ARRANGEMENT IN DUST

In "From Dust to Dust," a traveling exhibition with sculptures, films and a most intriguing booklet, the Dutch artist explores a mysterious confluence of time, space, and art historical fact and fiction.

MELVIN MOTI AND FAILURE

BY JOHN MENICK

View of Melvin Moti's exhibition, "From Dust to Dust," showing (foreground) his reproduction of a 19th-century bench, with (on wall) Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Portrait of Mary Barnardiston*, 1750, oil on canvas, 28¾ by 24⅜ inches; at Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels. All installation photos this article Filip Van Zieleghem.

OPENING SOON
"Melvin Moti: From Dust to Dust," at the Fondazione Galleria Civica, Trent, Italy, June 25-Sept. 5.

WALK IN AND START ANYWHERE. Begin with the Jacquard tapestry four times wider and three times taller than the height of any visitor. Then turn to the faded painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds, the one hanging beyond the 19th-century-style bench. Notice that the flower pinned to the sitter's dress matches the pattern in the tapestry. Circle back to the dark room housing a looped animation of interstellar dust. There is no shortage of options: the framed, aged papers with red in their centers; the ornate wooden pedestal topped by a vial of dust; the Purple Hearts; the four photographs of a green wall overlaid with moiré patterns; the patterned second wall of fabric, also woven with a moiré pattern, the same size and color as the Jacquard tapestry. Or maybe start with the second pedestal, similarly decorative, with curlicues and elaborate leaf shapes. This one supports a book, just a booklet really, one of the smallest objects in the exhibition, sitting there, open, but not exactly demanding to be read.

It's disorienting. It is also only a partial description of Melvin Moti's recent solo exhibition, "From Dust to Dust" at Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels. There is no easy summary. To describe the show, some pieces made by the Dutch artist and others not, is to inventory the entire exhibition. It is a bewildering lot, part solo show, part

mini-mausoleum—a collection of discontinuous objects only sometimes acknowledging one another. The Reynolds painting is authentic, but the benches, which look at least as old, were fabricated in Wiels for this exhibition. The framed watercolors by Moti have been "artificially aged." The Purple Hearts are real. The green photos show the walls of Whistler's 1876-77 *Peacock Room*, now part of the Freer Collection in Washington, D.C. Moti also made the pedestals, but there's no telling the origin of the jar of "19th century household dust," as the exhibition map calls it. The show is contrapuntal; the zigzags are of your own choosing.

AND THEN THERE'S THAT BOOKLET. Open it and find more moiré patterns, tapestry swatches, portraits. There is a reproduction of another Reynolds painting, a portrait of George Greville. There are images of a Purple Heart and a portrait of Charles Cros, someone else whom you've probably never heard of. Three texts fill the booklet, each a few thousand words long, two written by the artist and one by Edgar Allan Poe ("The Philosophy of Furniture"), all interrupted by the occasional swatch or photograph.

Most of the first essay is about dust. One reads of factories ruined by exploding clouds of dust, Marcel Duchamp's interest in dust, cosmic dust, soap production in Victorian England and a Cameroonian "stink ant" that climbs to the top of the nearest tree upon becoming infected with dust spores. After more than a dozen pages, the text unexpectedly shifts focus to a brief synopsis of Whistler's exhibition designs. The parallels, literal and not, to Moti's own show are obvious. Moti writes of "Arrangement in White and Yellow," Whistler's 1883 exhibition for London's Fine Art Society: "The galleries were regarded by Whistler as 'pictures in themselves.' The exhibition was, in other words, an *installation*." [Italics Moti's.] Whistler's exhibition also provided a booklet, not offering context as with Moti's show, but made up of art criticism, mostly negative, edited to provide an ironic gloss on the artist's work.

