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Q&A: Exhibiting at SCAD, Laurent Grasso subverts perception, makes the unseen visible

Laurent Grasso, the French conceptual artist, is known for complex multimedia works that lie just beyond the realm of ordinary experience, blurring the line between past and present, the real and the paranormal, the seen and the unseen.



Laurent Grasso (Photo by Jennifer Westjohn)

"On Air", an enigmatic video installation at SCAD Atlanta featuring neon, sculpture and painting, embodies his uncanny reframing of modes of art history, cinema, science and technology to subvert the notion that seeing is believing. (Presented in conjunction with France-Atlanta 2013, the exhibition will remain through January 3.)

The video, also titled "On Air," raises questions about control and surveillance. It features a falcon strapped with a miniature camera as it soars over the desert landscape of the United Arab Emirates. Eerily parallel to a military drone, the viewer simultaneously becomes the hunter and the hunted, as the camera shifts from birds-eye-view to ground view.

As Grasso has said, "The work included in 'On Air' deals with the contemporary desire to monitor, code and track everything through ever-evolving technology in order to create a sense of control over an increasingly complex reality."

ArtsATL spoke with Grasso during his recent Atlanta visit.

ArtsATL: *Your work often plays with what looks true but isn't, or what doesn't seem real but actually is. In what way is the act of "looking" or "seeing" as a means of understanding significant in your work?*

LG: One of my last exhibitions was titled "Uraniborg", and it was really about this idea of observation and surveillance, and in a way, it was connected to the idea of the Panopticon—this idea ... [that] through the architecture you could give the impression to the prisoner that he was under surveillance.

In many different projects, this idea was one of the starting points... In the exhibition at SCAD, you can see a sphere. It's a geodesic sphere. It's one invention of Buckminster Fuller. What I tried to [create] was a situation where the viewer is in front of an object and the status of the object is not clear, or this object

seems to be something, but [in fact] another thing. So, here we have a good example... this architecture is really well known, especially in the contemporary art world.... but not a lot of people know that this architecture has been used in military program of surveillance. So here, there is an interesting point—a very sophisticated object with strong aesthetic potential, but ... the architecture is used for a very different purpose.

ArtsATL: *How does the history of painting factor into your work? In your exhibition at the Bass Museum in 2011 where you combined your own off-kilter Renaissance-style drawings and paintings into the museum's collection of Renaissance works; your SCAD exhibition includes what appears to be a traditional Persian miniature painting. You often reference your own artwork in such pseudo-historical paintings, placing yourself in a kind of false history.*

LG: Actually, as I mentioned before, what I like to use are real objects. In a way it's like I try to manipulate some part of the reality and integrate something that we don't expect inside and through a little shift... to leave the feeling of something strange.

So, you know, when you see those paintings, they seem very strange, because first of all, we are [not] used to seeing a 16th-century painting in a contemporary gallery... But also, when you start to observe [the] content, you can start to see something wrong or a bit exaggerated inside. But my intention is really to create an object from the past...like a real painting that you could loan to a museum....

ArtsATL: *Do you make the paintings yourself?*

LG: I make first the composition...but those paintings are really a kind of scientific project. I have involved people...able to restore historical artwork...so everything step by step is done to give the feeling of the real technique used.



Laurent Grasso: "On Air" (still), 2009. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery and Galerie Valentin. © Laurent Grasso / ADAGP, Paris, 2013

ArtsATL: *Of your visual lexicon, you use neon the most regularly. It's the most contemporary material and seems to stand so much apart from your historical references. Can you speak to the Arabic neon wall text included in your SCAD show?*

LG: In English, actually the title is “the wider the vision, the narrower the statement”. It’s a Sufi statement. And like the film [“On Air”]... this work was created for the Sharjah Biennial 2009. The first time it was shown, it was in a long corridor...30 meters long. So very often I try to show neon in a situation linked with the content of what you can read. My assistant told me that the name for this is metalogue. I think it’s an interesting notion when you have a kind of coincidence.

ArtsATL: *What are you working on currently?*

LG: Actually, I’m here to maybe do some research in Savannah. I was interested to investigate a bit [the] existence of belief about ghosts there and other mythology. I think it’s very interesting that in the South, those beliefs are stronger. It’s really the beginning of the project. I mostly work with intuition, because I don’t really know the context in Savannah. But I have the intuition that something could be interesting for my work.

What I also like in the United States is this capacity to view history that doesn’t exist [here]. The Bass Museum, for example...the Isabel Gardner Museum in Boston...it looks like a palazzo in Venice. I like this idea because in a way it’s what I’m trying to do...In New York, for example, the Cloisters [and] the Frick collection... are really trying to give this feeling of something historical. The Bass Museum was really interesting in that sense...It was funny for me [that] I was invited to do something really important, to play with the Renaissance collection and do a complete installation. It was great to have this opportunity, but it was really funny that this opportunity was in Miami in South Beach. There is a kind of paradox.