

Neil Beloufa

FRANÇOIS GHEBALY GALLERY

Neil Beloufa seems fascinated by the sympathetic vibrations between opposing forces, and his recent solo exhibition at François Ghebaly Gallery (formerly Chung King Project) demonstrated his precise ability to let dichotomies collide. Only twenty-five years old, the French artist has already produced a small but compelling body of work that includes sculpture, video, installation, and conceptual photography, all of which were on view in "Tectonic Plates or the Jurisdiction of Shapes." As the title suggests, this show—with some pieces adapted or repurposed from earlier sculptures and installations for a "site-specific" exhibition in seismically active Los Angeles—lingered on the shaky common ground between reality and fiction, cause and effect, presence and absence, and surface versus framework.

Entering the darkened gallery, one first encountered *Tectonic L.A.*, 2009, two stout plywood-and-Plexiglas structures resting on short wooden platforms; these plinths, placed some two feet apart, were connected by a bundle of AV cables and electrical cords running along the floor. One construction housed a video projector; the other, a hanging sheet of paper (the projection surface) and two robust speakers. The video depicted Beloufa's sculpture *Tectonique*, 2007–2008, a hinged and motorized wooden platform covered in sod that perpetually undulated from flat to peaked. Each time the sculpture in the looped video moved toward the ground, a deep tone would resonate through the speakers, causing the paper screen to tremble. The possible meaning (or non-meaning) of the quasi-kinetic *Tectonic L.A.* remains open; that is, the work is less about a formal or conceptual interpretation than about the viewer's experience with or perception of, say, a moving image on a vibrating screen.

Perceptual experience was also the subject of *2007, April the 2nd*. For this video, which played on a small flat-screen monitor near the gallery office, Beloufa placed a large white monolith in the middle of a Parisian street and then recorded the reactions of drivers and passersby as they encountered the mysterious roadblock. At times, the object is digitally removed from the shot or inserted into frames where it was originally absent, so that the public seems either to react to an invisible field or to be oblivious to the conspicuously out-of-place form. The video imbues the green-screen paint applied unobtrusively throughout the gallery installation with eerie significance, suggesting that if the room were to be videotaped, a different reality might one day be introduced to the scene.

Just as Beloufa represents and undermines *presence* in his artwork, he uncannily conflates *presence* with *the present*, or rather, linear constructions of time; and while this may sound like an abstract possibility, his poetic, twelve-minute video *Kempinski*, 2007—a strong focal point of the exhibition—achieved such a fusion. The video, which was shot in Mali and has already won a number of awards on the independent film circuit, features Malian men earnestly describing a fantastical world in which domesticated animals comprise civilized society, machines and tools behave like humans, sex occurs telepathically, and unique geographies are able to travel from continent to continent. Without knowing the premise of the work—that each man is speaking of an imagined

future in the present tense—these stories seem surreal, unsettling, and indistinctly political. The fantasies and hopes of each individual are put forth as real, but the phrase "the future is present tense," written in reverse on an adjacent wall, confuses the terms. This and every other carefully planned aspect of the exhibition revealed Beloufa's thorough consideration of both the artwork and the viewer, a skilled balancing act of object and subject—and an impressive feat for an emerging artist.

—Catherine Taft



Neil Beloufa,
Tectonic L.A., 2009,
mixed media.
Installation view.