

## The Envoys

Stretched-out hands are alight in the darkness  
like an old town.

—Zbigniew Herbert

It's said that the invaders from Carthage spared only those who sought refuge in the temples of the city of Selinunte. In the days following the end of the siege, the population of the maritime Greek colony that grew to a zenith of nearly thirty thousand inhabitants in the 5th Century BC, was mostly enslaved or killed. Founded on ready trade routes and its westerly location as a strategic outpost, the city's iterations post-siege decreased in size and activity until it lay to dissipate beneath the sun and sea air. The acropolis and five temples of Selinunte, including among them one of the largest of ancient Greece, passed into Carthaginian hands, and the Doric order fell and and was parceled out, toppled ruins.

But in the Archeological Park of today's Selinunte the Temple of Hera stands partially re-erected and the architectural imprint of the city forms an impressive and remarkably coherent outline. Here time is adorned once again, embellished and excavated to a point where detachment retreats and the scale of devotion and its undoing is deeply felt across the natural beauty of the campus. The visitor can stand in deference to the Greek goddess of women, childbirth, and stars with the salt wind trailing through the site, and wonder at the centrality of the gods once—there are temples to Zeus but also Dionysus—the relatively open plan, and lack of barriers to the city.

Inviting the viewer to consider such themes as emblem, likeness, and loss, the exhibition *Are You My Mother?* animates both archaic and contemporary modes of address within the work of Jamie Diamond, Eugene Lemay, and Aleksander Duravcevic. Conceived as an exhibition that can offer a cultural platform of exchange between Sicily and the United States via contemporary art, the exhibition *Are You My Mother?* takes place across two very specific locations: in the Museo Riso for Contemporary Art in Palermo, Sicily, and at its central site, the Archeological Park of Selinunte, some two hours away. From very distinct positions, the three invited artists, all based in the United States, took the opportunity to consider how the highly provocative prompt from curator Ysabel Pinyol Blasi confronts both belonging and alienation in its interrogative tone, while also challenging themselves to respond to the dramatic setting of unearthed time that is the ruins of Selinunte along the southwest coast of Sicily. The volley and distance put in play by the invitation allows the curatorial question to resonate into the rifts of our political climate, where asylum cannot be assumed and solidarity within affinity is too often disallowed or foreclosed, even put under siege. The making and unmaking of identity is given an ancient context within the framing of the exhibition. Indeed, the displacement inherent within the question is one of time, place, and event as the artists grapple with responses.

At the center of Aleksander Duravcevic's work is a scenography of drawing, painting, sculpture, and installation spurred by an ongoing engagement with the fragmentation of both modernism and modernity, including the eventful and difficult history of his native Montenegro, and a uniquely hybrid approach to both narrativizing and evading the expectations of symbolism, biography, and ritualistic gesture he puts in motion. Having left his own country during a time of great conflict and growing sectarian violence in the early 1990s, Duravcevic sidesteps overt pathos in favor of the dynamics of recall within his work. His paintings and drawings, for instance, are often shown in what at first appear to be identical pairings or triptychs only to skip into slight difference and variation, revealing both the impossibility of absolute similitude and more significantly the desire to imbue and freight images with symbolic value via repetition and apparent doubling. The image as illusion, a mirroring refraction and mesmeric hold is both insisted upon and taken apart.

The slippage of memory is deeply embedded, mined repeatedly across medium to create a back and forth space that occupies and makes a subject of the fissure between images. *Touch me not (hands)*, 2016, for example, depicts the vulnerability of holding a candle in one's bare hands, implying the finite time of a votive gesture or the modest illumination of one's path, done twice in competing scales. It is also of course a play, in the title, on the letting go of a past life, and the futility and even mania of attempts to hold the past hostage in the present. Rather the insistent image within Duravcevic's repertoire is not unlike a symbol decoupled from its code, orphaned yet assertive still. With *Identity*, 2010-14, a plaque-like wall piece conveys a series of statements around the projection inherent in cultural typecasting, and shows Duravcevic mining linguistic slippage to create an absurd form of memorializing, ghosting the "I" of narrative into a series of misapprehensions:

"Albanians thought I was Montenegrin / Montenegrins thought I was Albanian /  
Italians thought I was a Slav / Latinos think I'm Italian / Blacks think I'm French /

