



Rokni Haerizadeh,  
'Royal Goldfish', 2014.  
Courtesy of the artist  
and Gallery Isabelle  
van den Eynde

**GALLERY ISABELLE VAN DEN EYNDE, DUBAI**

# THE EXQUISITE CORPSE...

Extended until May 20, Rokni & Ramin Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian's collaborative exhibition is a tour-de-force, writes Christopher Lord

In 1962, Leonardo da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' made a journey across the Atlantic, strapped to the bed of a luxurious cabin on an ocean liner, and arrived to jubilant crowds in New York harbour.

The painting was met by President JFK, who declared the arrival of Leonardo's Lisa a moment in America's ambitions of culture and patronage. Over the next seven weeks, more than a million Americans would file past the enigmatic eyes of Leonardo's middle class, possibly-Florentine woman.

Some years later, the critic Robert Hughes would reflect on the Mona Lisa's Atlantic passage as a watershed moment in the way we as the public would consume art. Speaking after the Lisa had crossed the pond, Hughes said that the visitors, '[D]idn't come to look at the Mona Lisa. They came in order to see it.' The painting, Hughes declared, had become its own facsimile by the sheer political weight and televised voyeurism that accompanied its arrival into the States.

It's hard not to think of that moment looking through *The Exquisite Corpse Shall Drink The New Wine*, a collaboration on an epic scale between Rokni and Ramin Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian, along with a multitude of their friends and fellow artists, at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde. It's hard not to think of Lisa because her face is everywhere in this exhibition.

Printed and reprinted, she's had, through cut-and-paste collage, two dental hooks prise apart that famous smile to reveal rotten teeth

beneath (a likely scenario in 16th Century Italy) or her forehead lopped off and replaced with that of Joseph Beuys – the *Fluxus* artist and patron saint of social art and symbolism who has cast a long, shadow over contemporary art ever since. Around these formal-splices are a multitude of collage works, stitched together household objects and small paintings that bear the discernible hand of all three of the artists.

*The Exquisite Corpse...* is a purposeful blurring of their three very divergent practices.

In January, the Haerizadehs and Rahmanian participated in a residency at the house of the late artist Robert Rauschenberg on Captiva Island, Florida. Designed to encourage the sort of Black Mountain College-community that stimulated Rauschenberg in his early years, the residency has clearly pushed the three artists to exhibit in an even more collaborative stance. In many of the works here, notably the *Nights of Captiva* series – a sequence of large works-on-paper that meld together painting, collage and photography against an explorative starry sky – all three artists have worked concurrently (The title of the show refers to a Surrealist collaborational experiment of draw-and-pass-it-on, initiated by André Breton).



(Above) Rokni & Ramin Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian, 'Days of Captiva', 2014. (Right) Installation view. Courtesy of Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde









Ramin Haerizadeh,  
'Emperor's New Dress',  
2014. Courtesy of  
the artist and Gallery  
Isabelle van den Eynde



Then there is the exhibition itself, a tour-de-force of moving paintings, handpainted floors, collage and calligraphy. It is both a ramble and an assault, mainly on the flat-faced minimalism of the ubiquitous white cube space – the lasting legacy of James McNeill Whistler who, some critics argue, sought to create a mode of looking that could alienate the viewer enough into believing that they were in the presence of the elite. There's none of that here. Like the 2012 exhibition *I Put It There You Name It*, which was a warped recreation of the house the artists share together in Dubai interspersed with original works and sought to invert the bare gallery model of pictures-on-the-wall, *The Exquisite Corpse...* is a total reinvention of the exhibition space. Three weeks of floor-painting, object-installing and domestic accumulation went into turning this once-white space into a patchwork of patterns and chattering debutantes that snake across the floor and between the works, creating a path through the exhibition.

So this show takes the spirit that charged their last collaborative exhibition and does something more with it.

The core of *The Exquisite Corpse Shall Drink The New Wine* is, both in content and form, about urging the viewer to look and not simply to see. Linger a while amid this *mise-en-scene*, spend time with the objects and view them collectively rather than in isolation; that is the message of its very busy fit-out.

There's plenty of work to go at here. But highlights include Rahmanian's ink-and-Polaroid concoctions in which a disquietingly alien-like head enshrines a single photograph of a pair of churning



(Below) Rokni & Ramin Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmanian and Iman Raad, 'Joyous Treatise', 2011-14. Courtesy of the artists and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

lips, *The Joyous Treatise* (a collaborative series featuring calligraphy by Iman Raad) and *Tourists*, three shelves of imitation antique jugs that have been daubed up to resemble grotesque caricatures of their potential purchasers – a bearded man in a fisherman's beanie with 'I Heart Morocco' on his chest, a wild-eyed lobster-ish woman in a bikini.

The thrust of the show culminates where it begins with the extended series of work that Rokni Haerizadeh has produced about the spectacle of the British Royal Family – particularly the 2011 Royal Wedding. Haerizadeh took photographs from the television coverage of the wedding and, using paint and gesso, reveals unnerving, demonic and absurd shapes submerged in the images. He subverts the smiling onlookers into a cast of grim-faced clowns, headless suits and human-animal hybrids to create a 'moving painting' video work composed of thousands of individually handpainted frames. 'Reign of Winter' (2012-3) was exhibited to acclaim in the *Carnegie International* in Pittsburgh last year.

But the satire here is not of the turgid world of the British monarchy – its archaic pageantry is so subsumed in paint that this is almost a sidenote in the flurry. Instead, the work is aimed squarely at the viewer themselves and, by extension, the some two billion who allegedly tuned in to watch the carnival.

In this work, as the show as a whole provokes, there is a call-to-arms about guarding oneself from being carried along in a spectacle. Like the new 'Royal Goldfish' (2014), which subverts the photograph of Prince George's Christening into a sombre scene of clandestine mysticism and illusory power, the point remains that we live in an increasingly voyeuristic world, staring into a goldfish bowl but not examining the framework – or urge – that makes us watch. What strange remnants of a feudal Old World do people search for in their fascination with Monarchy, the works ask, and what does it say about a world that considers itself so liberal, so free? What remains here is an incitement to look, look, and keep looking; to not be carried along in a swell of seeing. And that is all said with the three artists' characteristic humour and sense of theatre.

Until May 20. [ivde.net](http://ivde.net)