

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

### José Maçãs de Carvalho: *Archive and Democracy*

MAAT (MUSEUM ART ARCHITECTURE TECHNOLOGY)  
LISBON, PORTUGAL  
FEBRUARY 8–APRIL 24, 2017

*José Maçãs de Carvalho: Archive and Democracy* juxtaposes four photographic and three videographic works by José Maçãs de Carvalho in Lisbon's recently renovated Central Tejo Power Station complex, which houses MAAT (Museum Art Architecture Technology). Curated by Ana Rito, *Archive and Democracy* is a richly layered contemplation of private lives existing in public spaces, specifically Philippine workers living in Hong Kong. As the title suggests, Maçãs de Carvalho memorializes facts of being while considering public space ownership and the nature of freedom and equality. He seems to apply the second wave feminist theory that "the personal is political" to cultural identity theory.

The videos read as tableaux where figures come and go across the screen, stopping briefly in front of the lens to enact rituals that take place during the one day a week when domestic workers are afforded a day off. Glimpsed through rituals of rest, self-care, conviviality, or shopping, the mundane plays out in broad daylight, by ghostly, almost disembodied, figures who seem unaware of Maçãs de Carvalho's camera.

In the single-channel video *Archive and Democracy HSBC* (2017), the horizontal layering of the foreground, middle ground, and background presents a conveyor belt of people along a skyscraper-lined street. The chaotic streets presented by Maçãs de Carvalho serve as the repository, the archive, for the quiet melancholy and realities of the intimate experiences of immigrants suspended between two worlds—Hong Kong and the Philippines.

As the viewer watches the people parading from left to right and right to left, rarely moving toward or retreating from the camera, an acoustic version of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* is the only sound. The scene is punctuated by a male figure ominously and laboriously pulling a crowd control barricade on wheels across the picture plane. Next, an evangelical music group (as noted in the exhibition's didactic text accompanying the work) appears in the video on stage left like a Greek chorus. Momentarily, the fourth wall breaks as the evangelists glance and acknowledge the camera. In the background, figures sit with their backs to the viewer and the evangelists, as if waiting for something to happen. Will something happen? The viewer never finds out. The effect is as if Wong Kar-wai's film *Chungking Express* (1994) was brilliantly melded with the morality paintings of William Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* (1734) or the paintings of Flemish Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

A dual-channel video, *Archive and Democracy* (2017) plays in an adjacent space within the gallery. In both videos, figures walk in and out of the camera frame, sometimes stopping to sit among statues of lions or talking on phones in front of storefronts and advertisements of excess and wealth such as Burberry and Tiffany's. The characters' focus is elsewhere and distant as each ignores the ads and their surroundings. Their bodies are in the place Hong Kong, but their thoughts and emotional presence are elsewhere, presumably in the Philippines. A tension exists between interior and exterior realities.

The exhibition's photographs further explore the concept of place as connected to experience and psychological disembodiment. The

images read as movie stills, snippets of the isolated, nomadic world of immigrant workers. They are not tourists enjoying the scenery or capturing the glory of sightseeing acquisitively; they are there to work, seeking opportunity and perhaps freedom.



Still from *Archive and Democracy* (2017) by José Maçãs de Carvalho; © 2017 José Maçãs de Carvalho; courtesy Fundação EDP

There is a sense of romantic longing present in the decidedly desolate Caspar David Friedrich-esque landscapes that Maçãs de Carvalho presents. The photograph *Untitled (Terminal)* (2017) depicts a lone figure silhouetted from behind with one arm up, as if waving or signaling farewell in a foggy seascape. It is purposefully and distinctly not picture-postcard beautiful.

In the photograph *Untitled (Ferry)* (2017), a figure whose gender is ambiguous sits quietly in an empty enclosure looking stoically straight ahead while the city looms in the distance. The person's countenance exudes quiet determination. While physically in the picture, the person stares blankly toward something outside the picture frame and is, perhaps, mentally imagining someplace else. The image begs the metaphysical questions, "Where are we?," "Where are we physically present?," and "Where are we mentally present?" One can take the concept further. Is freedom physical or intellectual or both? The subject of the photograph wonders, as does the viewer.

The works in *Archive and Democracy* are philosophical, even moral tales, but they are also poetic or "image-sentences" as described in the accompanying text for the photograph *Untitled (HK #10)* (2017). This image is described as having its mirror in *Untitled (HK #11)* (2017) and evocatively delves into a phenomenological exploration. The image depicts a lone figure standing on an empty observation deck or platform gazing out onto the sea. Maçãs de Carvalho urges the viewer to think and consider what it means to exist in a space that is unfamiliar, without grounding or history. The works pose the question, "Can we be present in space without nostalgia and experience?"

Ultimately, Maçãs de Carvalho's work successfully provides an archive to explore democracy. What does it mean and how does it feel to be an immigrant? He makes the unseen, seen.

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