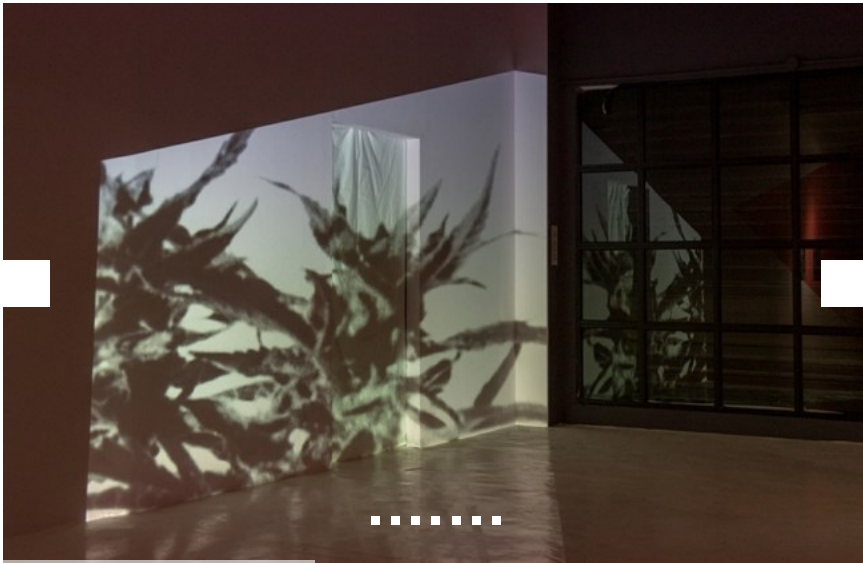


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Dancing between peyote and deity



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👤 Jim Quilty | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Depending how you navigate “things that SHINE and THINGS that are DARK,” the effect may vary. Joachim Koester’s first solo show in Beirut is one of two adorning the structure housing Beirut Art Center for a few more days.

Though Koester’s work betrays a persistent interest in cinema and photography, architectural forms, movement and altered consciousness (chemical- or belief-induced), this show arrays the work in satisfying discord.

Entering, you find a long gallery. To the left is a bed with a set of headphones on the pillow. Alongside, a few photos hang from the walls. A mock-up of a backwoods cabin crowds the passage, a television image flickering, muted, through its plywood slats. To the right is a projected work from 2009 called “The Hashish Club.” Naturally, you bear right.

An exhibition plaque explains what you’re seeing - a series of still images clustered about the theme of cannabis and the culture of hash consumption, inspired by some 19th-century European artists’ interest in heightened consciousness.

If you don’t like reading, the nature of the images projected in the BAC iteration of Koester’s work may be difficult to discern. The projector isn’t aimed directly at a flat surface, but the corner of the gallery, where its oblong images play upon a white curtain concealing the next gallery.

Behind the curtain you find a room-sized video installation housing “The Place of Dead Roads,” a 33-minute work from 2015.

The ordinarily white cube-style gallery has been transformed, its walls poorly concealed by wooden planks that may have been salvaged from some derelict building. Upon a generous screen is a room decorated to resemble a late-19th-century shack on the American frontier.

A cast of three - a couple of women and a bearded man - are dressed in the rustic costume of a Hollywood Western. When still, they stare meaningfully at something off frame.

Mostly they’re in movement, posturing and gesturing and making faces associated with action sequences in Western movies. The (seemingly hollow) wooden floor their

boots shuffle and stamp upon is thoroughly wired with microphones, heightening the sound of the figures' movement, like demotic flamenco.

The figures' behavior is amusingly odd because it evokes certain cinematic conventions but is unaccompanied by any narrative feature or dialogue. It becomes all the more exotic as the performers' movement (whether choreographed or improvised) grows more agitated.

Eventually they cease to reproduce tropes of human movement devised for movies set in America's "Old West" and seem to mimic those of horses, maybe steers. Entertainingly unsettled, you may decide to follow the light at the back of the gallery.

There, sitting on the floor between the gallery and the back entrance to the BAC auditorium, a television set flickers with Koester's 2007 video "My Frontier is an Endless Wall of Points" (after the mescaline drawings of Henri Michaux).

Peering at the shifting screen (preoccupied by mutable patterns of black squiggles upon a white background) is not unlike watching audiovisual "snow," though your suspicion that the squiggles were hand-drawn gives it a certain weight. Koester's second wink at what creative people can get up to when they're off their heads (from the hallucinogen of the peyote cactus, in this case) makes it difficult to not appreciate the artist's sense of humor.

BAC's terraced auditorium has been transformed into a delivery system for Koester's 2016 HD video installation "Maybe this Act, this Work, this Thing."

Formally it's much like "Dead Roads" - performers in period costume enact a choreography of scuffs and stomps upon a sound-sensitive stage. Here two women are clad like vaudevillians from the turn of last century (not cowpokes) and they aren't mute. Rather they mutter constantly, as though reciting lines evocative of narrative but deliberately suppressed in favor of movement, gesture and mugging.

Departing the terraces through a door-sized hole knocked in the wall, you're drawn to the 2007 installation "Tarantism," whose aesthetic reiterates that of "Dead Roads."

Looped on the television set on the floor of the one-room hut slapped together from old planks, a video scrutinizes a group of humans interpreting the body's convulsive response to a tarantula bite. Some remain standing as their arms and legs contort erratically. Others writhe energetically on the floor.

Students of North American pop culture may find this conflation of backwoods shack and crazed convulsions reminiscent of unkind stereotypes of rural Americans attached to Pentecostal Christianity, whose adherents believe the Holy Spirit compels believers to "speak in tongues" - i.e., flop about on the ground while shouting nonsense.

Standing in stark contrast to all the frenetic busyness of Koester's film studies of movement, his 2017 sound piece "Insect Silver Noire" is designed as guided meditation.

Nested in a small selection of praying mantis stills, the work cajoles you to don headphones and lie still, eyes shut, imagining yourself in a summertime garden where plants and trees grow to gargantuan size while you are transformed into a praying mantis.

Far out.

For more information, see <http://www.beirutartcenter.org/en>.