

frieze

Habitat (with World Food Books)

Minerva

Located on the first floor of a prominent Art Deco apartment block in the Sydney suburb of Potts Point, Minerva was established by gallery director Reg Lord in early 2014. It was conceived as a cross between a commercial enterprise and an artist-run-initiative, with represented artists having a substantial stake in the exhibition programme. So far, some fascinating exhibitions have been staged, mostly taking a material, rather than a contextual, bent. This was continued in 'Habitat (with World Food Books)', curated by Australian artists Matt Hinkley and Joshua Petherick, who presented their exhibition without a rationale, save for a short and obscure quote from William Gibson's 1986 science fiction novel *Count Zero*.

With works by 12 artists on display, at first the small gallery spaces appeared overcrowded; however, the more time spent with the exhibition the more its nuances were revealed. Given the high level of detail in each work – spanning sculpture, video, artist books and prints – the cluttered presentation invoked associations with Gibson's detailed narratives, in which the reader enters as a kind of tourist, forced to adapt to the author's dense language through total submersion. The most overt references to sci-fi came in the form of HR Giger's *Biomechnoiden* (1969) – a black and white screenprint in which a naked female's head morphs into an alien-like phallus – and Australian artist Lewis Fidock's *Esmerelda* (2014): a white porcelain doll with black high-heeled shoes wearing what looks like a plastic astronaut's helmet. Elsewhere, artificial representations of nature dominated, collectively creating an eerie, otherworldly vibe.

Veit Laurent Kurz's sculpture *Fettgrässli (Pleurozia)* (2013) did not so much command the space as lure viewers in. The work is a purposefully amateurish model of a castle in ruins, replete with fake moss and oversized plastic plants, on a purpose-built stand made from ornate curtain rods and hardware materials with their store labels left on. Its picturesque theme and emphasis on construction brought to mind the Pre-Raphaelites, whose critiques of labour were conveyed through idealized representations of the Middle Ages. The work, however, also seems to thwart such interpretations; it's at once laden with historical suggestion and yet deceptively elusive.

Giochi della Risacca (Games of the Undertow, 2014), by the

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'Habitat (with World Food Books)', 2014, exhibition view

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Italian artist Piero Gilardi – an enigmatic figure from the Arte Povera movement – also offered up a simulated environment, comprising a small section of realistically rendered rocks, bamboo and sea shells made from painted Styrofoam. The work belongs to what Gilardi calls his ‘nature carpets’, which he has been making on and off since the mid-1960s and, given current ecological concerns, it has a renewed relevance. In the past, viewers were encouraged to lie down or walk on top of Gilardi’s ‘carpets’, but here a small section of landscape was displayed on top of a white plinth – one of five that featured minimalist objects. *Untitled* (2014), by American artist Michael E. Smith, consists of two bent and dirty PVC pipes placed on the edge of a plinth, each with hand-carved slots where cut silver spoons have been inserted. Equally uncanny is Lupo Borgonovo’s *Maialito* (2014) – a painted rubber sculpture reminiscent of an archaeological casting of a bacteria-encrusted cave surface.

Video works by the Italian artist-turned-fashion-designer Cinzia Ruggeri, *Per un vestire organico* (Towards an Organic Way of Dressing, 1983), and the Italian product designers Anna Gili and Alessandro Mendini, *Nulla* (Nothing, 1984), added a 1980s-style nostalgia to the exhibition through their video production techniques and costumes, while also reminding viewers of the inventiveness and sheer ambition of Postmodern Italian design. Both works employ atmospheric, Andrei Tarkovsky-like soundtracks and visually resemble a hybrid of filmed theatre and gallery documentation, placing gorgeously crafted wall ornaments, lights and costumes at their centre.

In the foyer of the gallery, a display belonging to a Melbourne-based book service was an essential component of the exhibition. Founded in 2010 by Petherick, World Food Books specializes in hard-to-find artist publications, exhibition catalogues and monographs, operating online and occasionally as a pop-up store. Included here were reproduced drawings and photographs by Wols – the cult German artist associated with the mid-20th-century painting movement Tachisme, and whose oblique and abject photographs influenced artists such as Jeff Wall. The display strengthened the surreal undertones of this superb exhibition, with Hinkley and Petherick looking beyond historical and disciplinary divides to reveal the formal complexities at play in art that presents itself as a standalone world.

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