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Reviewing the Arts, Jour E-157

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Review 1

Infantry for a Damned Village

Fifty girls and fifty boys, each two feet tall and anatomically precise, appear suspended in mid-motion. Despite visible tension in their elbows, knees, hands, and even toes, they exhibit no id, expression, or deviation. Instead, they display social collectivism as they face in one direction, seemingly lost in symbiotic memory. And they're creepy. I hear Midwich is damned lovely this time of year.

South African sculptor Haidee Nel explores an interruption theme with *Infantry*, an ambitious sculptural expression of resilience and restrained hope. Her sculptures are visual metaphors for victims of police brutality, child soldiers, divorce bargaining fodder, and the kind of institutionalized deified defilements so piously denied by the church. Conceived for large glass-walled spaces where the African sun is sure to further waxen any color, the initial visual effect is haunting. *Infantry* represents the third installment in the artist's ongoing exploration around emotional defense mechanisms.

The one hundred sculptures forming Nel's installation share distinctive quasi-tribal design elements, unifying the collection. Producing separate interchangeable parts in concrete and marble, Nel applies anemic tinctures to specific sections, before adding embellishments and weaponry. She fits the sculptures with armor made from utensils and elaborate helmets fashioned from recycled paint tins, obscuring the blissed-out identical faces. Barefoot, some stand pigeon-toed while others

balance on their heels as if absorbing a shockwave. The girls are pageant-perfect in sculpted, pink dresses complete with ostentatious bows. Recycled paintbrushes are fashioned into statement mohawks with swishy ponytails. Blue-legged boys in *Hitlerjugend* rompers carry blue ballcock floaters as balloons. Some hold wind-up music boxes playing desolate plinky-plonk Bacharach hits like “The Look of Love.” These are no Build-A-Bear cuddly toys though, since the combination of stone and intricate metalwork convey cold alienation. It’s the stuff of children imagineering self-defense exoskeletons against school-yard bullies. The sculptures interrelate through interrupted, realistic stances. Juxtaposed with their mandatory muted silence, it creates brooding tension.

A product of the bellicose apartheid dogma, Nel belongs to a country transformed by a shift to democracy. In keeping with the opinion that art is partly reflective of an artist’s views, Nel modeled facets of the sculptures on herself. *Infantry* articulates a perspective on the white African experience during a time when concepts around appropriation and Africanness are reconsidered, discussed, and contextualized. As a result, the sculptures take commanding stances. They present the idealized robust shape typically favored by African artists, appearing zaftig as opposed to being the bug-eyed husks occasionally associated with victimhood.

Tom Stoppard writes how “we think a child’s purpose is to grow up . . . [but] a child’s purpose is to be a child.” Nel freezes the exact moment when childhood is deleted and replaced with coping mechanisms against fear and indoctrination. She instinctively understands how art codifies what words cannot. Lined up, the visual impact of the collective goads the viewer into reading the work as rudimentary war allegory. Opportunities for metaphoric interpretations however, are in high supply and the collection liberally accommodates nuanced opinion and textured impressions. *Infantry* prompts us to interrupt bigotry when it moralizes over pro-life propriety yet ignores children in concentration camps at the Mexican border. It urges the viewer to reject schoolmarmish “Won’t someone think of the children” shibboleths, while LGBTQ adoption rights are being dismantled.

Infantry encourages us to reach gnarly conclusions on societal disengagement. It subconsciously channels the 1960s *Village of the Damned* poster, “Beware the stare that will paralyze the will of the world,” while serving as a gentle reminder that votes have consequences.

Haidee Nel

Infantry 2019

The Gallery at St. James, 65 E. Huron St, Chicago