



Hannah Black's 'Soc or Barb' Traps the Proletariat on an Endless Loop

BY JENNIFER KRASINSKI

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“The world is a ruin, but we go on living in it,” wrote British-born, Berlin-based artist/writer Hannah Black as the punctuating thought to a bracing Artforum review of last year’s 9th Berlin Biennale. Although she graduated with an MFA in experimental writing from Goldsmiths London in 2013 (and completed the Whitney ISP program in 2014), Black has already made a name for herself in no small part because of the clear eye she keeps on the world’s ruins. In this reviewer’s opinion, *Dark Pool Party*, a collection of her writings, was one of the most invigorating reads of 2016.

Both her visual art and her texts have dealt in bodies — some celebrated, others degraded — in blackness, in capital and commodities, and in the ways in which these all knot together in the present tense. Her latest exhibition, “Soc or Barb,” is at once an eerie and goofy visual parable of sorts, possessed of an astute if uncomfortable ambivalence regarding the idea of change, of a “new dawn.” The installation features an oddball gang of barbarians: a group of clay figures round about a foot tall, alien-looking and a little lumpy, many of which wear bright white T-shirts decorated with infinity signs. They’re forged in different shapes and colors — black, adobe, olive-gray — but are all of a piece. As the artist explains in her statement: “They know a dawn is not an interruption but a moment in a cycle; freshness is a sensory and not a moral question.” Beneath the gallery window the artist places a wake-up light that blinks the time: 00:00. In other words, these lumpen little creatures are resignedly, perhaps even proudly, caught in an endless loop.

Three flat-screen televisions hang on the walls surrounding them, all playing the same video: an unremarkable sky changing color at dawn intercut with an animation of a fiery orb flying across the screen. (The sky, in Black’s own words, is an “animation based on found footage.”) The video plays at staggered intervals so that the orb moves from screen to screen, circling the barbarians. The harbinger of doom will be followed by the dawn, which will be followed by doom again. Piped into the gallery is a dizzying sound collage of various found or recorded clips: Fred Moten delivering his lecture “Blackness and Nonperformance”; a reading of Octavia Butler’s “Parable of the Sower”; Céline Dion performing her sappy anthem “A New Day Has Come”; conversations with the artist Tiona McClodden and with the social historian and cultural critic Hannah Proctor; birdsong; and other aural bites Black pieces together to create a fractured essay on race, blackness, fascism, revolution, nature. The audio track, sometimes sharp and clear, at other times garbled, unintelligible, plays on a loop too.

“Soc or Barb” takes its title from “Socialism or Barbarism,” which the Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg put forward during World War I as the two possible fates facing humanity. “This world war is a regression into barbarism,” she declared in “The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis of German Social Democracy,” her searing, exhilarating 1915 anti-war tract. “The triumph of imperialism leads to the annihilation of civilization.” (Luxemburg was arrested and executed for her activism and insurgent views by the German Freikorps in 1919.)

Black razes this historical opposition of civilization and barbarism, positing them as a kind of shorthand for what are in fact simultaneous, prerequisite conditions of contemporary capitalist societies. After all, civility and savagery have traditionally been defined by those in power, and those in power have traditionally hoisted themselves via systematic, and systemic, oppressions: slavery, colonialism, brutality, terror, and all other toxic, violent, fatal modes enacted on bodies, on minds — most horrifically on black bodies, on black minds. Yet if these conditions cannot be neatly parsed from one another, how to imagine a radical act? What will define and gauge the “evolution” of society?

Part of the particular success of Black’s show is that she avoids stitching all of this up neatly, preferring, it seems, to reveal the complex productions of a kind of dumbness — dumb meaning stupid but also to be rendered mute. For all the wisdom and insight one might catch coming through speakers, the artist often blunts the points, stripping words of context, sometimes cutting away from a clip in mid-sentence, mid-thought, obfuscating a certain kind of clarity, of sense. And amid this clamor sit the barbarians — unmoved, unmoving — just passing the time, over and over and over again.

Hannah Black: ‘Soc or Barb’

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