

Facts Worth Knowing

“And the dump grew continually, for there wasn’t a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn’t sooner or later turn up on it, having first been made photographic by plaster, canvas, lath and paint.” —Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*

It is an often forgotten fact that D.W. Griffith was an architect. This was not by design; his 1916 film *Intolerance*, follow up to *Birth of a Nation*, yielded only a quarter of its 55 million dollar budget. With no funds left for cleanup, the film’s 300-foot tall Gates of Babylon set was left to decay on Sunset Boulevard, eventually disassembled by the fire department in 1922.

Half a century later, Ray Bradbury was dipping his toes into architecture as well. After helping Disney build a “future city” detailing “the history of all mankind, starting with Adam and Eve,” the novelist convinced Los Angeles city planners to recreate the behemoth Babylon set on the corner of Hollywood and Highland. The white arches now tower over a Victoria’s Secret, but the fiberglass elephants are absent, removed after the pandemic to elide Griffith’s controversial history.

Sculptor and writer Aria Dean has chosen to rescue these elephants from the ash heap of history. Over the last decade, Dean has built a body of work that provides necessary revisions into 20th century discussions of subjectivity and representation. That Dean would opt to pull these elephants from *Intolerance* suggests a vital contemporaneity to the legacy of the objects, as well as an apathy towards the humanism signified by the filmic innovations and culture-war connotations of Griffith’s more recognizable film.

What use do these films have in the 21st-century city, where delocalized Silicon Valley aesthetics emerge overnight in the husk of America’s former industrial core, where speculative capital produces, as Fredric Jameson notes, “thousands upon thousands of buildings constructed or under construction which have no tenants”? Dean’s frequent requests to approach her work with an absent human subject is not a semantic distinction, but an ethical necessity, for it is by this logic that the most profound urban and aesthetic transformations have and will continue to occur.

Dean’s elephant asks us to approach Babylon’s decaying set not as a byproduct of the film, but its very form: an errant flow of capital, 40 million dollars hemorrhaged. With the human out of the picture, the failure of the studio to recuperate their losses ceases to be a failure. It is through such divergences that capital is able to produce, as Jameson famously notes, “ever-more novel seeming goods”—the latest of which being this sculpture.

Film, the elephant suggests, offers us a blueprint for the world to come, not in the production of subjectivity, as the thinkers contemporaneous to Griffith argued, but in the literal production of junk, as a petri dish for detritus that will soon fill up the streets: bootleg *Minions* hats, *Rick and Morty* grinders, etc. This is not the virtual bleeding into the real, but the real playing pretend before a night out, deciding what dress to wear to the party.

Certainly, *Intolerance* is not the first grand project in the 20th century that failed to realize its audience, but there is a flat, aesthetic dimension to the set that differentiates it from the modernist city, which necessarily supposes a subject. The Babylon set is simply not designed for human life; it's trash. It resembles Dean's recent intervention into cinema, *Abbattoir, USA!*, a moving image made in Unreal Engine that forgoes the spectator entirely. One is reminded of Hito Steyerl's comments on AI, that perhaps technology could perform the work of a film critic too, so we can finally leave the theater and go into the sun.

Returning to sculpture, Dean asks us to imagine what form, materially, this new world will take, once we finally do leave the theater. The elephants are back, now in the gallery, but something has been mutilated. Bearing the sharp edges of a low-res polygonal model, these are not reproductions of Griffith's set or Bradbury's recreation, but assets ripped from the 2011 video game *L.A. Noire*. The game was lauded for its encyclopedic reproduction of 1940s Los Angeles (save the anachronistic Babylon set) and hyper realistic human facial gestures. With a 50 million dollar budget, one of the highest in the industry's history, the studio went bankrupt soon after its release.

Like the neo-noir films of the 70s, *L.A. Noire* is both a simulation of origin, but also, quite literally, the apotheosis of our representational tools. That these ruined statues could find a digital afterlife a century later lends an uncanny prescience to Rem Koolhaas' 2001 "Junkspace" essay on the contemporary city, wherein, "There is no form, only proliferation...particles in search of a framework or pattern." As if our films and cities were just mockups for future video games.

Having pulled this asset back into the material world, Dean has closed some sort of loop. But where does that leave us to go? A 21st-century Ozymandias, the beast, disfigured by circulation, echoes Koolhaas' warning, "History corrupts, absolute history corrupts absolutely."

—Andy Rickert, 2024