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Museums

Directions: Antonio Rovaldi

DETAILS | OUR REVIEW | READER REVIEWS [0]

Laugh or cringe, it's hard to look away

By Michael O'Sullivan
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Antonio Rovaldi

Two video artists are being spotlighted in a pair of side-by-side micro-exhibitions at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. The works, by Dutchman Jeroen Eisinga and Italian Antonio Rovaldi, each of whom is represented by a single short video, inspire strong -- and entirely opposite -- reactions.

In the case of Rovaldi's roughly 13-minute video, "The Opening Day," the typical response is, by museum standards, an unusual one: laughter and cheering.

Walk into the darkened gallery and you'll see two video screens set up at opposite ends of the room. One features a larger-than-life image of a pitcher (Fabio Betto of the Bologna-based team Fortitudo) repeatedly winding up and throwing baseballs, apparently toward the camera. But turn around and you'll see what he's really aiming at.

On the second screen are the objects of Betto's fastballs: a series of silly ceramic knickknacks that, one by one, the pitcher smashes to smithereens. Sometimes it takes him a while, and several errant pitches, to hit his mark; other times, his aim is deadly accurate. Standing in the gallery, you're in the line of fire. It's as if you're a spectator at a tennis game -- look to the right, look to the left, repeat -- but plunked in the middle of center court instead of sitting in the stands.

That immersive quality makes us a tad complicit in whatever cheeky game Rovaldi is up to. The ceramic tchotchkes can be read as stand-ins for fusty traditional art. They suggest an increasingly irrelevant focus on the collectible object. Or maybe "The Opening Day" is a critique of soulless mass production, that trap of repeating oneself that many successful (i.e., museum-approved) artists fall into.

Either way, the vicariously destructive satisfaction of watching Rovaldi's video makes for enormous fun. When was the last time you wanted to chuckle, or were encouraged to, in a museum?

Just next door is Eisinga's "Springtime." Brace yourself: The nearly 20 minutes of silent footage document a feat of endurance in which the artist allowed himself to be swarmed by hundreds of thousands of bees. For many, it will be hard to watch. It's also more than a little hard to turn away from, both for pure, creepy fascination and for its evocation of more familiar art forms in the museum.

The black-and-white format turns Eisinga -- who barely moves, other than to blink -- into a kind of living sculpture. Even the wall behind him, covered with bees, suggests the ivy-covered walls of the Hirshhorn's outdoor sculpture garden, only here the walls are writhing.

The way in which Eisinga's "Springtime" calls to mind sculpture differentiates it from "Jackass"-style stunts or the competitive phenomenon of "bee bearding," in which participants spray themselves with queen bee hormones to attract the insects to their heads and faces.

To be sure, Eisinga's original 90-minute performance (of which "Springtime" is an edited version) bears similarities to those sideshow-like acts. But the work also is strangely beautiful, even contemplative, once you get past the initial revulsion.

The fear factor is part of the art, a concept Eisinga has employed in his previous work. His first video featured the artist wandering blindfolded in a parking lot as a driverless Volkswagen Beetle -- its steering wheel tied -- drove in circles around him. Like that work, "Springtime" evokes the shadow of death that lurks around every corner.