

whitewall

Helidon Gjergji: Waves

By Katy Donoghue | June 12, 2009



Photo by Fedele Spadafora.

Helidon Gjergji's "Waves" up now at the Chelsea Art Museum (May 15-June 13) almost didn't happen. He was invited to do the installation just days before analog TV was scheduled to switch to digital. It wasn't that he was worried he wouldn't get to watch his favorite network sitcoms, it was that the main materials in his planned project were TVs and the analog signals they received. Like many of us in early 2009, Gjergji struggled with finding converter boxes and figuring out how many government rebates was he allotted? "I was kind of panicking," he told me, standing next to "Waves" at the museum. "Sellers are abusing it big time. Something that normally costs \$30 was \$120. I thought, *this is going to be a very expensive project now.*"

Luckily for Gjergji and the rest of us still using bunny ears, the switch to digital was postponed, but just until June. "Which is perfect because this installation is going to turn into white signal the last two days of the show. Which is something really interesting to record," he said. "Waves" is comprised of several small TVs suspended from the ceiling of a darkened, lower gallery. They form a descending diagonal line that ends in a pile of sand. A lonely TV lies in the bed of sand broken in pieces, no longer receiving a signal. At the beginning of the progression, the screens are tinted yellow, and change in color from orange to red. The channel changes sporadically and

antennas were certainly not adjusted for a clear picture. “TV is so manipulated already, so by the time I start working with it I try do as little as possible. I’m just framing it – minimal interventions,” he said. “I try to accentuate the aesthetics of the TV and ask why do we watch so much TV? What is so hypnotic?”

Gjergji was born in Albania and lived under communism growing up. There, TV was used for propaganda, an aesthetic blend of political and communist ideology. “So you have this propaganda art, it’s really beautiful but it was highly ideological and it has its goal,” Gjergji said. “Now we have the market aesthetic. It’s different but the relationship hasn’t changed, its form has.” Gjergji chose to change the tint of the screens with stained glass paint to emulate that progression of form.

He compares the sequence of TVs to a bullet or bomb’s flight. While Gjergji appreciates the beauty of produced programs, he recognizes the harm caused by seeing the world solely through a screen. As a kid in Albania, his idea of the west came from dubbed American and Italian shows. “You have this idea of the world that is mediated through TV,” he said. “You see soap operas where everything is beautiful and people have big homes and pools and life is great. There became a dream of the west made by this window.” When Albanians finally arrived in the West, Gjergji said, they were confronted with a very different picture.

“Waves” also addresses the evolution of TV as a presence of the few to a reflection of the self. With more and more channels targeted towards a select group of viewers one could argue that TV has become more democratized. But Gjergji warns me that with more channels, the use of the term “democracy” gets a bit tricky. Given the option of watching only your favorite programs, TV starts to become a mirror. There is no longer an outside presence. “At that point the content becomes even less important, because it’s nothing new to you and it’s predictable. And that’s why I call it ‘democracy’ but it’s a fake democracy,” said Gjergji.

And TV will become even more predictable with the switch to digital. The picture will become clearer, too similar to what we see in real life for Gjergji. “It’s going to be more real now than ever. All these painterly qualities of old TV are going to disappear,” he said. But that won’t keep him from working with his beloved medium. With his work, just like with “Waves,” it’s all about obscuring the original, highly produced medium and extracting its abstract, artful, and unpredictable qualities.

