

MARIO PFEIFER

Mario Pfeifer
KOW Berlin
10 September – 28 October

How does the Western mind, or eye, perceive the ‘exotic’ or ‘other’? Are the lines between documentary, art and commercial film blurring? Dresden-born, Berlin-based artist Mario Pfeifer addresses these issues here in *A Formal Film in Nine Episodes, Prologue & Epilogue*, a series of nine films from 2010 that meander through modern life in Mumbai. The exhibition shows a series of film segments on large screens strategically set throughout the gallery’s concrete rooms. Some run on a single loop, others are grouped; all seem related merely in that they were shot in and around the same city. But only at first.

In the gallery’s ground-floor space, the largest screen shows a film of Indian men – and one woman – slowly moving huge blocks of ice through the vast halls of a factory. Shot on 35mm and featuring lots of fogs and lush shades of blue, the footage is atmospheric enough to be a standalone art piece, but there’s more: on the gallery’s lower level, the remaining segments appear on three slightly smaller projection screens. As the show progresses, a vaguely narrative thread emerges and the films reveal themselves to be partially staged and scripted.

One male and one female actor appear in scenarios shot in extended single takes. In one meditative loop, the actor’s head is slowly shaved, in extreme close-up, before the scene cuts to the actress lying on a bed, having her hands hennaed at dusk. Some episodes are slow and measured, such as that of a fisherman’s boat slowly traversing the water under two highway bridges. Others are loud and fast: a *hijra* (‘third-gender’ person) pokes his/her head into a rickshaw asking an unseen passenger for money. The amateur actors meet in a scripted quasi-love scene at an outdoor temple (some of whose subtitles are hilarious: “Do you like cucumbers?” “Oh, so much.”). She goes to the eye doctor. He rehearses a phone conversation on a balcony, with the cityscape as a backdrop.

The mix of seemingly documentary and reenacted segments calls the work of Jeff Wall to mind. But unlike Wall, Pfeifer’s visual postcards from modern Mumbai offer neither critique nor orientation. The viewer can thus choose how to react – seeing the work as a kind of stereotype-driven travelogue that uses high production values to create something almost pretty (even if the series has its share of socially loaded situations, such as a walk through one of the city’s slums); or surmising that Pfeifer is very aware of what he’s doing with not only clichés but filmmaking techniques in themselves. Also on view in the gallery’s lower level is a video of Louis Malle’s 378-minute documentary *Phantom India* (1969), whose raw depiction of Indian life angered the Indian authorities so much that the BBC (for whom the French filmmaker was shooting) was banned from the country for several years. Malle himself, however, was very proud of the work, in which he explored his own limited Western view. In contrast, Pfeifer’s vignettes offer the viewer – ‘the other’, in both the sense of being an outside observer to the filmed goings-on and, in this exhibition venue, most likely a non-Indian Westerner – a certain dispassionate distance that liberates from limitation. By taking a formal stance, the artist allows himself and his audience to simply *see*, any way they will.

KIMBERLY BRADLEY



Mario Pfeifer
A Formal Film in Nine Episodes, Prologue & Epilogue, 2011
(installation view), 35mm film & HD-multiple-channel-projection for exhibition space, colour, 50 min.
Photo: Alexander Koch. Courtesy the artist and KOW Berlin