

ART

AROUND THE GALLERIES

History, memory, faith and violence

HOLLY MYERS

The ever-nagging, lately pressing question of art's relationship to geopolitical strife finds cogent expression in the work of **Julia Meltzer** and **David Thorne**. Working in collaboration since 1999, the pair has produced an ambitious array of installations and videos (documentary, fictional and somewhere in between) exploring issues of history, memory, faith, violence and social engineering in the context of contemporary global politics, particularly in regard to the Middle East.

Two projects now on view at Steve Turner Contemporary highlight the artists' knack for critique that is potent without being didactic or moralistic, achieved here largely through the canny manipulation of ambiguity and ellipses.

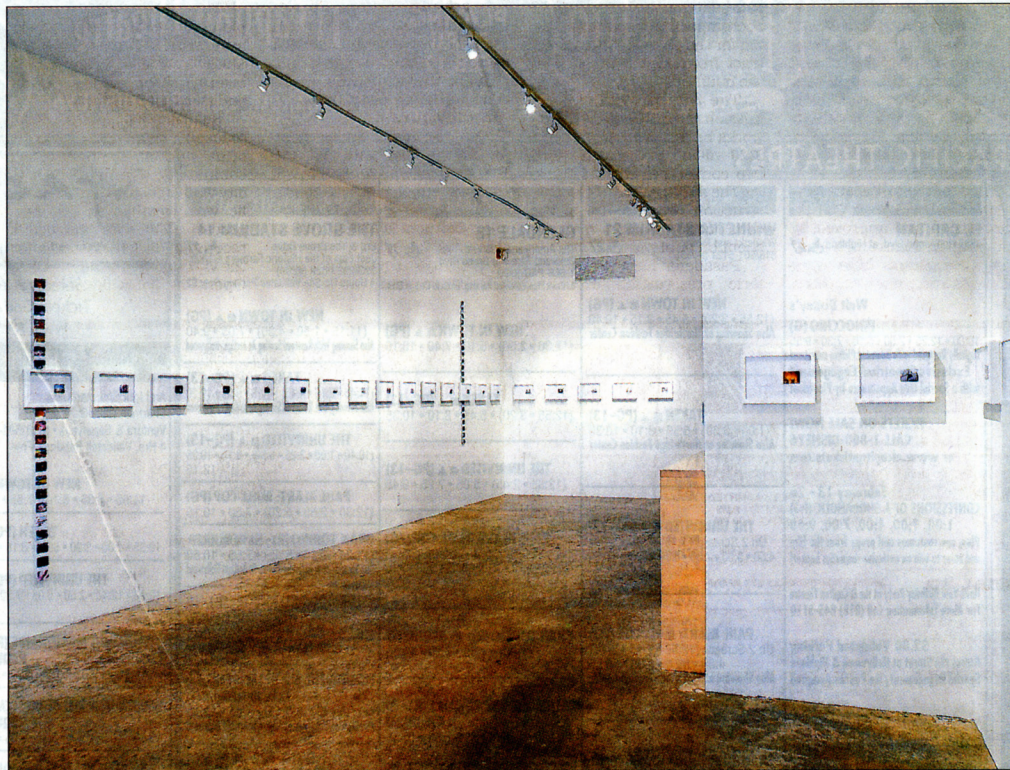
The most gripping, "Epic," is a modest presentation, despite the title: seven minutes of footage, concentrating solely on the face of one man, a Syrian performer named **Rami Farah**, whom the artists met during a yearlong stay in Damascus. Displayed on a small monitor that's sunk into a wall in the back corner of the gallery, the piece demands an intimate degree of engagement and rewards such attention warmly.

(The installation appeared in last year's Whitney Biennial, along with a similarly structured but longer video with the elegiac title: "Not a matter of if but when: brief records of a time in which expectations were repeatedly raised and lowered and people grew exhausted from never knowing if the moment was at hand or still to come.")

In "Epic," Farah delivers five short, fervent monologues on a vague array of topics. Performed in Arabic, with English subtitles, they are elusive and often enchantingly absurd, weaving around what one senses to be grave, monumental issues such as war, political oppression and economic struggle, through the use of allegory or poetic implication.

"The king has the ears of a donkey," Farah begins in the first. "I can't hide the secret anymore, it is smothering me."

In another, he laments: "This spoon, with which I eat. I cannot get it into my mouth anymore. Every time it throws



Steve Turner Contemporary

JULIA MELTZER AND DAVID THORNE: The installation "In Possession of a Picture" consists of 50 small digital prints of sites at which an individual was detained for taking photographs or video, or found to possess images of the site.

things, sometimes into my face, into my eye. Sometimes on my clothes, on my ear."

And in another: "I am normal, I am human like everybody else. I am entitled to have my own jet. Maybe I will make a kite out of it, put some ribbons and some threads and fly it over Mt. Kasyoon. Maybe I will park it in front of my building."

His presence on the screen is mesmerizing. Indeed, whatever the nature of Meltzer and Thorne's involvement in the collaboration, their shrewdest move was surely to minimize all evidence of it and give the stage completely to Farah, whose animated features, soulful eyes and lithe, agile hands make for inspired storytelling.

The second project, "In Possession of a Picture," is an installation consisting of 50 small, framed digital prints, each depicting the same two elements: a photographic image of a street, building, monument or other location somewhere in the United States, and, beside it, an empty square of identical proportion.

