



## BACK FROM VINELAND

A clutter of stooped bodies corralled by need in a corner shuffling and suffering, as the duo of Tom and Tim softly coerce their movement. Faces in white or black or sulphury yellow paint take form under tender lighting and careful framing. The tableaux surprise in their traditional formal rigor. What to do with these odd Cirque du Soleil types? There is theatre inside this work, but also tracings back to Ensor's mask paintings, Magritte's surreal ruptures and Tuymans' muddy portraits. I'm not Belgian, hell, I don't even smoke anymore, but I "get" a lot of what is going on in Harald Thys and Jos de Gruyter's *In the Vineyard*. Art language now is global.

That wretched bench, my bones bartering for purchase with it. Why do galleries and churches demand wood? However, it keeps me alert. In the dark, the motion picture releases its mysteries.

Going in cold I expect nothing. The production extrudes a hypnotic series of portraits, tableaux, psychodramas and parables. A funereal pace with beautifully timed edits to keep my attention, my interest. Never too slow or too fast. Just right. Enough time to think and react. More than any hard meaning, there is a multitude of layers and a chorus of detail not so much in service of a plot, but like scratches and markings in a set of experimental drawings that are linked by process. Hence, the pleasure in the formal aspects. With such a bulky art history it would be difficult to err with the elements which makes this work stylin' however absurd the content.

Opening night and the theatre on the streets vibes with the theatre on the screen. Thys and de Gruyter's peculiar offering is parachuted in to challenge our Vancouver sensibilities. But not so distant, or different, are these communal themes and dystopic returns. Obvious, considering our city's own social development in the area around Artspeak. I wonder if the curator considered how our downtown Vancouver setting would allow such synchronic shimmers with this Belgian piece?

I see an enclosed space where some people—a cast—are coerced into performative settings, some of it in action, some with painful stillness. I see Tom and Tim as crew or janitors or installers. The peanut-eating man is the bourgeois intellectual or the director, the curator, management. The actors/mimes take their direction from off-camera or else Tom and Tim step in. I sense a reverberation of "art gallery" as well as this strange proscenium presentation of community centre. A little bit Marcel Broodthaers museum critique, but then again amateur theatre and art-house film. But mime after Cirque du Soleil! How difficult—yet this work has formed itself without kitsch. It is grim, nasty and intent in its conviction.

Forgoing plot, I give myself up to the visuals. That mungy room, those close-cropped faces, the corner shuffles and the social worker types pinned to the wall like so much art. The "is" attenuated; contained vocals squeezed out, laughter that isn't, short peeps from off-camera, strangled garbles

MINA TOTINO ON HARALD THYS AND JOS DE GRUYTER

Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys, *Ten Weyngaert (In the Vineyard)*  
high definition video, 2007, 36 minutes  
photo: Blaine Campbell

from two rubber-headed machines, squiggling noises from a cockroach man. Everything is compressed and oppressive. The mouse tale is contained inside a psychology profile. Even the "landscape with fog" is shot as cramped interior, a staged set à la Beckett with anal flute and big-eyed clowns. The claustrophobia comes from the camera cropping. There is no relief from deep focus or pans and no redemption. It ends abruptly—bang bang bang. So each sitting is contained, like the work itself.

I am seduced by the form, as the narrative is not the punctum but the mise en scène and the action (if one must call it that) seems like a reaction to any kind of story in the linear sense. It is a work that I recall as many vignettes and yet the intent slowly blooms from the weird events inside the cool form. These events are nonsense, weary and cruel. The air around each event keeps a sensible storyline from cohering. The air around each event allows the absurdity to reverberate outside of the work. The confinement and containment in *In the Vineyard* is familiar. The postulations are real. The events in the video are ridiculous but the effect is a confrontation out here with all our social failures.

I have just returned from Los Angeles and the WACK! exhibition at the Geffen Contemporary<sup>1</sup>, an exuberant feminist show with 60's and 70's work that is so aware of politics and community. Two Belgian artists in the show—Lili Dujourie and Chantal Akerman—dazzle. Have they influenced Thys and de Gruyter, I wonder? That painful stillness from

Dujourie, the anarchic Goddardian "fuck the narrative" from Akerman, and the social sculpture of 70's feminism itself. Social sculpture, which I learn from the didactics, refers to political engagement with the public, working within a community and creating communally. But look what happens to this idea of social sculpture in *In the Vineyard*. There was so much wonder in that 70's notion and so much disillusionment and ennui in this work.

The social euphoria that drove artists to care for the idea of community, to make art with and of these communities has evidently mutated into a crippled politics which cares but is almost effectless. Utopic social sculpture—in this poem inside a parable inside a fable inside a video—has not transformed the world. The scenes of bodies laid out on tables conjure up mad science: the straw girl, the cockroach man and the rubber heads. Harald Thys and Jos de Gruyter offer us a body (a video) with bits of failure grafted to limbs of dim hope—a mutation. Is this all the representation we can manage, this absurd and sorrowful thing, not easy to like but all ours to share?

Mina Totino is a visual artist who lives and works in Vancouver.

<sup>1</sup> WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution, March 4-July 16, 2007, The Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles