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# MODERN PAINTERS

ART / ARCHITECTURE / DESIGN / PERFORMANCE / FILM

JUNE 2013

A SPECIAL  
PROJECT BY  
**PAUL  
McCARTHY**

**GEOFF DYER**  
ON PHILIP-LORCA  
diCORCIA'S MAGIC

+ PETER HALLEY  
JO BAER  
JONATHAN MONK  
ANRI SALA





## REVIEWS

### ANTWERP

## Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys

M HKA // February 8–May 19

AFTER SEEING “OPTIMUNDUS,” the first major survey show of these Belgian artists, who have been working collaboratively for some 20 years, I had two vivid dreams—one a nightmare, the other more of the laugh-out-loud type. The first featured a nasty-looking zombie figure, its head inspired by *Kitty & Katty*, 2013, and its body made up of metal frames like those in *Ricco & Rocco*, 2010–12. The zombie was floating horizontally by the house I grew up in. Two days later, I had a much more pleasant dream in which I chanced upon a person I don’t necessarily like sitting behind a counter with a turd on her head, like the pooped-on dog in the series of clay sculptures “Der Schlamm von Branst” (The Clay from Branst), 2008. To me, these dreams are the perfect metaphor for the duality present in De Gruyter & Thys’s work: Their oeuvre walks a fine line between idiocy and terror. I have never had as much fun seeing an exhibition, while bearing in mind that this strange parallel world might haunt me forever. Their works are where happiness and horror meet.

“Optimundus” combines drawings and sculptures with video works like *Das Loch*, 2010, featuring the sad painter Johannes, who believes in the universal expression of painting and whose soul is crushed when his wife, Hildegard, suggests he start making video works following the example of his red-headed macho friend and rival, Fritz, who saunters happily through life armed with an HD camera.

Characters and props from the video works reappear throughout the exhibition, strengthening the feeling of entering a parallel world fraught with social discomfort, psychological tension, human unease, staring into the void, and general strangeness. Consider, for example, the sculpture *So ist das*, 2013: two men (one of them headless) placed next to a plastic table adorned with oversized liquor glasses. The piece is so out of proportion and downright weird that it makes the viewer nervous. Yet, at the same time, the scene is acutely recognizable. Similarly, in the duo’s recent videos human actors have been replaced with makeshift dummies and a computerized voiceover; the dummies’ standard Styrofoam heads are personalized with pushpins, glue-on eyes, and stick-on facial hair. Notwithstanding the crude human shapes, these characters seem familiar, as if we already know them; they are, in their own way, archetypes.

Here lies the power of this work: strange enough to throw us off guard yet familiar enough to remind us that this is as much about us as it is about any of the strange folk inhabiting “Optimundus.” In their catalogue exposé on the relationships and possible disturbances between the real and the parallel worlds, the artists conclude with a scenario in which the two worlds become one, “a world from which one never emerges again.” “Optimundus” is an optimal world, but slightly askew. There is a Johannes, a Fritz, a Kitty, a Katty, a Ricco, a Rocco, or a vagabond in all of us. —Maaïke Lauwaert



### LONDON

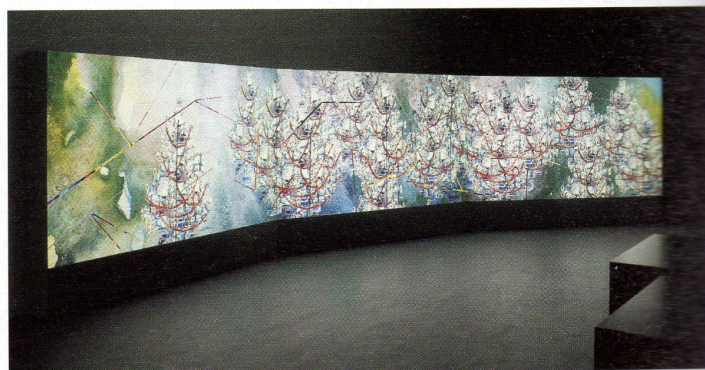
## Shahzia Sikander

Pilar Corrias // February 22–March 28

WITH HER LARGE paper drawings, Sikander stretches our understanding of calligraphy as a form of text, indicating the force of discursive institutional authority. Her calligraphic experimentation both affirms the persistence of the text-based past and abstracts it, fissuring and opening it to an ongoing dialogue with more globalized artistic vocabularies. Steering free of illustration and narrative, Sikander also celebrates the exquisite refinement of Arabic script. In foregrounding the sensuality

of the garden.” Also thematically difficult but ornate in its design is *Punctuation*, 2013, where the cryptic small shapes are human body parts, singled out from their original Mughal designs and repeated ad infinitum. There are thousands of beards and ponytails condensed in a glowing mirage but also severed arms knotted in a fight.

Sikander pursues her systematic deconstruction of the miniature and her interest in mobility in the digital animation *Parallax*, 2013. Here, Sikander returns to ideas of defense and control



of Arabic calligraphy, she makes its aesthetic permeable to the outside, disrupting any straightforward binary homology between art and national identity.

In a drawing entitled *Dissemination*, 2013, Sikander denies theoretical closure. The scripted message is interrupted by a riotous swirl of graphic connotations. No information rises above the surrounding ocean of visual noise, as the delicate laces of Arabic script are displaced by a series of elegant cypresses and four spiraling staircases. Upon closer inspection, the cypresses, sacred to Persian poets and calligraphers, remind one of atomic mushrooms and hint at an imploding world. But Sikander deflects political allusions—including Pakistan’s nuclear ambitions and the country’s arms dealing with the U.S.—and instead quotes a verse by the Urdu poet Khalid: “The cypress despite its freedom is held captive in

by focusing on the Strait of Hormuz, the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the ocean. While viewing the 3-channel video, we are assailed by myriad moving shapes—those familiar beards and ponytails—and the constant murmuring of overlapping voices. The strait shrinks and expands before our eyes, suggesting the perpetual bleeding of history with its conflicts and conquests. A nervous narrative is created, dispelled and contracted by swaths of noise and ever-condensing fields of color. Sikander would rather attract the viewer with the calligraphic figure than with language and writing, in keeping with an ancient Persian saying that calligraphy “is the tongue of the hand.” Moving between drawing and animation, her exquisite patterns jolt our eye across vertiginous landscapes on the brink of a collapsing world.

—Emilia Terracciano