

Scraps

By Stephanie Sykes



Like most exhibitions, Scraps at Dubai's Total Arts Gallery has a dual identity: one premised upon on its physical presence and the other based on context. While Scraps' geographical framework plays an important role when shown in Dubai, architect Dariush Zandi and artist Shaqayeq Arabi, the husband-wife duo behind Scraps, have proposed the show's capacity to function independently from its context, relying chiefly on formal attributes to propel its content.

With Zandi and Arabi's proposition in mind, this article offers two readings of the show. The first account examines Scraps on a formal level, examining its strength when decontextualized from its relationship to site. The second

illustrates the story behind the exhibition and evaluates the ways its geo-social context intermingles with its aesthetics.

I.

Scraps welcomes visitors with an aural disruption, a bass rumble that reverberates through the gallery like a muted explosion. The thundering, blatantly evocative of active destruction, guides the senses to the exhibition space in which the typically stark walls and bright track lighting of Total Arts yield to a theatrical darkness punctuated by an array of sculpture and installation. The curve of the gallery's large glass wall is obscured by sheets of uniformly ridged cardboard, allowing only narrow slivers of light to trespass into the darkness.

Scraps contains an assortment of sculptural formations composed of everyday materials now altered into semi-recognizable shapes. The work has clearly been wrought by extreme heat, tarnished with rust, and the subtly toxic smell of melted plastic and chemicals suggest the incident from which they were produced is in the recent past. Each piece visually recalls its original state of being while simultaneously finding itself warped into alien forms with unpredictable contours. In contrast to the physical presence of the installations, each work is framed by a richly toned spotlight that streaks long shadows across the floors and walls and creates sculptural forms within the negative space.

The works, which have been rescued from the remains of a damaged building, are for the most part formally unaltered by Zandi and Arabi. A crippled bicycle sits in the shadow of a draped sheet of corrugated metal that creates a suspended corridor for visitors to negotiate. An extraordinary mass of scissors welded together, reminiscent of Arman's accumulations, sits adjacent to a mammoth steel rod dressed with swathes of ostensibly delicate steel while a pile of scorched paint cans reveal stubborn flecks of brightly toned pigment surfacing through the ash.

The lonely positioning of each installation, accentuated by the spotlights, brings to mind Martin Heidegger's notion of things and their corresponding "thingliness." This concept denies the human inclination to impose visual associations upon the partially decipherable forms. By classifying each object's "thingliness" as an aesthetic value in its own right, Heidegger discourages the projection of a greater meaning into the pieces and deems their ontological value sufficient to

carry them as artwork. The importance of a piece's "thingliness" fuels Heidegger's related concept of *technemataology*, wherein archeology can be perceived as artwork because of its ontological representation, which aptly highlights the show's successful elements. Other than photography-based exhibitions, there have been very few attempts in Dubai to straddle the boundary between documentation and artwork. *Scraps* is a courageous attempt to engage sculptural work in a fresh discourse, using a phenomenological methodology to propose quotidian objects in a different light.

However, the exhibition does bare symptoms of conceptual incongruity.

A cluster of pieces in one corner of the gallery has been experimentally manipulated by Zandi and Arabi. Here, knives pattern themselves onto a steel plate while another metal slab features forks that systematically puncture their way into the surface, emphasizing the tension between their violent organization and the delicacy by which they are suspended. Above these makeshift canvasses, three eerily cheerful bottles shaped like hippos and ducklings—equipped with gruesome masses protruding from their partially melted heads— are situated alongside countless paper clips resembling charred clumps of shredded wheat. Amidst a dead plant, a stack of charred newspapers and a rusted spring, two blackened tongue-in-cheek fire extinguishers sit impotently on the ground. As a whole, the assemblage resembles an altar, perhaps to Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades or Arte Povera's nod to the elemental dynamism of raw materials, investigating the properties of the man-made by engaging viewers in the polemics of aesthetics and meaning.

On an opposite wall, metal debris is suspended from the ceiling and transitions into depth-producing shadows against a projected backdrop of an empty warehouse. While this installation boasts strong artistic merit, the careful choreography of the flying scraps coupled with the inclusion of photography is inconsistent with the rest of the show, detracting from the value of objects as simply objects.

These two installations reveal confusion about the exhibition's voice. The curatorial hand becomes directive, thus disabling the concept of *technemataology*. Instead of allowing the objects to function through their own aesthetics, the visible curating posits the works into a dialogue that does not exist throughout the rest of the show. As a result, the installations work more as assemblages whereby each piece is visually reliant on the others surrounding it rather than its own autonomous value.



Perhaps the weakest aspect of *Scraps* is a rotation of projected photographs depicting the site from which the objects were excavated. This reel unintentionally categorizes the show as a documentary display and spoon-feeds a social context to viewers, consequently reducing the pieces from archeology-as-artwork to archeology-as-document, from artwork to artifact. If this show were on display at the Dubai Museum or another historically inclined venue, photography could have a comfortable role; however, given the rest of the exhibition's ambitious ontological agenda, this photographic inclusion disallows the proposition of formally decontextualizing the works.

II.

At 7 AM on March 26, 2008, a colorful blast ignited by illegally stored fireworks roared through a compound of warehouses in Al Quoz, Dubai's most central industrial zone. Over 70 warehouses, many of which operated as storage units for a broad spectrum of commercial manufacturers, fell victim

to the violent sparks, emitting a distress signal to the rest of the city by way of an ominous cloud hovering over the Al Quoz and Al Barsha neighborhoods.

Such was the catalyst for the dramatic tone of *Scraps*.

Like many others in the Al Quoz community, Zandi and Arabi initially visited the fire site out of curiosity. Here, they encountered a singed landscape of mutated shapes, pocked with blisters, adhered together in thrillingly unrecognizable ways – in ways that, according to Arabi (whose own artistic practice often addresses ideas of distortion), “artists work an entire lifetime to create but can never quite achieve.” Zandi and Arabi returned to the site driven by an archeological fascination, intent on excavating the relics of deformed (or more accurately, re-formed) objects. By now, all useable items had been removed by the hundreds of scavengers who scoured the site shortly after the explosion. All that remained were the scraps.

It is this passage – the process of discovery – that sets the visual character of *Scraps* and alludes to a greater public significance. The journey is indicative of the role Al Quoz plays in Dubai: the place where dust and culture meet. The area, with its sand-lined roads and vast single-story structures, is home to the bulk of Dubai's most established and experimental art galleries. While the area has no official sanctioning from the local government, it is recognized as the center for contemporary art culture by Dubai's small but stalwart art community. It is appropriate that Al Quoz, an area notably lacking in Dubai's infamous Junkspace architecture, is home to the grassroots initiative of galleries as the humble growth of the area reflects the initially organic growth of the art community. If, as social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai claims, the social value of objects shifts each time the objects change context, exhibiting these pieces in Dubai – more specifically in Al Quoz – suggests that the objects' primary value resides in their relationship to geography.

In many ways, it is impossible to ignore the central role Al Quoz plays in *Scraps* as it demonstrates an appropriation of the physical community into the art community. Calling upon artist Robert Smithson's musings about monuments, and treating this exhibition as the carefully selected detritus of a fallen monument wherein the installations pay tribute to a specific site, we see that each object is “charged with the rush of time even though it is static.” This “rush of time” suggests that the works are inevitably infused with memory and the specific conditions of time and place, thus countering Heidegger's uninterpretive model of perceiving the exhibition.



Scraps's strength clearly reveals itself in its connection to the temporal trajectory of Al Quoz, which is implied through the cycle of destruction and rebirth that naturally occurs with the passage of time. In a city like Dubai, where the cycles of man-made topography unravel at an unprecedented rate, it is critical to find ways of encapsulating moments of history without these histories becoming instantly obsolete. By giving these objects a new life with revised social values, Zandi and Arabi have successfully used Scraps as platform in which the tools of contemporary art propose an exciting new approach to archiving Dubai.

1 Heidegger, Martin. (2002) [1960] *"The Origin of the Work of Art"*, *Off the Beaten Track*. Edited and translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2002) [1960]

2 Appadurai, Arjun. *"Commodities and the Politics of Value"*, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988

3 Smithson, Robert. *"A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects"*, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Edited by Jack Flam. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996



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