French think I'm one of their own" It's as if Duravcevic is working from a playbook reminiscent in its wry fatalism to that of the Serbian writer Danilo Kis (1935-89), also of Montenegrin background, who wrote with great concision and implied resistance of the place of art: "History is written by the victors. Legends are woven by the people. Writers fantasize. Only death is certain." Replace writers with artists and you can count Duravcevic among those replenishing the space between legend and mortality with an ironic lyricism. In a tragic yet buoyant register, his work carries memory into a place where it is allowed to shift time signatures readily, take on materiality, and dwell within itself. As with the artist's solo exhibition for the Pavilion of Montenegro at the Venice Biennale in 2015, Room No. 1 and Room No. 2, Duravcevic presented ornate interior fragments of carved woodwork at room-scale, charred black but with their adornment impossibly and perfectly in tact, exquisite detail in service of anxiety. Retaining architectural details native to his youth but also to his years in the city of Florence, Italy—where he managed to study in the 1990s as a refugee from the wars that were tearing apart the soon-to-be former Yugoslavia—Duravcevic's rooms are touched with just enough fantasy to counter the grain of experience. In these acts of compression, Duravcevic crafts versions that reflect upon surface and contour until they become an image that can morph and retreat from the demands of recollection. For the accuracy demanded in his work is that of the imagined composite rather than the evidentiary, the dream and not the document.

With his site-responsive installation *Youth*, 2019, installed in proximity to the Temple of Hera at Selinunte, Duravcevic worked with a folk recording of funereal lamentation abstracted to create an otherworldly sound composition. Emitting from a trio of iridescent columns that pay homage to the overwhelming scale of the Doric columns within the temple ruin just behind, the ethereal tones rise as if channeled from the earth and chthonic memory of the site. Having collaborated with sound designer Lorenzo Brusci, *Youth* references such ritual singing as found in the 'gjama' form of lament practiced in Albania for centuries and outlawed for decades under Communism. Drawing upon the power of an ancient collective expression of grief, the artist's composition is, however, ultimately untethered from one specific cultural identity as it hovers ghostly over the site, oscillating between a choral swell reminiscent of a vocal chant and the reverberant echo and ringing distortion of an immense, hollowed out space. The iridescent reflection that covers the human-scaled painted columns contributes to the figural presence of the otherwise abstract work. Duravcevic evokes a sense of loss in the absence that haunts the Temple of Hera but also culls a lament for his own journey in having left a stable narrative of homeland long ago. The keening effect carries out over the site like a retort from a disappeared and exiled language.

The immediately recognizable formations of flags are perhaps most familiar to us from the sentry-like groupings that appear before government and official buildings, or the banners that crown sports stadiums, and the pageantry of coded regalia that thrives at political events and in the background of news reportage. Even the lingua franca of internationalism indicated by displaying flags from many countries at upscale hotels is a familiar image to many, a welcoming gesture meant to make the worldly and predominantly western guest feel at home. As with the half circle of flags outside the United Nations Headquarters in New York, such assemblies readily indicate cultural exchange and fluency to a viewer, a league of nations working in collaboration. It's not hard to imagine the Temples of Selinunte bore varying crests and insignia of welcome and association.

But perhaps no imagery of flags en masse is more resonant than that associated with the pomp of national holidays, political summits, and military procession. From common patriotism to strident authoritarianism, and imminent attack, a swell of flags is largely synonymous with shows of strength, pride, and country. As such, it calls to mind imagery of invasion and newly prescribed territory attained. In short, flags flying more often than not speak a language of possession and ownership. As Elias Canetti wrote in *Crowds and Power*, "Flags are wind made visible... Nations use them to mark the air above them as their own, as though the wind could be partitioned."

It is with a rush of aggregate associations that Eugene Lemay's *Amerika* installation at Selinunte stakes itself to multiple readings. Drained of patriotic colors and reduced to a compromised state of black-and-white, a crop of United States flags stands out like a stark harvest in the windswept landscape. Not placed before the recreated ancient Temple of Hera or one of the other carefully attended to architectural remnants but rather situated in an open grassy area, Lemay places his work intentionally in an in-between zone. By turns ominous and ambiguous, the displaced emblems stutter in the now uneasy scenic locale. Are we witness to a colonizing gesture of implied takeover, or more so a critique thereof as the stars-and-stripes is emptied of its supposed technicolor virtuosity? The U.S. flags now fly undone, made ahistorical in the gap of archeological time.

With an explicit titular nod to Franz Kafka's incomplete first novel *Amerika* (aka "The Man Who Disappeared"), completed in 1914 and published posthumously in 1927, Lemay's gestural land grab leans toward the absurd as the skewering of patriotism is now on watch within the archeological park of Selinunte, conjuring up a misbegotten authority or waylaid entourage. And yet the effrontery implied is also unmistakable as the flags further read like a statement on vitiated power and a high-contrast reminder of contemporary U.S. foreign policy and its current lack of shared diplomacy and multilateralism. As in previous works by Lemay, the polarizing effect of politics in the era of Trump is unavoidable here as the gathering of flags tacks between intimidating and farcical in the dry environs of an ancient civilization.

