



Noah Fischer: Rhetoric Machine - Elwyn Palmerton

March, 2007

Noah Fischer's "Rhetoric Machine" presents a whirlwind tour of American history since 1941: a ten-minute-long narrative installation in kinetic sculpture, lights and recorded sound. Snippets of pop songs, sound effects and recordings of speeches by every president from F.D.R. to Clinton accompany the sculpture's ten-minute sequence of light and animatronics. Some of the sculptural elements here include a small wooden presidential podium, a sculpture of a TV crudely fashioned out of plywood, which intermittently flashes Bush's image and red lights accompanied by air-raid sirens. The various wars and "military actions" that defined America's international role in the 20th century are announced by a rotating spotlight projecting moving shadow-silhouettes of war planes onto the wall. A separate back room features a giant robot and a hanging sculpture, which generates the kinesthetic visual equivalent of applause in projected light and shadow.

The presidential sound bites mostly evoke each president's role in the particular military conflicts through which they led the country. They also seemed calculated to evoke both the character of a president and the era of his administration—as well as to demonstrate how easily we attribute a whole personality, ideology and political agenda to a single sound bite. Still, it's interesting how quickly Roosevelt's talk of a "peaceful revolution" gives way to Eisenhower's forboding "new language of atomic warfare." Or how it suggests that Bush's Newspeak ("This war is about peace," not included here) may have had some roots in Clinton's rhetorical, "visionary" posturing: "We'll have a remarkable opportunity to shape a future more peaceful than the past—but only if we stand strong against the enemies of peace." These comments were made upon his announcement of air strikes on Iraq.

The use of pop songs also served to evoke particular eras or, rather, to evoke the use of those songs in popular films of those eras. It also provided a telling demonstration of the montage effect: how similar imagery, the shadow-silhouettes of war planes moving along the gallery wall, for example, feels—and almost seems to look different—depending on what song they are accompanied by, while remaining unchanged themselves. One of the best moments here was an emaciated, spectral eagle under a spotlight (more pathetic than proud) flapping its scraggly metal wings to Whitney Houston's I Will Always Love You.

Given the slick cheesiness of the song and the abject construction of the bird, it could have been simply incongruous, but it worked—as a hysterically fucked-up, pitch-perfect audio-visual metaphor for “America.” Still, it seemed at times as if Fischer leaned too heavily on the audio cues to create atmosphere and to carry his narrative. A few of the sculptures also seemed a little generic or unnecessary. The deliberately insouciant, ostensibly anti-aesthetic treatment of humble materials (wood, paper maché, wire, etc...), a trick derived from the visual language of conceptual art, is used effectively here but is starting to seem familiar, if not ubiquitous.

Equally dramatic is the giant 50s-style robot with a rotating, music box-like drum on its head and glaring white photo flood bulbs. Weird analog synthesizer drones sound as we hear Reagan relating a story about “a man that he met during the Cold War,” who had told him, “I would rather see my little girls die now; still believing in God, than have them grow up under Communism and one day die no longer believing in God.” Even compared with George W., this is a dumbfounding bit of speechifying—as impressive for its blatant pandering as it is for the audacity of the sentiment. Emanating from the luminescent belly of a clunky, cartoon-y, 50s-style robot with a music box-type cylinder rotating on its head, it’s evident that Fischer wants us to see this—the actor turned president, of course—as the apotheosis of what he calls the rhetoric machine.

Among all the pop songs, presidents and wars, the American people here are represented only as applause—suggesting a homogenously sycophantic entity. Accompanying this applause was a hanging diamond-shaped sculptural gizmo which generated a kinesthetic marvel: the crunchy white noise of applause in scattered chiaroscuro triangles cascading across the walls. Here, Fischer most effectively ties his audio track to his sculptural ingenuity—as his tendency elsewhere was to let the audio overshadow his sculptures. That this element is also among the most abstract in the show suggests that his narrative needs tweaking as well. Despite his critical stance, he still seems to rely too much on the familiar armature of conventional historical narratives (“great men,” wars and popular music). And, while “Rhetoric Machine” is undoubtedly an impressive sculptural achievement, he still might be leaving out one thing: people.