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Features

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Aliens in Our Midst

Art Fag City: Smack Mellon's Multiplex series continues with overlapping works on immigration

By Wayne Hodge

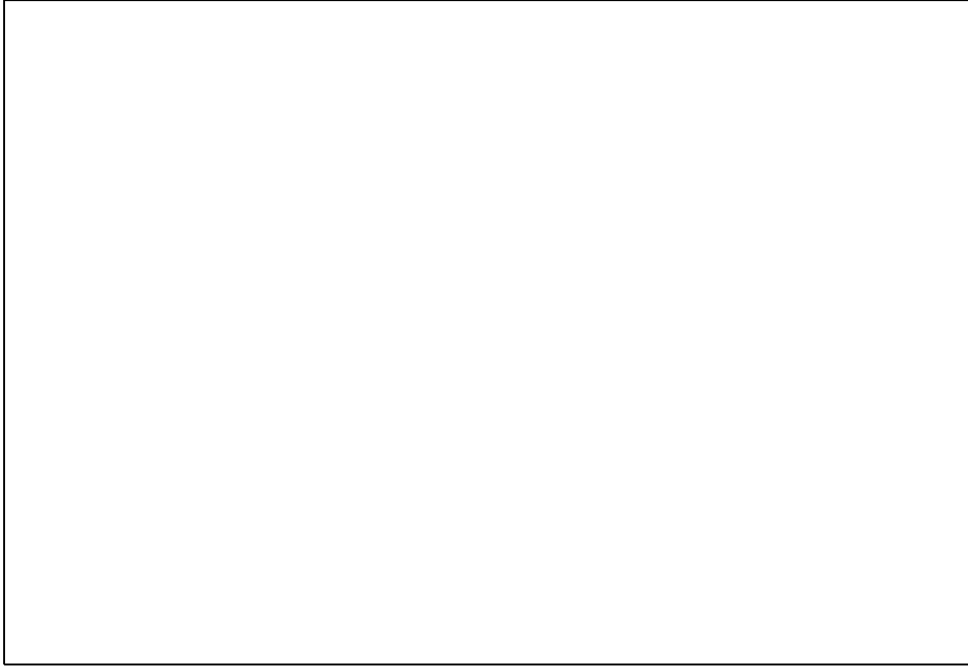
(*Art Fag City* editor Paddy Johnson is covering the Art Basel fair in Miami Beach; she will return next week with a report from the event.)

Legal Aliens is the title of the third part of Smack Mellon's cineplex-styled film and video screening series Multiplex. This time around, a guest curatorial team of Ofri Cnaani and Rotem Ruff showcase artists who work within contemporary debates on immigration. The artists gathered here all use media (and in one case even installation) to address a myriad number of positions and concerns; global in its approach, yet local in its impact, the curatorial bent of the show is decidedly about negotiating spaces between categories.

This approach is most evident in the conversation that happens between the works in the space. At first, I was a bit turned off by the installation as a whole; it brought to mind the conventional cineplex stereotype suggesting that if you go to see a character drama, you can hear the action flick in the next theater (or, if you are in New York, the action flick *and* the subway). But the act of sorting out the sounds associated with each work projected in the space provoked many exciting connections between image and sound; as I huddled up to a speaker, I couldn't help but feel a certain intimacy with each piece as it played in an enormous space that was still not quite large enough to encapsulate and isolate each individual work. In fact, the first work one encounters in the space is not media-based at all - rather, *Esperanza Mayobre's Virgin of Esperanza, Mother of Immigrants* is a wall of candles emblazoned with a self-portrait of the artist as a saint. While the image of the saint carries contemporary effects (including a passport and a green card), the candle is a reminder of pre-film forms of media. One thinks of the flame of the candle in opposition to the space filled with projectors and plasma screens; the ephemeral nature of the candle in the context of so much media technology.

The idea of the ephemeral is echoed in *Garde l'Est*, a haunting video piece by Francisca Benitez. Shot in Paris, the imagery in the video consists of a series of shots tilting up into

trees from whose branches hang sacks and bundles placed for safekeeping by Afghani immigrants. Radio news programs in various languages describe the plight of people who pay smugglers to cross out of Afghanistan, but what we see are not the people --just the scant evidence of their presence. Unfortunately, the audio suffers most in the installation of the show, providing a rare example of sound quality and the material's subtlety get lost in the mix of sounds in the main space.



