

Uncovered

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I don't envy the curator who, wishing to bring works in the collection out into the museum space, is tasked with tying potentially disparate pieces together thematically. That said, I'm never much happy with the conceits employed, finding them often either unhelpfully broad or feeling the works dubious victims of shoehorning to fit the exhibit's premise.

Passageworks currently showing at the SFMOMA takes Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* as its starting point and *raison d'être*. Benjamin was fascinated by Paris commercial arcades, reading into the enclosed window shopping lanes all manner of interesting observations about commodification and culture.



Thus, the visitor must first pass through Felix Gonzales-Torres' *Untitled (Golden)*, 1995/2008; a curtain of gaudy beads that conceals yet allows entrance to the exhibit proper. From that point on however, I find my enjoyment of the pieces marred by that nagging question in the back of my mind: just how well do the pieces on display illuminate or stir in me reflection on Benjamin's unfinished masterpiece and its ruminations?

Right inside, forming a cluster in the far corner is Tony Feher's *It Seemed a Beautiful Day*, 2001. Suspended from a clothesline are a collection of scavenged water and soda bottles, half-filled with liquid. In the harsh light of the gallery, they stubbornly refuse to undergo transformation: they remain for me an assemblage defined by their familiarity.



Directly across from it is a piece by Josephine Taylor whose work so impressed me at the Catherine Clark Gallery. The tension running through the figurative work is summed up for me by the line running like a suture on the head of one of the anguished participants. The bluish gash practically throbs like a gorged vein, a synecdoche for the taut drama playing out in *We all have our weaknesses (and those who look out for us)*, 2005.

In the next room I'm overwhelmed by a wave of perfume from a passing security guard. On the wall is Ed Ruscha's *Parking Lots* 1967/99; an aerial photograph that reveals the unplanned patterns that emerge in a landscape viewed from above. The parking spaces take on the look of cartoon fish skeletons, the kind that hobo cats dig out of garbage cans and place daintily on the lid. Nearby is Gordon Matta-Clark's *Conical Intersect*, or rather a series of photographs documenting a 1975 site specific work he cooked up for the Paris Biennale. Matta-Clark pierced through the interiors of adjacent 17th Century buildings due for demolition. Through the exit wound of the cone-shaped excavation one can make out the street scene below near the Centre George Pompidou. There is a weird poignancy of the captured view: the rubble and parked cars, a strolling couple holding hands. Whereas I normally lose myself in the spaces and shapes formed by the artist's "building cuts," I found myself mostly thinking of the unwitting pedestrians framed for a brief time by a piece of art they may not have even realized loomed over them. There is a strangeness to a work of art concealed in plain sight.



I can feel myself rushing through the exhibit. Luckily the next room is devoted solely to Emily Jacir's *Where we come from* which forces the visitor to stay put to take it in. The work proceeds from an idea, a question posed by the artist to Palestinians living abroad or unable to return home: "If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?" It's probably the only work you'll ever find that includes "American Passport" as a material component of the piece. The responses vary from the mundane to the playful and many reveal a longing that wrenches the heart, sometimes because the suggestion is so personal in nature.

"Water a tree in my village of Dayr Rafat."

"Spend a day enjoying Jerusalem freely."

"Bring me an Arak" (an aniseed-flavored alcoholic drink).

The restrictions placed on freedom of movement form a common thread in a number of the suggestions, such as "(p)ay my phone bill in an Israeli post office." The explanatory cards are accompanied by pictures that serve as a kind of proof of performance. There are no messy divergences. You get the idea that Jacir had no trouble carrying out any of the suggestions: it's all rather lyrical and perfect. Did she have any trouble finding a boy to play soccer with? Did she spend a day lost trying to track down the specific village where she was to drink a glass of water? Was she nervous arranging to take a photograph of a family? There is also the strange vacancy of the artist, acting as she is as the agent of another's desire. She vanishes into the art even though she is ever-present.

While my visit was mostly spent resisting the connection to Benjamin's work, in retrospect it was more apt than I was willing to admit at the time (and I really struggled with it, feeling constantly like I was missing some crucial and pointed giveaway in every piece). Especially by the time I reached Jacir's work, I felt something of the indefatigable aspect of the *flâneur*. I strolled, I stared, I peeped through a hole in a building at the people below. My walk had taken me all the way to the Middle East without breaking a sweat. *Passageworks* failed to inspire me in the moment, but the memory of my visit is growing and deepening upon reflection.

2 Responses to "Uncovered"

1 **Ms Heidi** January 8, 2009 at 9:42 am

i really enjoyed this write-up and the details from the exhibit you focused on. in a nice bit of synchronicity modern art notes just wrote about that wonderful emily jacir piece as well:
http://www.artsjournal.com/man/2009/01/acquisition_emily_jacir_at_sfm.html

2 **hideoussunday** January 8, 2009 at 9:58 am

Thanks for posting this Heidi - I'm looking forward to the follow up promised. Everyone always has better pics than me 😊

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