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ART REVIEW | OMER FAST

Is It Reality or Fantasy? The Boundaries Are Blurred

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#)

Omer Fast, who has a powerful, discomfiting solo show at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#), and another opening at Postmasters gallery in Chelsea on Saturday, was born in Jerusalem in 1972 and now lives in Berlin. But he studied art in New York City, and anyone who saw his graduate project in the 2000 [Hunter College](#) M.F.A. exhibition will remember it.

The piece was a two-channel video installation called "Breakin' In a New Partner." One monitor ran clips from the 1987 film "Lethal Weapon," a buddy-cop hit that sweetened violence and racism with comic patter delivered by the interracial duo of [Mel Gibson](#) and [Danny Glover](#). On the second monitor, Mr. Fast himself appeared, mimicking, with pitch-perfect accuracy, not only the film's dialogue but also its audio effects, from fists slamming into flesh to sirens wailing and guns going off.

The result, a soundtrack for American machismo performed by an owlish artist-geek, was weirdly concentrated and hilarious. The basic ingredients in all of Mr. Fast's subsequent work were there: the blurring of realism and fantasy; the combining of special effects and conventional forms; the simultaneous projection and rejection of specific political content. From the start, he was a one-man band: filming, editing, directing, performing, writing and shrewdly borrowing.

In his 2003 video "Spielberg's List," he composed a sinister, absurdist and unorthodox view of the Holocaust by interviewing Poles who had worked as extras in [Steven Spielberg's](#) 1993 film "Schindler's List." Some were alive during World War II, when Jews were being exterminated; others were not. The video suggested that, whatever their experience, many of them conflated the Hollywood version of the Holocaust with historical reality, a confusion reflected in Mr. Fast's changes to the video's subtitles to create subtle discrepancies between what interviewees say and the translation we read.

He took this mash-up approach to truth and fiction a step further in "Godville" (2005), for which he focused on three actors — two white, one black — who worked as costumed re-enactors at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. He interviewed them both as their 18th-century characters and as their 21st-century selves, then cut and pasted their words to create an entirely new script.

A reference to the Revolutionary War segues into a mention of Sept. 11; a condemnation by the black actor, speaking in his historical persona, of early American racism extends to modern institutions like living-history museums. At one point one of the actors turns on Mr. Fast, accusing him of distorting his words to his own ideological ends, but the actor's attack is itself an editorial fabrication.

Mr. Fast's practice of simultaneously capturing and undercutting reality took ambitious form in the 2007 four-channel video piece "Casting." In it a United States soldier describes two traumatic events: his one-night fling with a German woman prone to suicidal behavior, and his accidental killing of an Iraqi civilian. The episodes are illustrated by tableau-vivant video images, with actors frozen in dramatic poses but quivering ever so slightly from the effort. So, as usual, we are pulled between overlapping versions of

reality, live and faked, with neither predominating. If a war — a real war — is also a stage set, how deeply can we respond to it?

The piece won for Mr. Fast the 2008 Whitney Biennial's Bucksbaum Award, which came with \$100,000 and the promise of a one-person show, the one now on view. Organized by Tina Kukielski, a senior curatorial assistant, and installed in the lobby gallery, it's a three-part video installation called "Nostalgia," with each part in a dark space of its own. Topical elements from past work — race, war, violence — are in play. But so is a developed sense of the enwrapping potential of cinema, and a new appreciation for the art of building a certain kind of narrative tension: dread.

The main theme is the plight of the refugee seeking asylum. The central image is of a trap, set for animals but also lethal to humans. The physical making of a trap from natural elements — bent branches and twine — is described by voice-over in the first video, spoken by a young Nigerian man, a former child soldier, now anxious to leave his country.

In the second video we see the Nigerian, now in London, being interviewed by a white filmmaker who is considering using him in a project about Africa. The exchange is tense. The filmmaker asks him to describe his past life but when, after resisting, the man mentions trapping and eating monkeys, his interviewer is appalled. The meeting ends; the Nigerian won't be hired. His asylum status is in jeopardy.

In the third, longest and most grueling part of "Nostalgia," the racial tables are turned. Three white English people, two men and a woman, are trying to escape what we assume to be some form of persecution and are illegally entering an unnamed African country, a wealthy democracy that has shut its borders to Western immigrants.

The three break into a tunnel, where they are hunted and cornered by African border police. In one scene the woman is attacked by police dogs, then clubbed. Just as the soldiers are about to set her on fire, the scene cuts to a government office. There, one of the male refugees is being grilled by a government official, a black woman, who is trying, with a promise of amnesty, to trap him into revealing locations of other tunnels. Whether he accepts her offer, we don't know, for at this point the film loops back to the beginning.

In "Nostalgia" Mr. Fast puts aside his early shuffling of documentary and fictional styles and goes, especially in Part 3, for an organic flow. The plot is still fairly opaque, but its inscrutability is moving: a man weeps inconsolably for a dead child, though we don't know why the child died; when the woman is clubbed in the tunnel, she vomits a fountain of tropical flowers, an image of mystical tenderness rare for this almost fanatically unromantic artist.

You won't find such images in the video pieces at Postmasters, though both are completely absorbing. The earlier piece, "De Grote Boodschap (The Big Message)" (2007), shares the narrative fluidity of "Nostalgia" as it follows the intertwined paths of six characters: an elderly, drug-addled woman and her black caretaker, who is also the lover of the woman's grandson; the couple in the neighboring apartment, a flight attendant and her husband; and a silent Middle Easterner who rents the old woman's apartment after her death.

As in "Nostalgia," Mr. Fast creates specific personalities and gives them stories: the old woman lives on memories of surviving World War II, and of her father saving the family fortune — a handful of diamonds — by swallowing it. Each character has flaws. The grandson cares most about the old woman once she is gone, making her apartment rentable. The couple next door, listening through the wall, think they hear someone speaking Arabic and want to call the police. The film is one of the most settled down Mr. Fast has made. It bodes well for the feature-length films that are surely in his future.

The other Postmasters piece, “Take a Deep Breath” (2008), with its combination of shock and sitcom humor, couldn’t be more different. Based on a real episode, it opens in a Jerusalem falafel shop shattered by a suicide bomb attack. A medic arrives on the scene and finds a man still alive in the ruins but horribly maimed, with both legs and an arm blown off. The medic applies mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but the man dies. Later the medic learns that the person he tried to save was the bomber.

The vignette has the makings of a moral fable, but Mr. Fast will have none of that. Halfway through the mouth-to-mouth scene, members of the film crew start razzing the actor playing the bomber. They decide he’s no good, has to be replaced, and so he is, by an actor who starts hitting on one of the film’s extras. Other complications arise. The police arrive — the video is being shot in Los Angeles — demanding to see the film’s director, played by Mr. Fast, and a film permit, and now we’re in comedy country.

And then, suddenly, we’re back in the falafel shop, with a wrecked body and the breath-exchanging kiss that bridges, unknowingly, chasms of ethnic and religious hatred. If Mr. Fast requires irreverent comedy and special effects to arrive at that image, fine. He can do what he wants. He’s amazingly good, and getting better.

“Omer Fast: Nostalgia” remains through Feb. 14 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; (212) 570-7721, whitney.org. “Take a Deep Breath” and “De Grote Booschap” open on Saturday and remain through Feb. 13 at Postmasters, 459 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 727-3323, postmastersart.com.

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