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Pondering the Unconventional

London Curators Pick Unusual Spaces to Illuminate Art

By EMMA CRICHTON-MILLER

Jim Shaw/Courtesy of Simon Lee Gallery
Toby Ziegler's 'The Cripples,' installation at Q-Park in Old Burlington Street.

Rising above Regent's Canal in London's King's Cross, the Fish and Coal Offices, a dilapidated building from the 1850s, looms, blackened by years of industrial smog. Currently surrounded by wire fencing, the landmark awaits a retail redevelopment project that will turn it into a food and drinks court.

For another 10 days, however, the building is open to visitors seeking a different experience: Greta Alfaro's "A Very Crafty and Tricky Contrivance," a site-specific work filmed from a camera attached to the head of a rat. In an empty ground-floor room, windows blacked out, you are confronted by an

enormous video screen. A chaotic scene unfurls, the camera hurtling randomly through what seems to be an office, peopled by figures in Edwardian dress, pieced together like a Cubist painting from a close-up sleeve here, a mahogany desk leg there, a sudden glimpse of a face, an antique phone; the sound track is a disconcertingly loud series of scuffles, scrapes, coughs, and the assertive tapping of a Remington typewriter. In the second dimly lit room, a series of film stills and another video reveal that what we have seen is a reconstruction of an imagined scene from the heyday of these very offices.

Ms. Alfaro's work animates the space for our contemplation. Sitting there, you become aware of how blithely human beings disregard the personalities of the places they inhabit, assuming they exist only for their purposes. We are blind to the hundred other creatures who slip in and out, opportunist tenants who may ultimately inherit the place. Meanwhile, the space itself, with its bricks and mortar, beams and open doorways, persists patiently, only ever truly revealed in these in-between moments, when an artist can expose its poetry, before ordinary human use once more renders it banal.

In a week when art lovers from around the world are crowding the tents of Frieze and Frieze Masters in Regent's Park to admire works of art that are definitively transferable, some artists and curators have taken the opportunity to make or to show art that refuses all such movement, and asserts its relationship to unconventional spaces.

Toby Ziegler's exhibition "The Cripples" (until Oct. 20) in Q-Park in Old Burlington Street features five massive metal sculptures, inspired by Bruegel's painting. These are shown in the car park 14 floors below street level, accessible only by lift, as if buried in Mayfair's subconscious, and lit by five wall-size light boxes showing an enlarged detail of horses legs, taken from Piero della Francesca's Arezzo Fresco Cycle.

"I wanted them to exist in a subterranean space, but a utilitarian space," Mr. Ziegler says. "The speed of the space was important. Normally you want to leave car parks in a hurry, but here the ambient light and sound encourages you to slow down. The thicket of horses' legs is very dense. There was something onomatopoeic about it in this clattering space."

Meanwhile, Paul Benney, a resident artist at Somerset House, has chosen its Deadhouse, a network of underground passages beneath the fountain court, to display his latest series of "Night Paintings" (until Dec. 9). Gleaming dark paintings of apostles St. Andrew and St. John, based on a set of mugshots Mr. Benney found in a street market in New York of criminals on death row, achieve a particularly spooky intensity. Within the passages, his Shamanistic figures stalk burning landscapes, levitate in air or float in water. The Deadhouse dates from the 17th century when England's Stuart queens established an alternative court at Somerset House, complete with a Roman Catholic chapel. Engraved stones in the wall mark the burial spots of favored courtiers, enhancing the spiritual charge of Mr. Benney's paintings.

Flora Fairbairn, the curator of this show, and of Ms. Alfaro's King's Cross show, has been selecting unusual spaces for 12 years, after a first show at Trellick Tower became a sensation. "People wanted to go to the top of the Trellick," Ms. Fairbairn explains simply. "I do quite often feel that the building improves the art." Besides the sense of discovery, she says disused spaces are "less intimidating than a gallery space. The artists like the character and atmosphere. It is quite often the last moment in that building's life, before it is tarted up and loses its personality."

Undoubtedly, the draw for visitors to "Bedlam" (until Oct. 21), the third exhibition of dealer Steve Lazarides featuring urban artists at the Old Vic Tunnels, is the thrillingly dank, 2,787 square meters of unused arched space lurking beneath Waterloo Station. A veteran of "pop-up" shows here and in the U.S., Mr. Lazarides says, "The pop-up is synonymous with the broken economy, providing all these derelict spaces."

Finally, venerable arts organization Artangel is featuring British artist Lindsay Seers's poetic "Nowhere Less Now" (until Oct. 21), an installation inside the Tin Tabernacle, a 19th-century corrugated iron chapel in Kilburn used for 70 years as the headquarters of the Willesden and St. Marylebone sea cadets. Ms. Seers is using the site for a subtle, multilayered meditation in photography, performance, video and animation that explores her own family's seafaring history in the context of Empire.

"Successful site-specific work undoubtedly has its place in the arts economy," says James Lingwood, Artangel's co-director. "The place is not a container, not a vessel. It something much more active and alive. You get a wonderful chemistry, an alchemy, so that you end up with an experience that doesn't immediately resolve into its elements."