

White Cube... Literally: On form and convention of display
Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai 18 January – 3 March

Beirut-based curator Amanda Abi Khalil's latest show in Dubai features nearly 30 works that are all, quite literally, white cubes ensconced in a space that most people would describe as a 'white cube'. The title of the exhibition, then, becomes all about that play of meanings. Whether by regional stalwarts like Lebanese Saloua Radoua Choucair and Emirati Hassan Sharif, contemporary mainstays such as Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, or selected early-career artists, the works on show share the formalist merit of conforming to the required colour and shape, but are almost impossibly tasked, by both show title and various references in the press release, with (re)igniting Brian O'Doherty's critique of the widely unloved yet persistent spatial construct, developed in his 1976 *Artforum* articles, and later published as a book.

Wilfully playful, *White Cube... Literally* seems to unfold at two different speeds: a whimsical celebration of the form itself via material variations – sugar cubes, soap cubes, rubber, cotton and neon cubes – and a shy needling of the aesthetic conventions of the gallery through occasional works that, either directly

or indirectly, evoke the white cube's entropy. Beyond the purely formalist exercise, though, most of the works are unrelated to O'Doherty's institutional critique: they feel more like tangents than pillars of the curatorial edifice. Iraqi artist Adel Abidin, for instance, raises questions about religion and sustenance in *Tasty* (2007), a video of a sugar cube mosque slowly devoured by ants (projected in this show, formalism *oblige*, on a white cube of sugar cubes). Similarly, *White Cube No. 2* (2015), a newly commissioned sculpture by Hassan Sharif, comprises tiny rubber cubes whirled into a sphere of copper wire. Firmly in the lineage of Sharif's previous 'objects' formed of the flotsam and jetsam of industry, the work is wholly unconcerned with the ideology of spatial display.

In the white cube, O'Doherty warns, context becomes content: the space itself overpowers the artworks, dominating them. Dubai-based artist Vikram Divecha's *Casting Failure* (2016) is a lineup of six cast-iron cube moulds into which white paint has been poured. The would-be white cubes shrivel and wither,

peeling away from the mould edges. The paint's resistance to being cast as a cube illustrates the unattainability of this 'ideal' shape more generally; its transformation into hardened, wrinkled lumps in the space itself is testament to O'Doherty's premonition. To make this point perfectly clear, *Casting Failure* will remain in the gallery, beyond the show's closure, until the paint masses are fully shrunken.

Like Divecha, other artists tug at the dynamics of the white cube convention. The Kabakovs's *The White Cube* (2005) is sketched from their 1993 installation in which an intrusive oversize cube 'victimised' viewers in a gallery. Gilbert Hage toys with viewer dynamics too, in his *And Yet, to Me, What a Piece of work is a Man!* (2015), a mirrored cube inserted in a rectangular, open-topped box. Perhaps less successful is Yann Sérandour's *Inside the White Cube* (2008) – 18 copies of O'Doherty's famous tome encased in a white cube-shaped box. Much like the show itself, of which it is perhaps the most emblematic work, *Inside the White Cube* is formally intriguing, but perhaps just a bit too, well, literal. *Kevin Jones*



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Courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai