

November 25th, 2013

The Art of Bottles

Simon Lee



Although you may well have admired the bottle-balancing performance ritually enacted on the pavement outside Smokey and Bunty's bar in St James, it's unlikely that even with a bad head you would have considered this "Art". Think again, and not simply about the artistry required to source the raw materials for this distinctly postmodern Creole performance art. Here in Trinidad, we take for granted such street performances in much the same way that tourists or Londoners

take for granted the jugglers in Convent Garden, or the pavement chalk artists who'll oblige with a quick portrait or an Old Master. It took an outsider—Heino Schmid, a Bahamian artist—to see the bottle balancing as an art form. Initially captivated, Schmid began to study the performance both from practical and artistic points of view.

He made drawings; studied the physics involved; dedicated long nights of research on the St James pavement to eventually learn the magic of balancing and then to shoot a short video of himself performing, which combines humour and sly commentary with manual precision. Schmid's "temporary horizons" video, which runs for approximately ten minutes and features the headless artist's hands carefully placing two bottles—the upper one with residuals which constitute the temporary horizon—before he walks offscreen leaving the bottles, which eventually collapse, was originally shown at the prestigious Tate Liverpool Biennale in 2010. Last week, thanks to local artist Christopher Cozier, one of the 35 curators of Project 35, it was screened at Alice Yard, along with several other videos from the same project.

Project 35 is the second in a series of itinerant single-channel video exhibitions, organised by Independent Curators International (ICI) New York, which "trace the complexity of regional and global connections among practitioners and the variety of approaches used to make video." The videos themselves "reflect on the intersections of routine and ritual, the mundane and the absurd, the possibility and impossibility of intelligible communication." Alice Yard played host to Project 35, with four screens of different sizes located in strategic spots playing continuous loops. It was possible to stand mid-yard and with peripheral vision catch two videos simultaneously.

Besides temporary horizons another impressive video was *The Invisible Patriot* shot in Cuba by Reynier Leyva Novo. This eight minutes short, shot in chiaroscuro light so it resembles a Rembrandt-like canvas, focuses in close up on the hands of a guitarist poised over a fretboard, tuning the harmonics and later strumming a chord sequence. In the darkness with nothing to distract, the screen resonates with pure music—something the makers of music videos might care to learn from.

The Egyptian Basim Magdy's *My Father* looks for an Honest City offered a wry look at the corruption which seems a regular feature of modern construction and development, while an Indonesian video mixed human actor with animation, with comic effect. As new media expands and is expanded by artistic interventions and interpretations, providing almost limitless connectivity and a reach unthought of only a decade ago, little Alice Yard is once again at the forefront of keeping T&T in the new loops.