

The Aesthetica Art Prize: Interview with Shortlisted Artist Vera Drebusch

Vera Drebusch has been shortlisted in this year's Aesthetica Art Prize. Her performance pieces Preservation and Chocolates can be seen in the Art Prize exhibition, currently on display at York St Mary's. Something as simple as a jar of jam or a box of chocolates can become entangled in questions of political and environmental conflict. Through the use of a medium as homely and familiar as marmalade, the artist is able to stimulate an inquiry into the arbitrary division of territory and seek out the point where global events impact ordinary life. In Preservation, Drebusch presents jam made from fruits grown in Bonn, Germany, but on the grounds of the embassies of Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which legally remain the territory of those countries.

A: Your recent work explores politically-charged locations around the world. Where did the idea for Preservation come from?

VD: Before I moved to the Rhine area, I was pretty curious about Bonn as the former capital of Germany. I was never there before and when I came there by chance I was quite affected by the former embassies. Some of these buildings are located quite prominently in Bonn. My initial idea was to document the embassies as a video or a photographic piece. However, I soon realised that the myth and the aura surrounding the buildings were much more interesting; each embassy assuming the role of some sort of Zeitgeist.

A: Preservation uses food to explore themes concerning international law and ownership of land. What draws you to this alternative, yet everyday material?

VD: I noticed that plants within the grounds of the embassies of Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia were growing over the delineation of what could be called borders. Through my research I knew, that an embassy and its grounds loses its status as extraterritorial ground on the occasion that it be sold. I came to the conclusion that the fruits which grow there are of the nationality of these countries, and I wished to challenge this perception of division. This is when I started to collect fruit from the embassies in order to produce marmalade.

A: The jam created is contained within minimal and intimate vessels. In your opinion, how do small-scale pieces compare to larger works?

VD: I do not think that the scale of a work should define its worth. In my opinion the scale of a work comes out of the topic it is dealing with

A: Your shortlisted works are performances. Why is this medium important?

VD: To make performances is a vivid type of practice. I am interested in several kinds of disciplines, but sometimes I realise, that a performance can include the audience in a very direct way.

A: Can you talk about your projects for 2015?

VD: At the moment I am working with themes of public space. I am creating a LED-Display for an empty store-front window which shows 122 synonyms for the word 'pattern'. Alongside this work, I have conducted interviews with refugee children who live in Germany. As a result, I chose citations from their statements, created billboards of those statements and installed them in an area of Dortmund known for its active Nazi scene.

The Aesthetica Art Prize 2015, until 31 May, York St Mary's, Castlegate, York