

The Subtle Art of Defiance

The Cross Arts Projects

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Catalogue Essay

The Subtle Art of Defiance examines the intersection of allure and resistance in contemporary artistic practice. Philjames, Keg De Souza, Mojgan Habibi, Julian Talarico and Oliver Wagner present works that exude beauty, tradition and craftsmanship whilst simultaneously representing actions of social, political, historical and artistic defiance that question unilateral social hierarchies. Embedded in each artists work is a distinct counter discourse subtly undermining dominant narrative ideologies subject to this contemporaneous moment. As Cultural theorist Richard Terdiman reflects, “... counter – discourses have the capacity to **situate**: to relativize the authority and stability of a dominant system of utterances which cannot even countenance their existence. They read that which cannot read them at all” The power of these works is in the gentle and alluring way they have engaged in the act of defiance. The beguiling beauty of each work provides a false sense of security for its audience quickly giving way to anxiety.

The centre piece for this exhibition, Philjames *Glass Warfare (Molotov) 2017*, is a reimagined cut glass decanter. In keeping with his signature stylistic re-contextualisation of iconographic terrains and symbols Philjames strides toward commentary on the long dedicated violence of social class systems recreating an object that was once considered a marker of opulence and social status as an exquisitely beautiful, though thoroughly inciting, Molotov cocktail.

Iranian born artist Mojgan Habibi’s *Behind the Words* speaks to a nuanced international dialogue regarding censorship and freedom of speech. Suspended terracotta nonsensical letters hang in row upon row of jumbled language emboldened by the presence of floating white letters behind them. The white letters symbolize the presence of what cannot be said, that which is censored, thereby making bolder the terracotta letters. The installation presents a fragile ecology suggesting that which is censored is still present even if it is unable to articulate itself in a way that is visible.

The title of Keg De Souza’s work, *the earth affords them no food at all, 2017*, is taken from the diary of English explorer William Dampier, considered the first Englishman to explore parts of Australia, when surveying Australia in 1697. This quote serves as a point of departure for the work. De Souza’s vacuum bagged food samples are presented as though botanical specimens and speak to the present history of Indigenous displacement and evolving food culture in Australia.

In *Fontana in risposta, 2019*, Julian Talarico examines the relationship of the natural world and the social sphere fostered and reflected through the changing utility of the urban landscape. He extracts aspects of the public fountain which historically served as a source of

water and bathing for communities, and presently serves as a monument or decorative structure. In Talarico's reimagined public monument *Fontana in risposta* pieces of information that are habitually separated from each other are re-positioned into a relationship with each other. Maps are combined, money is re-viewed, images are overlaid and obscured, meanings are reworked and function and form blur revealing a new concept of urban landscape that subverts categorisation and acts as a site of resistance, revealing uncomfortable social truths.

Oliver Wagner's *The Material Flow (Green, Pink, Blue)* 2019, reformats the parameters of the white cube by embedding itself in the architecture of the space. His work questions the very concept of art in its highest form. From the constraints of the canvas to the walls of the white cube Wagner suggests that art, like ideology and imagery, dissolves with the ebb and flow of time and that which we hold high in one moment is relegated to dust in the next.

The Subtle Art of Defiance is the fifth in a series of exhibitions curated with current and former Waverley Artist Studios artists. This exhibition was created specifically for The Cross Arts Projects and has been generously supported by Waverley Council.

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ⁱ Terdiman, Richard; *Discourse/Counter Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth Century France*; Cornell University Press, 1990. P. 15