Each empty square refers to a site, whether public, commercial or private, in which an individual was detained for taking photographs or video, or detained for other reasons and found to possess images of the given site. (How Meltzer and Thorne determined the selection is unclear.) The photograph at the right is an image of the same site, drawn from the public domain of the Internet.

The installation itself is

clean but staid; the power of the work lies in its conceptual resonance. In the repetitious framing of these conspicuous absences, Meltzer and Thorne illuminate an insidious and typically invisible force at play in the fabrication of social and geographic reality.

It is a pointed companion to the Syria-born collaboration, suggesting that the injustices to which Farah's monologues obliquely refer are endemic not only to distant conflicts and corrupt foreign regimes (or the actions of our own regime on foreign soil) but to systems of power generally — not only governmental but commercial and corporate as well.

Steve Turner Contemporary, 6026 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 931-3721, through Feb. 7. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.steveturnercontemporary.com

The ticking clock in imperial Russia

The long-standing dialogue between painting and photography finds eloquent, if not especially radical, expression in the work of **Becca Mann**.

Her second solo show at Roberts & Tilton presents six paintings and three drawings based on found photographs of imperial Russia. The images — which primarily depict members of the aristocracy, their

properties and their livestock — are solemn and poignant, imbued with a sense of elegance and doom. Several involve members of the Romanov dynasty, whose gruesome end at the hands of the Bolsheviks lends a stirring pathos to their solemnity in the images.

The drawings and paintings, which range from roughly 11 inches square to nearly 5 feet across, are exquisite.

Mann's technique is painstakingly precise yet driven by a poetic sensibility. Subtle accents such as a thin blue outline around the figure of a horseman, a smoky blurring of the leaves of trees in the distance, or the dreamy emphasis on highlights and the glare of the sun underscore the painterly nature of the project while preserving the distinctive quirks of the photograph. This isn't photorealism exactly, but something along the lines of a reverse pictorialism — painting poeticized via select elaboration of the romantic tendencies of photography.

The painterly manipulation of photographs is so common by now that it would scarcely bear mentioning as distinctive if Mann didn't do both media such lovely justice, suggesting that the relationship between the two has grown comfortable but by no means complacent.

Roberts & Tilton, 5801 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (323) 549-0223, through Feb. 14. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.robertsandtilton.com

small red letters across the image. "Lone Onomatopoeia" is a page from a comic book on which everything but the word "BARROOMM" has been whited out. "Lens Cap, Interior," a roughly 2-by-3-foot print that depicts just what the title suggests, is a photograph of the object that disables the production of a photograph, the surface that periodically blinds the lens to the world.

Several of the most striking works call attention to details one typically opts to overlook, namely those connoting death and depletion: a butterfly smashed on a windshield, the pattern of its wing still visible in the splat; the remains of a dinner in a sink drain; or the striking surface of a matchbook, blown up more than 14 feet long and resembling an Abstract Expressionist painting.

The underlying suggestion is the inevitable truth contained rather too literally in the neon piece: Everything passes, everything fades. The key is to be interested in what's here now, and Stone is nothing if not interested.

Charlie James Gallery, 975 Chung King Road, L.A., (213) 687-0844, through Feb. 7. Closed Sunday through Tuesday. www.cjamesgallery.com

Paintings ready for bachelor pads

The paintings in **Alexander Couwenberg's** "A Little Bit Left of All Right" at William Turner Gallery are as blithely appealing as the show's title would imply and a pleasure to encounter at a glance. But after a while, their tricks, along with their relative limitations, reveal themselves.

Couwenberg has a pronounced fondness for Mid-century Modernism — so pronounced, it seems to have shouldered out any competing inspiration. With a bachelor-pad palette and a few quintessential hard-edged motifs (the pinstripe, the lozenge, the inflated rectangle, triangle or trapezium), he concocts sleek, multilayered, spatially sophisticated compositions, ranging from 2 feet to 8 feet across, that by their nature cover only a narrowly circumscribed territory.

Whether he needs to reach beyond this is arguable; there is much to be said for a handsome, well-crafted picture. It is just these qualities, however, that make one curious about what more he might accomplish outside the bounds of his extreme nostalgia. As it is, he's playing it all too safe.

William Turner Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., E-1, Santa Monica, (310) 453-0909, through Feb. 21. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.williamturnergallery.com

calendar@latimes.com

The inevitable passage of time

"Unanticipated Despair (Despite Prior Naive Optimism)," **David Stone's** first exhibition with Charlie James Gallery — and that gallery's first solo show — begins with a deliciously perverse one-liner. It's a floor sculpture configured to resemble a true-to-scale Twister mat, with red, blue, yellow and green dots indicating the positions for a player's hands and feet, that happens to be composed of broken glass. The piece calls to mind Robert Smithson's "Map of Broken Glass," a treacherous, vaguely topographical mass of shards, but with a playful twist characteristic of Stone's general approach: considered cleverness articulated with striking visual and conceptual economy.

The price of such economy is that a handful of works seem mostly to skirt the obvious: a series of television stills taken from news coverage of car chases, or a neon piece that reads, "Eventually you will die and be unable to read this."

The majority, however, are sharp and genially thought-provoking. "Angry Man, Silenced," for instance, is a still, blown up to poster scale, taken from Peter Finch's famous "mad as hell" speech in the film "Network," seen on a television screen with the word "mute" in