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Contemporary Art Magazine

Roman Road, 69 Roman Road, London E2 0QN

TEMPO AL TEMPO. ART FROM ANNO DOMINI TO RONI HORN

Review by Helena Haines

December 1, 2015



Title: TEMPO AL TEMPO. ART FROM ANNO DOMINI TO RONI HORN, Installation View, Roman Road, London, 2015. Website: <http://www.romanroad.com/>Credit : Courtesy of Roman Road. Image credit Ollie Hammick

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Anonymous 1930, Anonymous 1450, Roni Horn, Anonymous 1 AD, Thomas Struth, Anonymous 1400, Darren Almond, Anonymous 2 AD, Domingo Milella, Anonymous 1550, Bartolomeo Vivarini 1460

Roman Road

5 November - 18 December 2015

‘TEMPO AL TEMPO’ is about as convincing an artist-curated show as it’s possible to imagine. Curious, delicately wrought and fascinated with the passing of time, the exhibition is so explicitly an extension of Italian artist Domingo Milella’s photographic practice that any weaker works here could easily have been shouted

down by the strength of his curatorial premise. Fortunately, Milella and his co-curator, antiques specialist Bruno Botticelli, have managed to strike the difficult balance between the creation of a coherent, deeply original yet millennia-spanning whole – with all the conversations and arguments between works that implies – and allowing each piece enough space to breathe.

It's the street-facing, double height room at the front that we're immediately drawn to. Milella's 'Index' (2004-11 – 2012-13) – a Fischli and Weiss-esque series of framed photographs that record various evidence of mankind's presence on earth – sets the tone for the rest of the show: an ancient, crumbling amphitheatre on a mountain top; four tourists staring out to sea from a leaning outcrop; lines of archaic script carved into a rock face; a view over chaotic rooftops studded with satellite dishes; or cordoned-off stone figures displayed in a crisp, clinical museum. Ten years in the making, these were photographed in historic sites and cities all over the globe, and you can feel the depth of Milella's research and his obsession with the marks we leave behind.

Hung opposite, as if in some kind of face-off across the ages, the ever so slightly wonky eyes of Bartolomeo Vivarini's 'Saint Catherine of Alexandria' (c. 1460) gaze dolefully across. This 650-year-old rendering of a teenaged martyr is vibrantly coloured and unbelievably well-preserved, with every stroke as evident as if it had been painted last week. What, we wonder, would Catherine make of Milella's photographs? The third piece to join the conversation is a water-worn marble sculpture of a sea snail by an anonymous sixteenth century artist – installed together like this, these works add up to a curatorial comment on questions of timelessness, value and the (often futile) human desire to preserve.

Milella and Botticelli have also dealt admirably with the second, potentially tricky space at the rear of the building, which is being used to display artworks for the first time. As gallery spaces go, then, this half of it is particularly unconventional – obviously expensively fitted out with bare brick walls and glossy surfaces, it feels essentially as if you've wandered into someone's swish, contemporary office. The designer furniture and echoes of voices from the workspace upstairs compete for our attention with Milella and Botticelli's choices: a large Thomas Struth photograph – all lush green, tangled foliage and startling clarity;

Darren Almond's 'Perfect Time (7 x 3)' (2012), a clacking mechanical wall piece consisting of twenty one flip clocks displaying mismatched numerals, or a first-century AD marble sculpture of a couple of Roman deities "consumed by the water" – pocked and full with the weight of their own history in that way that only truly ancient objects can be. Rather than feeling like rude intruders, though, the contemporary and historical works here give the space an extra dimension, adding to it without seeming like decoration and sitting just oddly enough in their very particular, temporary home.

All the pieces here offer their own meditation on time and its effects – whether emotional, physical or visceral. Almond's feels the most harshly impactful, sounding the minutes to its neighbour – a reclining lion statue from fifteenth-century Florence with a sad, gaping hole for a face – with its sharp slaps. The five prints that make up Roni Horn's 'Untitled (Weather)' (2010 - 11) hit the precise tone that the American artist always gets just so, with one woman's face ever so gently changing from image to image. We notice her gradually parting lips, the drips of water running from her nose as she emerges from an Icelandic spring. Those deities, and their centuries-long, losing battle with the elements, suddenly appear in a very different light.

The gallery PR makes much of these connections, emphasising them a little too prescriptively at times. Given that the show itself flows so organically, this is a shame – they could learn a lot from Danh Vo's recent triumph at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice: maximum attention to individual works and minimal instruction as to how we might want to interpret the relationships between them. It makes us critics feel as if there's still a reason for our existence.