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Basil AlZeri

A Facade of Flesh, A Spirit of Skin

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The image in Figure 1 shows the histories of erosion and weathering marked across dated rocks, and flora thriving within its cracks. Photographed at The Grotto, a blue water cave in the Bruce Peninsula National Park in Ontario, this scene is brought together with AlZeri's installation to further investigate the relationship between life and death. This tourist attraction park is marketed for various activities that allowing for people of all ages to explore and experience the land. In the background of its scenic Bruce Trail towards the Grotto, traces of human interaction imprint the terrain of trees and rocky cliffs. The visual landmark of this region is layered by its history as the traditional territory of the Saugeen Ojibway First Nations and its present use for outdoor adventures for the general public. While the rules and regulations of the park provide some actions for sustainability, such as regulating the income of people per hour through parking limitations, the Bruce Peninsula National Park exists in tandem with a culture commodifying its land to serving human interests.

Amongst the bustle of crowds and adventure seekers moving towards The Grotto, interstitial spaces such as the crevices in rocks where fauna seeps through illustrates the prosperity of the land. These small and discrete areas for life to grow and prevail capture an image of safekeeping. This scene demonstrates an unexpected condition of living that has taken root separate from human control. It signals new hope for survival and imagines a positive persistence against destructive conditions.

In a conversation with the artist Basil AlZeri, we questioned spaces of in-between, and how survival is compromised as an act of resistance against oppressive systems. Under these circumstances, the trajectory for life and death takes new forms. AlZeri take interest in how marginalized spaces allow for new growth, specifically contemplating for instance, how a flower grows in between the cracks of cement. ¹ As a continuum of this thought and exchange with the artist, the image in Figure 1 grounds this query on how to live well despite pressure and violence.

The Xpace Cultural Centre window space presents Basil AlZeri's installation, *A Facade of Flesh, A Spirit of Skin*. Viewed from street level of the gallery, its most prominent feature is a curtain spanning across the vitrine. It seamlessly dangles in the air and shows a gradual blend of beige and brown hues.

¹ Basil AlZeri in conversation with the author, April 2019

As the fabric masks the space, there is, however, a quiet lift of the drapery that introduces a small opening for one to look inside. This inviting gesture unfolds the mystery behind the curtain: a collection of ripped textiles, contorted blobs of newspapers crumbling and held together with produce wrapping, and fragments of a concrete pot. Each of the materials appear to ooze and drip in their place. How they came to being left into fragments is unknown, whereas some of these objects insist to take a new semblance. *A Facade of Flesh, A Spirit of Skin* marks a point of contemplation on concealment and presents some first thoughts on how the dichotomy between life and death can be a fine surface.

Curtains, as used in theatre productions and stage-like settings, draw a line of separation between the audience and the stage. Where on one side of this installation, viewers confront order and familiarity, the small opening of the curtain reveals the falsity in maintaining that disposition. AlZeri brings together these material objects as representations of past and concealed lives. The use of newspapers and bed sheets represents a multiplicity of narratives, and most of which are unclear and deteriorating. News headlines are faded from the paper, and the stories embedded within the textiles are torn apart indicating a lack of care in these histories. These domestic and familiar objects are left in the background to be hidden behind the façade of the curtain.

In comparison to *A Façade of Flesh, A Spirit of Skins*, the photograph in Figure 1 takes a look at a positive happenstance of life within marginalized spaces. However, it further underscores the realities of place making. The flora growing out of the rocks by The Grotto are tucked in secret and away from the frequently used pathway. In the installation, AlZeri zooms in on the spaces that oppose sustainability by using materials to contemplate what is kept from public knowledge or sight and how these concealed narratives inhabit space. His work orchestrates a division using a curtain to expose and simultaneously hide broken objects. Both the photograph and installation present ideas on wellbeing and the autonomy to exist. AlZeri's inquiry on in-between spaces unravels between *A Façade of Flesh, A Spirit of Skins* and Figure 1. The nuances of navigating how to live and living against unseemly conditions becomes an act with complex, imaginative, and leading decisions.

- Erica Cristobal



Figure 1. Erica Cristobal, *Where Flowers Grow*, 2018.