

Large print guide

Aria Dean:
Abattoir

8 February – 5 May 2024

Aria Dean's *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* is a site-specific film installation with immersive 8-channel sound. The animated film traverses the interior of an empty slaughterhouse.

The modern slaughterhouse emerged in the 19th century during a broader period of industrialisation in Europe. This project arose from the artist's research into agricultural and industrial architecture, specifically the intimate connection between modernity and death on conceptual, political, and material levels at the site of the abattoir.

Rendered using a 3D computer graphics tool that creates real-time environments, the gaming software Unreal Engine, the film weaves the viewer through corridors and chambers, an imaginary patchwork of 19th, 20th and 21st century architectures. Visual references

include the Crystal Palace and American industrial buildings as well as the material-driven work of artists like Richard Serra and Paul Sharits. The film is mimicked in the ICA's gallery through physical echoes of the virtual space. Composer Evan Zierk's crucial score establishes affective drama with samples of field recordings, cinematic instrumentals, algorithmically generated sound, as well as a familiar pop cover.

The film appears to be a straightforward survey of space and shows Dean's formal interest in cinema. Yet this seemingly neutral materialist approach and our knowledge of the goings-on in these sorts of killing halls about one another as politics and ideology necessarily invade. This is complicated by the use of realistic animation, where the suggested first-person perspective – one we are inclined to associate with our personal view, or that of the artist, or an animal to slaughter – is undermined by irregular "camera" movements. Moreover, the film is untethered from actual space and time constraints. Dean explores

how these things inform how we relate to what we are seeing in the film: playfully testing our interpretive response, susceptibility to the pull of symbolism, and posing questions about the barriers to empathy.

1.

Abattoir, U.S.A.!

2023

Single-channel video, sound, colour,

10.50 min

Directed by Aria Dean

Animation Filip Kostic

Score and Sound Design Evan

Zierk

Additional Sound Jackson

Kovalchik, Nicky Wetherell

3D Models Maya Lila

Produced by Aria Dean, Andy
Rickert

Commissioned by the Renaissance
Society at the University of Chicago
and co-produced with The Vega
Foundation

Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali,
New York, and Château Shatto, Los
Angeles



2.

Vitrine*

2024

Four vitrines with branded text on velvet, wadding, hardboard, plywood, acrylic, and vinyl text on wall.

Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York, and Château Shatto, Los Angeles.

About

Abattoir is the first UK institutional exhibition by New York-based artist and writer Aria Dean. The presentation includes two artworks related to the artist's investigation of the essential link between slaughter and industrialisation. Presented in the main gallery is Dean's *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* from 2023, a film installation featuring a short animation with immersive audio; the secondary gallery contains a new sculptural presentation with text by the artist.

Across both spaces, Dean proposes with her characteristic concision and humour, an interpretive angle on the foundational place of death within modernity.

Abattoir, U.S.A.! addresses its subject in a seemingly straightforward way: the film traverses the corridors and chambers of an imagined slaughterhouse. Death, that quintessential candidate for symbolism in art, is here approached materially, via the architectures of a killing maze. The secondary gallery minimally

contains four large vitrines and an accompanying wall text. The vitrines are empty save for a single word marked on their red velvet lining with a branding iron. The brand, a tag of ownership usually burned into living flesh, emphasises the palpable lack of a body. With both the film and the vitrine installation Dean does not offer bodies, or objects, or images to be looked at; there is nothing there. Rather she presents a container, specifically one that doubles back on itself.

To make sense of things, we must above all consider the structure in place. Dean uses the idea of the abattoir as both a material and analogical framework for understanding structuralised death as a cornerstone of modern life. This interpretive emphasis on structure is part of the artist's broader artistic project understanding modern subjectivity; specifically how representation, aesthetic systems, and perceptions of history map onto questions of race and power. French philosopher Georges Bataille described the slaughterhouse as a site that must

necessarily sit outside of what we deem 'civil society' in order to uphold that society. We literally and conceptually situate animal slaughter on the outskirts.

In Dean's US context, the way an industrialised slaughterhouse establishes and perpetuates a particular relationship between human, animal, and machine resonated with the structuralised violence against Black Americans. Here in the UK at the start of 2024, the capacity of the analogy to accommodate broader architectures of modernity – colonialism, industrialisation, fascism – became clear. Against a contemporary backdrop of systemic violence and subjugation, the concept of the abattoir remains as poignant as it is absurd.

Melodrama

Though popularly understood as a disposition of heightened or exaggerated affect – whether in film, theater, text, or embodied by a person – melodrama is also a specific historical form and

technical category in film. The classic melodrama structures itself around binaries such as hero and villain, good and evil and generally finds virtue triumphing over vice. Further, the melodrama's general goal is to produce ideological and neuro-psychological effects in the spectator through techniques as seemingly mundane as the close-up, or emotionally resonant music cues. The melodrama is the basis of the time-worn Hollywood film formula as well as the model for all film genres. However, it is also the basis for fascist film form as well; its American iteration, as the melodrama par excellence, was used as the blueprint for the propaganda melodramas produced by The Third Reich Cinema in Nazi Germany. In the post-war era, the conventions of melodrama remain baked into cinematic discourse. Efforts have been made to deconstruct and ironize melodrama in the German context, most famously by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who was massively influenced by Douglas Sirk (Hollywood director known for his melodramas, who also happened to

be German-born, working as a film director in Germany until the rise of the Nazis at which point he and his Jewish wife escaped to the United States).

