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John Miller Tour scrums: Protesting black and blue (from 1981 archived material) 2007 (film still)

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Art as Empowerment: Direct Democracy at MUMA

BY DAN RULE 05th June 2013

The current group exhibition at Monash University Museum of Art traces the thrum of many voices.

A woman is walking the streets of Belgrade. She wanders along crowded shopping strips, across train lines, past bus shelters and down leafy suburban streets. She is tall and dressed in jeans, heeled leather boots a tailored black jacket. She has blonde hair. The woman pauses at pedestrian lights, waits for cars to pass, skips in front slow-moving traffic. She holds her shopping bag in one hand. In the other, she grips a semi-automatic assault rifle.

[fold] Milica Tomic's video work – *One Day, Instead of One Night, a Burst of Machine-Gun Fire Will Flash, if Light Cannot Come Otherwise* (Oskar Davico – fragment from a poem). Dedicated to the Anarcho-Syndicalist Initiative – Belgrade, 3

September, 2009 – is something of a centrepiece amid the works that populate *Direct Democracy*, the vast group exhibition curated by Geraldine Barlow at MUMA. Featuring artists including Hany Armanious, Mike Parr, Alicia Frankovich, Destiny Deacon, DAMP and Natalie Bookchin, the exhibition engages with potential and recent models, occurrences and activators within the democratic milieu. In the simplest of terms, it looks at individuals, groups and the extent to which their actions impact upon their given and prospective future democratic contexts.

Tomic's work, which is punctuated by interviews with soldiers who fought in World War II to help establish a Yugoslav Communist state, prefaces not only the social conditions of a recent democracy, but delves into cultural memory. While the setting suggests at least a veneer of peace, Tomic's weapon forges a deep allegory for a nation and region's recent past. The fact that throughout the video's length, Tomic and her rifle barely raise a second glance conjures a litany questions and propositions. The normalcy with which she and her fellow citizens treat the weapon hints at issues of cultural denial, amnesia, distress, fear or all of the above. Democracy rarely comes about without bloodshed.

Mike Parr has long bled for his work. His 2002 performance and video *Close the concentration camps* witnesses the artist subjecting himself to the same self-harm endured by asylum seekers while in detention. We watch in horror as Parr has his face gradually sewn up, a needle and thread piercing and tearing at his flesh. It is both a gesture of empathy and kinship and a reminder of our own democracy's foul underbelly. Freedom is a relative term.

There are playful, even humorous, works. Melbourne collective DAMP's giant pencil and group drawing (enacted by seven members all holding the pencil in order to draw) seems an ode to many minds coming together. It is cooperation and collaboration in direct action. Hany Armanious's *Mystery of the plinth* (2010) is a wonderfully absurd whodunit involving a downscaled model of the Parthenon, a pair of oversized marble feet, two polystyrene ladders (with broken rungs) and the evidence of some kind of terracotta breakage. The Greek references point to the foundation of democracy, while the disparate scattering of clues and sense of rupture suggest that we can't rest on our laurels.

There are plenty of other highlights. Natalie Bookchin's multi-screen video installation – which offsets and synchronises the ramblings of various video bloggers – highlights the juncture between the democratisation of speech and media in the internet age and its often troubling results. The truth remains elusive. Jemima Wyman's suite paintings and video work appears to capture some kind of rebel group in training. But there's also a playfulness to the images. The lurid palette and bold gestures, marks and striping give her paintings an almost festive air. It eschews the Western cultural paradigm of the rebel as someone to fear in exchange for a celebration of specificity.

Indeed, with true democracy comes a plethora of perspectives. In the forecourt, artist and Occupy Melbourne organiser Carl Scrase has installed a vast, inflated sculpture. It is a hand, partially clenched to forge the ubiquitous peace sign. Or is it? If we consider the sculpture from a different vantage, Scrase is flipping a two-fingered salute.

Direct Democracy shows at MUMA until July 6.

monash.edu.au/muma

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