

Karim Zouak: U-NI-TS

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Of Jelly Donuts and Dziga Vertov

The girl sticks her fingers deep into the heart of the jelly donut, and comes up with a bit of what passes for strawberry jam these days. She applies this deviant's lipstick, and appraises her icing sugared complexion. In this scene (from *Nahrung, Symphonie von Grober Bedeutung*, 2004) one gains an understanding of Karim Zouak's practice that can stretch far enough to wrap around a rapidly emerging collection of distinct but unified film and video works. A humourous absurdity is everywhere in these pieces, but above that, floating comfortably around the engaged viewer, are Zouak's concerns for the form of film itself, and his reverence for structure and ideology, in a world where there is less and less concern for such stuff.

In *U-NI-TS*, Zouak is soft-shoeing his way from exploratory documentary, and a body of work largely exhibited in rooms that come with seats, to the space of the gallery, where his film installation, reconfigured but not reconstituted, can experience a freedom that popcorn-passive viewing does not allow for. Despite conventional representation (the pieces preside, like paintings might, framed on the gallery wall) the work is constantly changing, a series of loops that wend their way into an occasional narrative, only to get broken down again, to their smallest particles.

Zouak's preoccupation with Dziga Vertov's concern for 'breaking down perception to its most basic units,' informs everything he produces, and to produce a resounding value judgement, this is probably a good thing. Watching *Death to all Film*, (2002), or *Nahrung, Symphonie von Grober Bedeutung*, the subjects may be disparate, but the fundamental concern for the shape of film, and for the viewer's awareness of that structure, is not at all dissimilar.

Zouak's work is neatly paralleled by a recurring visual trick in Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories*. The director's Manhattan apartment is a sparsely furnished affair, where everything would be black and white even if the film were not. The dining room acts as a gallery of sorts, with an array of photos taking turns playing wallpaper for each scene. In one scene, Eddie Adams' famous 1968 photo of a Vietcong being shot covers the entirety of the dining room, while Woody wryly complains to his producers, 'I don't want to be funny anymore.' A few scenes later the Vietcong is gone, and the backdrop is a Ma Bros' still. Thus the stills are constant reminders that one is watching a film, and that photographs are but frames, frozen and thrown up against walls for higher scrutiny.

And so it goes with *U-NI-TS*. We are watching a film, but the film is breaking down, and, in doing so, forcing us to embrace its component parts, to examine them like we would a permanent collection painting frozen on the gallery wall in perpetuity. As for the 'fish flops,' the perishable shoes that close out Zouak's meditation on food and its uses (*Nahrung, Symphonie von Grober Bedeutung*), well, it's hard to say how much closer an examination those can bear.

In *U-NI-TS*, we're granted a chance to explore. The genre film, and all its formulaic cliché, gets ripped apart, broken down like a diagrammed lesson at the Learning Annex. Vertov called the handful of Soviet Weekly newsreels he directed in the early part of his career *Kino-Pravda*, *Pravda* being the Russian word for 'truth.' In his own way, Zouak too, is trying to shine a little *Pravda* on the artifice of film.

KARIM ZOUAK was born and raised in Montreal. He holds a degree in Fine Art from the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver. He has spent much of the last decade studying art and media in Montreal, Toronto and Paris, and currently works primarily in video, film, installation and painting.

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