Fordism

Fordism refers to a system of economic, social, and technological activity organised around mass production. The concept is named after Henry Ford, whose Ford automobile factories relied on an assembly line model of production – the method which would come to be known as the central characteristic of the Fordist model. However, the assembly line predates Ford, finding its roots in the slaughterhouses of the 19th century and their streamlined methods for swift and hygienic ‘dis-assembly’. It has even been said that Henry Ford was struck by the idea for the Ford plant’s assembly lines during a visit to a Chicago meatpacking plant.

Ornament

The question of ornamentation is a recurring concern in architectural history, and central to the development of Western architectural style over the centuries. Perhaps most famously, Adolf Loos railed against ornament in useful objects in 1913 in ‘Ornament and Crime’. For Loos, ‘ornament is wasted labour and hence wasted wealth’. Many years before this text, the problem of ornament in industrial building was debated, specifically in relation to French slaughterhouse design in the Napoleonic era. Prior to the 19th century, animal slaughter in Western Europe and America was a largely unregulated practice, taking place in small butcher shops, alleyways, and private residences. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, French architects and civil authorities began to explore not only regulating butchery as an industry, but doing so by removing it from sight almost entirely. By the Napoleonic era, this was written into law (the abattoir shall be ‘completely removed’ from all ambitions to Architecture and

ornamentation). As a result, the slaughterhouse was prohibited from being thought of as an architectural typology, but at the same time – through its lack of ornamentation and rational, function organisation of forms – is exemplary of something not unlike the modernist design sensibilities that would emerge after World War I.

International Style

The International Style was a European architectural tendency that emerged after World War I and by mid-century had come to dominate architecture in the west. The category is ambiguous, but is largely used to describe design that follows a rationalist program of architectural modernism, like that put forth by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Philip Johnson, and Le Corbusier. As architectural historian and theorist Reyner Banham explores in his book *Concrete Atlantis*, The International Style was directly influenced by American industrial buildings, which European modernists fetishised for their supposed honesty of form (à la

Louis Sullivan's adage 'form follows function'). Architects adopted the structures and iconography of American factories, grain elevators, and the like as a language through which to express their techno-utopian desires. As much as the International Style was influenced by American industry, it also carried with it some socialist utopian ideas about labour and collective living. The intermingling of these forms and ideas had varied results, many of which were skewed toward a technocratic model for life, as in the work of Le Corbusier.

Necropolitics

Achille Mbembe developed the concept of Necropolitics in his essay and book of the same name; it is, in short, a theory of politics and sovereignty that centers on 'the right to kill'. The idea is an elaboration of Michel Foucault's concept of 'biopolitics,' reconfiguring it to emphasise the power to decide who dies and administer death, over the power to grant and administrate life as the primary operation of power in modernity. This view creates an

umbrella concept through which slavery, colonialism, genocide, labour struggles may be yoked together and read as a complex of forces with a shared goal, not as competing negative orders to struggle against. The abattoir is a site where necropower is exercised at a seemingly mundane, rote scale – against animals, in order to define the contours of the human. In this sense, the abattoir is a ‘reality-generating’ site. It participates in the generation and maintenance of a humanist reality, as well as a technocratic, securitised, capitalist reality where ‘vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead’.

Aria Dean, 2024

Biography

Aria Dean (b. 1993) lives and works in New York. The selected writings of Dean were compiled in *Bad Infinity*, published by Sternberg Press in 2023. Recent solo and two-person exhibitions and performances include The Renaissance Society, Chicago (2023); Greene Naftali, New York (2023, 2021); CAPC, Bordeaux (2023); REDCAT, Los Angeles (2021); Artists Space, New York (2020); Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, Geneva (2019); and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York (2018). Significant group shows include the Whitney Biennial: *Quiet as It's Kept* (2022); the Hammer Museum's biennial *Made in L.A. 2020: a version* (2021); the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (2019); The MAC, Belfast, Northern Ireland (2019); Tai Kwun, Hong Kong (2019); Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (2018); Swiss Institute, New York (2018); and the de Young Museum, San Francisco (2017), among others.

Her writing has appeared in publications including *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *e-flux*, *The New Inquiry*, *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly*, *Spike Quarterly*, *Kaleidoscope Magazine*, *Texte zur Kunst*, *CURA Magazine*, and *November*. Dean's work is in the collection of the De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art, Tilburg, Netherlands; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Event Programme

Aria Dean Artist Talk

*Friday 9 February 2024, 6.30 pm
Upper Gallery*

Aria Dean discusses her recent work and the thinking behind her current exhibition.

Site and Simulation curated by Aria Dean

*Saturday 9 March 2024, 4.30 pm
Cinema 1*

Programme of short films that explore the entanglement of sites and their simulations.

Introduction and Q&A following the screening with Aria Dean via video conference.

Additional events, including a live performance version of *Abattoir*, *U.S.A.!* and a panel discussion, tickets, and information on educational and youth

Tours available on the website:

www.ica.art

Support

Aria Dean: Abattoir is supported by The Elephant Trust and Greene Naftali, New York

Access

Please do not touch artworks, you can use the icons indicated in this visual story and in the sensory map for further references.

You need to purchase a ticket to the exhibition at the Box Office or online. At the front desk you will receive a sticker which validates your entry into the gallery.

Feel free to take photos of all artworks in this exhibition and share your experience by tagging *@icalondon*

No food or drink in this space.

The Lower Gallery is lit by overhead strip lights. The light levels in these spaces can also be dependent on the weather and time of day.

There is a smaller gallery room on the left-hand side of the Lower Gallery, there is also a small ramp into this space.

See our sensory map of the exhibition for more information.

Digital guide

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