The implication of a future time when the presumed hegemony of the United States becomes itself a mere relic is hard to miss as a possible take on Lemay's stance. Recalling his monumental hybrid painting and sculpture, *Hezron*, 2014, where a wreck of granite detritus is placed before an immaculate five-panel large-scale black monochrome painting, formal polarity and reduction pry open a space for political metaphor and supposition via the ruin. A park devoted to unearthing the contradictions of history—finely preserved cultural fragments in a place of the radically disappeared—is further tuned to the tension of our time as Lemay's installation reads like a warning signal of depleted and impinged upon freedoms. Seeing the circle of flags as a gesture of camaraderie, solidarity, or civic discourse is distanced and receding, left untenable in the open expanse. The viewer is rather pushed into more confrontational terrain as the politics of black-and-white preside and prod discomfiting responses. The forgotten society and an erased populace stand as a stark reminder of the precarity of democratic ideals in Lemay's acute warning regarding isolationism.

Alongside the archeological objects on display in the small museum at Selinunte, Jamie Diamond's photographs from her ongoing *Constructed Family Portraits* series attain an added spectral quality. Shown in the context of a museum attempting to give insight into the everyday reality of a bygone way of life, the intentionally stilted qualities of her portraits are further underscored. In Diamond's scripted allegories, fictional family portraits are posed for in various hotel rooms by strangers. The familiar narrative of the happy family is frayed at the edges as estrangement creeps into the frame of each entry. Named after the hotel where each portrait was performed, the series accrues a litany of misplaced and nearly comic surnames, including "The El Finns" and "The Harmonies", as well as "The Westerns," with performers coming together to capture the trappings of an artificial intimacy and skewed lineage. Found via online casting calls and by asking people the artist came across in daily life, Diamond's family constructs are equal parts playful and bracing as each clan reveals performers coming to grips with the uncertain social mores being depicted.

In *The Camino Reals*, 2016, for instance, the rigidity of a hierarchical and highly formal family picture is seemingly composed across three generations, with the implicit grandmother and grandfather seated at the center, mother and father standing behind, and grandchildren flanking the parents on the left and right. An impossible poolside setting and mauve skyline form an askance backdrop in the window frame behind the family of seven. What emerges from an immediately recognizable setup is further layers of alienation as familial resemblance is difficult to spot beyond a somewhat similar skin tone and shared physical stature. A sleuthing is triggered immediately in the viewer. Diamond's scenes play off of the stereotypes of the unified family on a special occasion—a holiday or vacation—while also portraying the tensions inherent in such play-acting at gender, ethnicity, or class norms. The directives that come from behind the camera for any such family portrait appear amped up as a fragmented attention comes alive in Diamond's work. In *The Al Bustans*, 2016, the performers appear perplexed as pursed mouths and furrowed brows seem to betray the directives given to six performers, likely of Arabic background, in staging a family portrait that appears on the verge of going awry. Derived from and constructed to meet familiar family poses, Diamond's series implies the presence of a directorial voice precisely cajoling from off camera, evoking what Gilles Deleuze termed the charged atmosphere of the "out-of-field," the neither seen nor completely understood but absolutely present nature of directorial command.

Taking the awkward quiver of her family portraits into public space, Diamond's Living Family Portrait video series, also on view, further captures the hyper-consciousness of the still frame, often having performers return to and repeat sequences that delay their final poses. In translating the overlap and boundary condition of posing for portraiture into moving-image works, Diamond's failed tableaux vivant videos heighten the physicality involved and emphasize the time of registration over the time of narrative. This is underscored by each video taking place during rush hour in such urban contexts as a public park (Madison Square Park, NY), or public square (Shimbashi, Tokyo).

Titled after the location of each shoot, Living Family Portrait in Paradeplatz, Zurich, 2015, for example, twitches with the anticipatory micro-movements of rehearsed gesture as four performers slowly enter the frame of the camera, pose in extended duration for what immediately appears as the cliché stance for a family of four—mother and father standing proudly, daughter and son smiling on the bench before them—while the comings and goings of rush hour unfold around them. Wearing varying red tops to put their suspended pose in further relief, quotidian hurry and waiting occur beside and around the held pose of the performers, with the uncanny presence of a familiar still image pushing against the extended gesture taking place in public. Diamond's restive clans confront the viewer, refusing historical linearity in their apparition-like assembly. Archetypes of mother and father, daughter and son, masculine and feminine, are absorbed in the angular looking back of the roundups, exposing the cultural codes that underscore our need for empathic identification while also giving heterogeneous form to the lack that arises in the diffusion of gender, ego, and character that takes place within the frame.

Intended as the first part in a dialog, the exhibition-as-exchange turns to a second chapter at Mana Contemporary forthcoming, looking to further amplify its powerful signal. The echoes from Selinunte arrive in advance, reports stirring from the colony.

1. From the story "To Die for One's Country is Glorious," *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*, Northwestern University Press (ed. 1997), p.131.
2. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, Farrar Strauss & Giroux 1984, p.86.
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1986, p. 17.