

ArtSeen Next Section »

## *The Days of This Society Are Numbered*

by Gail Victoria Braddock Quagliata

ABRONS ARTS CENTER | MARCH 6 – APRIL 16, 2011

The Abrons Arts Center showcases the rich horror that constitutes social entropy in an exhibition aptly titled *The Days of This Society Are Numbered*. Curator-in-residence Miguel Amado found the show's inspiration from words uttered by French Marxist theorist Guy Debord in 1979: "The days of this society are numbered; its reasons and its merits have been weighed in the balance and have been found wanting; its inhabitants are divided into two sides, one of which wants this society to disappear." However, the show's focus on unyielding modernity and irreversible momentum (perhaps toward some sort of manmade apocalypse) lends itself more appropriately to the words of rapper Aesop Rock (Ian Bavitz), who stated, "Feel dystopia vs. Elysium / time ticks and the hand keeps feeding them / A billion try to bark revolution / when only knee deep in the medium." To paraphrase Mr. Bavitz and channel Mr. Amado: the end is nigh.



Amado's dystopian variety hour presents this quickly ticking doomsday clock so elegantly that the viewer could forget that he or she should immediately flee the exhibit to hoard food, clothes, and medicine. The work presented is no simplistic critique of capitalism or the consequences of first-world indulgences. Unlike the simplistic and overly commercial fare presented at the art fairs this year, here there are no Exxon logos dripping oil onto weeping ducks, and few images contained in this show would make clever t-shirt designs. Instead, one is immediately greeted by an assortment of colorful posters affixed to the gallery windows, proclaiming such vital messages as "don't think...feel good...and good feeling thoughts will flow," among other less sanguine, vacuous harbingers of doom and historical references to the end of all civilization (or at least civility).

"Mural Newspaper," commissioned for the show, demonstrates how 18 artists can effectively use the format of the propaganda poster to both seduce passersby on the street with dynamic graphics, and utterly enrapture a captive audience in the gallery with the more subtly wrought elements of these large scale communiqués. Mary Temple's small-scale portraits of current world leaders reduce vaunted

figures to impotent postage stamps floating above the statements that will likely define their legacies. In one of Temple's images, President Obama's disembodied head drifts away from the barely-impassive words, "ACCEPTING PEACE PRIZE OBAMA DEFENDS WAR." Yet from the street, this poster simply appears to be a vibrant field of red and white—the critique is only visible from within the gallery walls.

Kiluanji Kia Henda's "Portraits about the Apocalypse" (2009) captures his native Angola as site of surreal disarray; his large-scale photographs show subjects such as a bovine that seem to challenge Newton's first law of motion, its nose pressed against the metal post of its corral, and an inert human figure standing exposed to the elements in some barren industrial wasteland, his frame awkwardly contained within some sort of crudely-fashioned aluminum foil suit that could serve no rational purpose in the event of actual cataclysm. Kia Henda's visual allegories dissect moments of both abject protest and inertia, as though depicting the instant just before that undefined "something" that will be called, in retrospect, "THE END OF IT ALL." In strange textural juxtapositions—the bare skin of three butts plopped in unison atop a stark concrete wall, the faint traces of humanoid features beneath layers of silver foil, and the smooth monotony of plastic mannequins with gently surprised faces interrupting some strange terrain—the artist walks that tense line between figure and ground, natural and artificial, order and chaos.

Nadja Marcin's series of absurd video vignettes, "Street" (2007), places the performance artist in the public, dressed (or undressed), to confront the civilians in her midst. In one action she quietly masturbates a large dildo while fully clothed, as approaching businessmen and street musicians attempt to sheepishly blend into the background in spite of the sheer social anomaly of her actions. A lady doesn't typically whip out her plastic phallus in public, really. Her actions rupture normalcy just enough to engage those around her with her disruptive, almost giddy weirdness: "Who is this woman dressed in leaves and why is she so insistently asking where we're from and where we're going?" Here Marcin transforms the most banal wait in a drab queue into some sort of odd, aimless, banana-gun heist pantomime, much to the rather vague discomfort of subsequent people waiting in line. These oddly strained moments place Marcin firmly in Debord's camp of "those wanting this society to disappear," perhaps in favor of one more self-aware and engaged.

So tempting it would be to pry Carolina Caycedo's crimson machete from the wall, kiss the names of those guerrilla groups etched on its surface for luck, and retreat into Takashi Horisaki's elegant, latex dome. In it, one could await the impending collapse of society shrouded in the memories of civilization contained within the imprints of the abandoned dwellings forming the pieces of this colorful shelter. Amado's interpretation of this ever-nearing downfall contains truly visceral moments of apocalyptic darkness for those hardened few already digging private fallout shelters in the backyard, and fleeting flashes of giddy, public absurdity for those pop zombies among us who (to paraphrase our friend Aesop Rock's clever retort to poet Gil Scott-Heron) might miss the revolution should it *not* be televised.