



They Brutalized All is Sweet

Article, Aisha Azab



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Abstract

They Brutalized All That is Sweet is an attempt at exploring, deconstructing, and examining the interrelationship between the use of kitsch by totalitarian regimes and the aesthetic of erasure that is a byproduct of such mechanism. The work is simultaneously a mode of reflecting and mapping personal losses that I felt were heavily embodied in the city (Cairo). How the city is embodied by an aesthetic of erasure and displacement. It is an attempt at mapping loss, grief, intimacy, and belongingness through the city, my self, and kitsch.

The varying mediums used in the installation of the work aim to defy the workings of kitsch; hand-embroidery (requiring mental, physical labor, and time), stop motion animation using rice (usually displayed accompanying the sculptural work and embroidered piece), and the steel sculpture that holds the embroidery piece (creating direct contrast in the materiality between both).

Keywords: kitsch, loss, embroidery, mapping, aesthetic.

I, They. They, I. They.

Purple arabesque tiles, with Lilac flowers placed and planted over areas in which others were forcibly displaced from. ‘They’ put everything and nothing, to satisfy everyone and no one.

‘They’ have an aesthetic, an aesthetic of erasure, forced intimacy, and loss. I had begun sensing loss in the city, the kind of loss that is embodied in buildings,

structures, people, and all sorts of visuals. I recalled this aesthetic of erasure from a vivid dream that I had two years ago, where ‘They’ were demolishing familiar houses to forcibly place extracted varying cultural and historical elements to place them buildings and bridges. It was very difficult to tangibilize this sense of loss, or even put a label on it. Yet, it was easily identifiable in buildings and in myself. It was a moment of realization where I could materialize the concept of the personal is political, and the political is personal; my political losses are reflected through personal losses, and vice versa. This sense of loss had a vivid aesthetic, that after further reflection, came to be a mechanism adopted by totalitarian regimes; kitsch.

Kitsch + Sentimentality = Brutality = Kitsch + Sentimentality

The loss that I experienced was grief over the flattening and under-watering of ideas, spaces, individuals, and time. Histories being flattened, individuals’ lives being flattened, and cultures being flattened, decorated, sugarcoated, and orchestrated in a sense that will only feed the regime’s agenda. ‘They’ capitalize off looting; a byproduct of the functionality of kitsch. Where elements of cultural and historical significance are taken out of context and put on billboards on highways to create a sense of familiarity, intimacy, and identity; a ‘we’. A non-existent ‘we’; but, can intimacy and belongingness be imposed?

They Brutalized All That is Sweet is an attempt at mapping and deconstructing the mechanism of kitsch. The central piece of the installation is a map that is the result of spending four hours mapping time and memory. Through this map I have realized a common thread of ideas and concepts that have embodied other mediums (video, embroidery, and sculpture). There was a conscious choice in the mediums to create a sense of paradox. The installation invites the viewer to take time and space to ‘look’ at the different dimensions of the work. As an attempt to counteract the mechanism of kitsch, in which it does not allow the viewer to consciously engage, question, nor reflect on the content that they are looking at. The different paradoxes of the installation such as; the contrast in the materiality of the fabric and steel, and the intricacy of hand embroidery alongside the concept of kitsch, all aim to challenge the notion of ‘systematized sensations’ that totalitarian regimes aim to orchestrate through the use of kitsch.

About the Author

Aisha Azab is a multidisciplinary visual artist based in Cairo, Egypt. Her work varies in mediums including: hand embroidery, audio-visual pieces, and installations. Azab's recent work explores the mechanism of kitsch in relation to looting and loss.