

LOOKING FOR ROVER

exhibition catalogue essay
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Entering the gallery space to view 'Looking for Rover', the spectator is confronted by a visual field of brown; but rest assured this is far from a 'beige' exhibition. Composed from textured fibres in rich earthy tones, from tawny brown to sepia, covering the walls are two major works - an imposing construction titled 'Rover' and a suite of individual artworks under the heading of 'St Francis'. Weaving his ropes with the dexterity and passion of a painter wielding his brush, artist Dani Marti creates sensuous textile based works that also operate as abstract sculptural reliefs.

Like oversized fabric swatches, he skilfully manipulates thick ropes composed of both natural and synthetic fibres, which are woven into rhythmic patterns. From a distance the viewer can admire the rough hewn tactility and geometric order of his minimalist constructions. However, on closer inspection the subtle complexities of his works begin to emerge. With his obsession driving his ambitions further and further, Marti's weavings have now expanded to inhabit and dominate their physical space like an immersive installation.

Perusing his panoramic wall installation 'Rover' feels like walking through a vast desert landscape. Constructed from twelve individual compositions, each is woven in copper coloured nylon ropes, the natural daylight playing on the synthetic fibres so that the undulating designs form sweeping patterns resembling the flow of water or the ripple of sand dunes. Marti sees the work as an homage to the late aboriginal artist Rover Thomas, attempting to evoke the artist's strong connection to the land. Each of the twelve works is individually numbered and available for sale, according to Marti, "so that people can buy a little piece of the masterwork, like buying a small section of the desert landscape or real estate". Woven within the opaque textiles are hints of colour - dusty pink, mauve and sienna gold - emerging like subtle facets of the aboriginal artist's persona.

The loose free flowing movement inherent in this installation is sharply contrasted with the tight patterns of his accompanying 'St Francis' series. Titled 'The Last Sins of St Francis/Scarring the Flesh', the artwork is divided into five elements or 'episodes'. Reflecting the russet colour of monastic robes, the natural fibres Marti uses also emulate the jute ropes worn by Franciscan monks. The artist has long been fascinated by the drapery of catholic saints, having studied the richly embellished fabrics in Old Master paintings. The seventeenth century Spanish devotional painter Zurbaran, who specialised in painting the brown cloth of monks, inspired this suite of works. The compressed and restrained weavings in 'St Francis' reflect Marti's ambivalent attitude to the Catholic Church, referring to its structured and rigid religious dogma. The series initially appears quite meditative with their calmly ordered patterns and natural fibres implying a kind of spiritual humility, yet up close the viewer can detect rusted barbed wire interwoven between the ropes. Suddenly the works take on a menacing ambience, with connotations of ritual scarification and sacrifice, masochism and martyrdom. Black rubber is also intertwined implying a fetishistic dimension.

Dani Marti sees both artworks as non-representational 'portraits' of two men of faith, symbolising two diverging forms of spirituality. Both works were inspired by the artist's fascination with different spiritual paths, the institutionalised and ritualistic Catholicism of his Spanish childhood and the pantheistic spirituality of aboriginal culture.

Marti's large fabric constructions therefore function on the surface as sensual contemplative abstractions, yet beneath his minimalist designs there are a multitude of messages for the viewer to decipher. The artist comments that: "At the same time I'm interested in the romantic notion of magnifying the fabric, to an almost molecular level, enabling people to fall into the fabric, walk into the fabric, allowing them to get close to the essence of the wearer. . . . On the one hand they are very quiet formal pieces, but on the other subliminally there is a human and emotional charge to them."

Accompanying his woven wall pieces, Marti has also created a collection of free-standing sculptures cast in bronze from clumps of household pot scourers. Titled 'Musitones' (Spanish for 'little mumblers'), the three works sit on plinths like strange rock formations in the desert, acting as small spiritually cognisant markers.

Both Rover Thomas and St Francis of Assisi were characters that inspired the artist in some form. Viewing Rover's majestic paintings and being 'blown away by them' was Marti's introduction to contemporary Aboriginal culture, after arriving in Australia from Barcelona in 1988. St Francis is representative of the catholic saints studied in his Spanish childhood. Perhaps ultimately Dani Marti's intricate abstract weavings act as a combined 'portrait' of the artist's own psyche. Caught between his native homeland in Spain and his adopted home in Australia, the work indirectly reveals Marti's own search for identity in a life formed straddling two cultures.

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