



Rushing In Slow Motion: Sierra Leone Comes To Museum In Docklands

Review By Kate Smith

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Kate Smith walks the virtual streets of Sierra Leone, via an art installation combining contemporary art with social commentary and history at the Museum in Docklands until November 1 2007.

The new exhibition at the Museum in Docklands is billed as a multi-sensory experience. It is simple in set up: three large screens show a busy city street in Freetown, Sierra Leone, with a 'talk radio' voice over. But one artificial element makes this compulsive watching.

The video opens upon a curious stillness. A camera moves down the African city street during rush hour, but something is amiss. Whilst a radio crackles with music, jingles, news and debate, everyone here is rooted to the spot, caught in mid-stride, mid-gesture. We are looking at a snapshot moment from everyday life.

But this is no simple photograph. With a voyeur's license we travel around the frozen urban scene, wandering amidst a population caught in stasis.



Then, suddenly, an unexpected blink disrupts this petrified landscape. An involuntary glance meets our eyes and turns hastily away. An arm moves slightly. Small movements betray life within this unmoving terrain.

The people of Freetown are not the still subjects of a photographic record, but subjects standing still for a carefully choreographed freeze frame performance.

The video gives what no conventional travel dialogue, or news report could bring. We see minute details of everyday life - the juxtaposition of a sharp suited businessman holding a state of the art laptop; rundown shops with chatting groups frozen on the street; a family bunched into a car, the city's fashion choices, the even, appraising glance of 150 people.



The radio phone in soundtrack gives a feel for where Sierra Leone is at today. It was appropriated in 1787 as a safe haven for Africans liberated from slavery, but many of its first residents were brought reluctantly from Britain and subsequently died. Hence the idea of reparations for slavery are hotly debated, the dialogue moving between English and Krio.

The country is both the world's greatest exporter of diamonds, and the second poorest in the world. War, which so often afflicts countries rich in resources, came in 1991 and lasted a decade, killing anywhere between 50,000 - 200,000.

Which makes all the more striking the energy and vibrancy - even in stillness - of these Freetown commuters, and the art piece intervention impels us to imagine ourselves too as inhabitants of that city. This looks like a hopeful place.

photo shows people standing in street



The film was made by David Matthew, a London-born journalist, and Paul Howard, a visual artist.

Whilst in the city, they took samples of posters from across the capital. These are displayed to the side of the screen, many for local family drama films, or for religion or business: "Sierra Leone's Hottest new movie Street Life" "The Return from Europe" "My family is covered with the blood of Jesus" "Africell Scratch And Win".

With democratic elections coming up on August 11th, a magazine also asks "Election 2007 - how safe are we?"

This immersive, nuanced experience stays with you for far longer than any conventional exhibition could. It is great to see so many threads of history brought together in this simple, imaginative way.

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