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Review of Lucy + Jorge Orta at Yorkshire Sculpture Park
September 4th 2013



Lucy and Jorge Orta have worked in collaboration in various media since 1991. The general thrust of their work is located in the exploration of responses to global concerns surrounding issues of survival and sustainability. The exhibition now housed within The Longside Gallery at Yorkshire Sculpture Park centres around the subject of Water. It is a highly thought-provoking exhibition. Aesthetically, the viewer finds continuity throughout the exhibition. Most striking, however, is the implicit comparison drawn between geographical regions of starkly unequal access to water. Such inequalities are given greater force by the meditative aftertaste of what, at first glance, impresses for its cheerful innocence in the aesthetic.

In this exhibition, the visitor discovers the imposing Premier of Orta's major installation, *Raft of Medusa*. This work, the centerpiece of this exhibition, was inspired by the 1818-19 shipwreck painting, *Le Radeau de la Meduse*, by Gericault. Here assembled, the viewer is presented centrally with a ladder-cum-mast, which thrusts diagonally out of a cloud roof. Below this roof, the cloud-like qualities of which are contrived with an assemblage of recycled water bottles held rigid within resin, stands a sort of cabin on a stage. Strewn about the 'raft' are floats shaped in apparently innocuous, cartoon-like forms resembling sea creatures: cheerful characters that might please children. Driftwood and other flotsam & jetsam convince of the overall maritime conceit. The stylistic innocence –

consistent throughout the exhibition – allows for a deeper penetration of the allusions made through the sculpture to the contradictory power of water. Water is seen here as both a lifesaver and life-destroyer. The intention is to bring to mind the perils of migration journeys; and the inequalities that cause such journeys. Given the context, this is achieved.

The use of assemblages of recycled water bottles held rigid in resin, which is then painted with metallic paint, is repeated. In *Cloud Ascension Ladder* (2011), the visitor finds a ladder leaning against one of the gallery walls. Toward the top of the ladder, attached to the ladder (apparently floating through it) is one of these bottle-resin cloud assemblages. The use of the ladder indicates hierarchy. The context of the exhibition ties this in with the theme of inequality of access to water as a global issue.

The use of recycled water bottles has special resonance for Orta. It is a vehicle for exploring survival and inequality. In Cairo, Orta encountered Zabaleen communities who recycle 80% of everything they use. The viewer is given to understand that these people scrape a living using refuse. They are known as ‘garbage people’. For Orta, the recycled bottles embody inequality. The bottles can be found again in *Cloud House* (2012-13). Here they are, again, held in resin; but incorporated into the fabric of a wooden house. Striking for its geometrical balance and regularity is *Orta Water* (2011). Here, recycled bottles are placed regularly to jut out from the body of a life buoy surrounded by bottle rack. Survival and inequality are given deeper contextual impact on the viewer by the initial impression of stylistic cheerful innocence in the arrangement. That context is compounded, in part, by various wall-mounted metal frames. From these frames hang gourds, floats, and other paraphernalia highlighting survival and sustainability. Common to all is a deceptive innocence at first glance.

Daniel Potts

Lucy + Jorge Orta, 20 July until 3 November

Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton, Wakefield, WF4 4LG.

www.ysp.co.uk

Credits:

1. Lucy + Jorge Orta, *Spirits of Huveaune Ubelka* (detail), 2013. Photography courtesy Jonty Wilde 2. Lucy + Jorge Orta, *Cloud House I* (installation view), 2012-2013. Photography courtesy Jonty Wilde 3. Lucy + Jorge Orta, *Diptych Cloud Chaises*, 2011-2012. Photography courtesy Jonty Wilde

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