

ART / 26 APR 2016 / BY DAVID PAW



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Photography courtesy EVA

Ashanti people in Ghana. Accompanying mannequins are clad in a straitjacket and a fluorescent orange jumpsuit, recalling a penitentiary's finest, albeit woven from pretty commercially-produced lace in a striking visual representation of commercial enslavement as colonial legacy, while juxtaposing the city's manufacturing heritage with the material's status as a luxury item in Ghana.

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Other artists were similarly direct in their engagement of the subject matter. Korean-American artist Michael Joo's three-part installation *This Beautiful Striped Wreckage (Which We Interrogate)*... sets up shop at the city's historical Sailor's Home, a 19th century building stripped bare save for a few select pieces. His video projection of an emaciated Buddha from 3rd century Pakistan, filmed in the British Museum, is haunting and beautiful, but also a stark reminder of Britain's unsavoury history of claiming ownership over that with which it has little association.

Latter-day variations on our species' affinity for oppression and violence abound. Uriel Orlow's work with microhistories brings Nelson Mandela's incarceration on Robben Island into focus with the installation *Grey, Green, Gold*, which refers to the garden the prisoners were allowed, and one that concealed a manuscript of the biography that was to become 1995's *Long Walk to Freedom*. A slide projection and wallpaper of the prison garden and the events surrounding it culminates in a tiny flower grown from a seed, which was renamed 'Mandela's Gold' and symbolises a new era in post-apartheid South Africa.


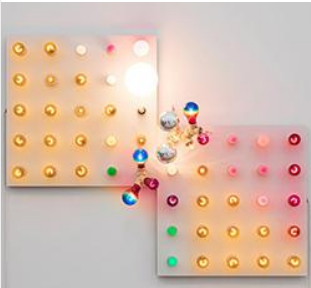
Similarly, Canadian duo Public Studio's film *Road Movie* has been staggered and projected onto sweeping screens in a vast factory space, depicting a system of segregated roads that have been built as part of the Israeli military control over the West Bank. There are roads for Jewish-Israeli settlers and roads for Palestinians – thus, the roads are commonly referred to as 'Apartheid Roads', underlining the continued occupation and modern-day colonisation of an intensely contested territory.

While the scope of engagement that EVA has produced in relation to discussions of colonial legacy is impressive, the engagement with the host nation as a departure point for this discussion – and particular the core centenary of the Easter Rising – has been less marked, something that Kouoh has acknowledged. The city is bidding for European Capital of Culture in 2020, with the Biennial a core part of its application, and while a few artists have put Ireland at centre stage – notably, Deirdre Power and Softday, as well as Jonathan Cummins and his complex trio of films – the mood is far more global in outlook, as the curator invites us to draw historical comparisons between far-flung regions like Southeast Asia and the Congo, and not merely in isolation.

'The colonial enterprise from the Western Europe perspective was understood as a capitalistic and social project played out in faraway "uncivilised" societies as opposed to one played out next door,' she replies when asked about Ireland's modern relationship with its colonial past. 'Ireland being geographically located in Western Europe makes it difficult to recognise that the country served as a laboratory of imperialism before its global expansion. Another may be that the extended duration of the British occupation of Ireland brought about a strong degree of assimilation, which finds its most visible expression in the contemporary situation of Northern Ireland divided between Unionists and Republicans.'

It's an enormously complex subject to grapple with and as ever, one with deleterious aftershocks that reverberate through the fabric of the contemporary news cycle. 'Europe cannot exonerate itself from the conduct and consequences of imperialism through denial and silencing,' Kouoh concludes. 'The current refugee crisis is just the tip of an iceberg of intricate and entangled fraught relationships forged during that era of massive exploitation. Their impacts continue to define our present day.'

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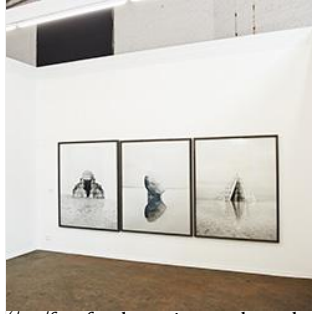
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