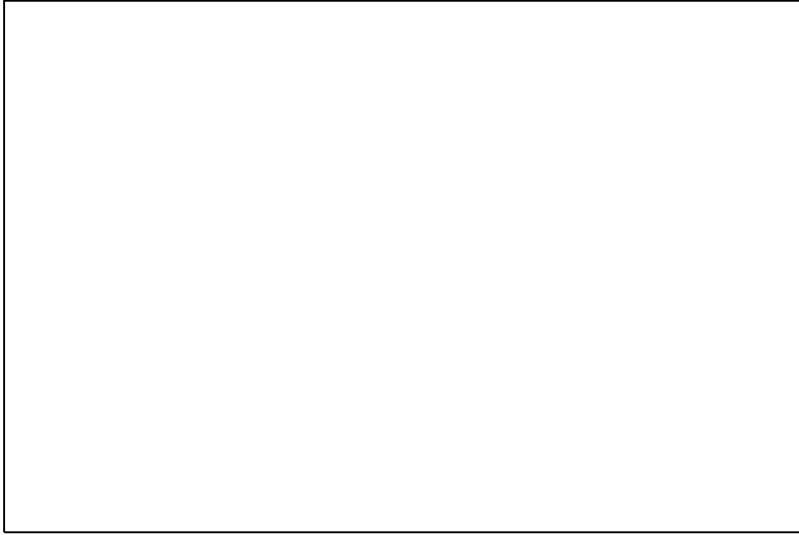
Adrian Paci, still from *PilgrIMAGE*, 2005. Film on DVD.
(Photo: Galleria Francesca Kaufman)

Religious iconography reappears in Adrian Paci's film *pilgrIMAGE*. It opens with a short introduction describing an icon of the Virgin Mary of Shkodra, which was said to have disappeared by being "...borne aloft by angels in a cloud of light" during a Turkish siege on an Albanian village in the 15th century. The icon then resurfaces in (or immigrates to) Italy, where it is known as Madonna del Buonconsiglio (or Our Lady of Good Counsel). Many pilgrims gather in the village, ostensibly to see the lost Madonna. A movable panel reveals the icon to an empty sanctuary. And herein lies the rub: The "pilgrims" are in fact watching a projected image of the icon in a public space in Albania.

While the devout look at the projection of the icon, a projection screen is set up in the church sanctuary in Italy. Here we see projections of worshippers regarding the Madonna, but here it is the icon that plays the role of the "real." When the projection in the church abruptly stops, so then does our access to the virgin, as the doors to the sanctuary close along with our intimate moment with many layers of images, sacred and profane. The people who come to regard image also become image; they occupy the same space as the icon, but they also vie for our visual attention in such a way that they become absorbed into the same visual language as church and sanctuary. Such a practice would seem unthinkable in the 15th century, yet through media it becomes uncomfortably commonplace in the 21st.

Another take on old world/new world is explored by the work of Gautam Kansara, whose video *Grandma, Gautam and Ghalib* offers a static view of the artist and his grandmother sitting at a dining room table. They base their conversation around her translation of Indian

music playing in the background. At times the exchange is very intense: Kansara's grandmother seems incredibly moved by the stories told through the songs, but Kansara's reactions range from interested to puzzled and even bored. What is implied in this video is not movement from geographic location, but instead, the effects of global movements on the most culturally specific unit of all, in this case Kansara's own family.



Gautam Kansara, still from *Grandma, Gautam, and Ghalib*, 2005. DVD. (Photo: Mumbo Jumbo Gallery)

Taken as a whole, *Legal Aliens* offers a layered and lateral approach to ideas surrounding immigration; you may not distinguish a single voice or see a lone image, but rather observe a theater of many reflexive gestures. One must look and listen closely to hear through the din as well as accept that images overlap and cross borders -- just like the cineplex.

Wayne Hodge is an artist based in New York City who works in performance, video and film. His work has been shown at The Bronx Museum, The Studio Museum in Harlem and internationally in Hong Kong and Stockholm, Sweden.