and is on an artistic mission to gentrify parts of the Congo by establishing an art centre in the heart of Africa. Locals have made sculptures which Marten has scanned and recreated in chocolate. You can buy them in the shop of the National Museum, with all proceeds going back to the project and the artists.

National Museum Cardiff was also the venue for Continuity, a film by Omer Fast. Thanks to the Israeli artist's knack for storytelling, this looping 40-minute film felt more like five minutes in length. But dealing with PTSD and incest (if only indirectly), Fast's tale of a young man, ostensibly back from the war in Afghanistan, was as dark as it was well conceived and shot.

Like the rest of the pieces in the Artes Mundi lead venue, Fast has to work very hard to compete with a stuffed goat on a bicycle which clatters around a circular track in a space devoted to the work of Theaster Gates. This masonic symbol is apparently part of the artist's attempts to link spirit with labour and his wider project is the development of the Dorchester district in Chicago.

There's an interesting development in the next gallery, where Carlos Bunga has installed an imposing cardboard corridor the length of one of the National Museum's galleries. The abstract concerns of the Portuguese might seem at odds with the rest of this socially-minded shortlist, but the title of this site specific piece, Exodus, at once calls to mind migration, this year's hot topic in the UK.

This is a politically galvanising show and if all else fails to challenge the default state of passivity, there is always the installation of Falha (Failure) by Renata Lucas. Reconstructed for the Artes Mundi prize, with local materials and makers, this piece paves a gallery floor with wooden panels which you are invited to lift into A shapes and otherwise rearrange. But to do so feels strangely taboo.

With a shortlist more than twice as long as the Turner, greater prize money, more social engagement and a wider ambition, one wonders why Artes Mundi doesn't grab the headlines it deserves. The prize many Britons love to hate is announced on December 1 and will be everywhere. You'll just have to keep your eyes peeled on January 22 for the winner of Artes Mundi 6.