Other historical personages accompany Whistler. For example, French writer and professional screw-up Charles Cros (1842-88). Cros was a mess, and, to borrow Moti's metaphor, everything he did came to dust. Cros invented the phonograph—did you know?—or almost did, because theoretical machines don't usually make it into history, especially when your competitor's version was actual. Cros also would have been an innovator in color photography if not for the fact that he never got a patent for his invention. Instead, Cros spent most of his time drinking absinthe and running with Paris bohemians. Failure was a way of life.

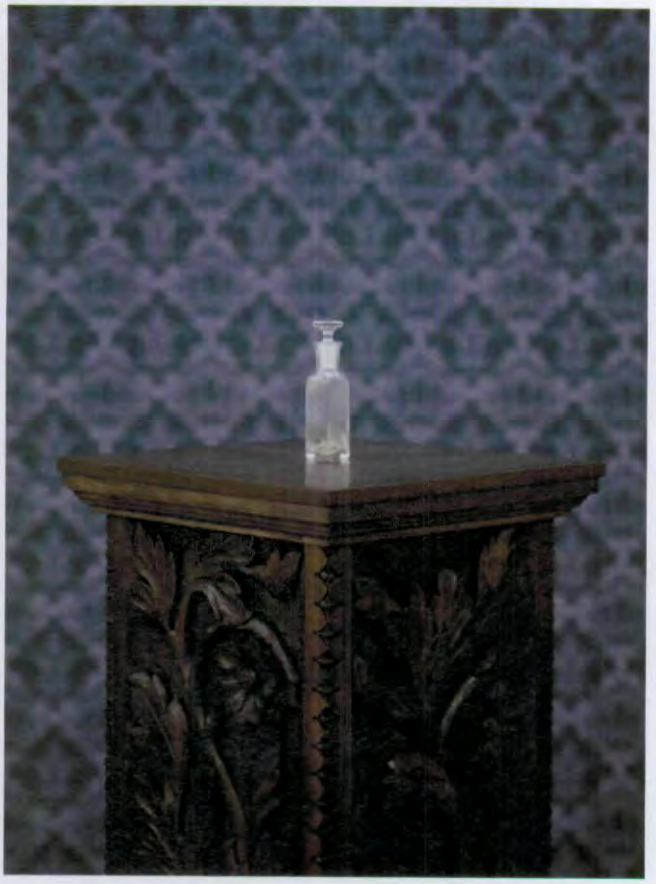
In Moti's text, Cros's story accompanies that of the Swiss photographer Ernst Moiré (1857-1929), a businessman who had only slightly better luck than his French counterpart. While Moiré was accidentally blinding his wife in a photo mishap in the Alps, his business partner, Willi Ostler, was misprinting a

Above, *Moiré Fabric*, 2009, silk and cotton, with *Bookstand*, 2009, carved wood, and *Dust*, 2010, artist's book.

Right, close-up of *Bookstand* and *Dust*.

Opposite top, sample of 19th-century household dust in glass jar on stand, and *Jacquard Wall Fabric*, 2009, in background.

Opposite bottom, *The Peacock Room*, 2009, four C-prints, each 11⅞ by 15¾ inches.



SOME ELEMENTS IN MOTI'S EXHIBITION MAY BE MARGINAL OR OVERLOOKED, BUT THEN THE ARTIST IS NOT INTERESTED IN ASSIGNING THEM A PERMANENT PLACE IN HISTORY.

We learn that there are moiré patterns in the fabric of Purple Heart metals in order to discourage counterfeiting. The Poe essay describes the author's ideal room, and since no one is decorating their houses in the manner of Poe, we can consider it another path history chose to ignore.

It's not that the show simply relies on the booklet (stretching tapestry over a contemporary gallery wall does introduce an emphatic juxtaposition of approaches to installation), but the objects do send you to the text, just as the booklet returns you to the objects. Despite postmodern elevations of text over image, language over presence, most exhibitions still behave as if the work should speak for itself. The work is first, the catalogue a distant, optional second. But Moti's text is not secondary; it's a work unto itself. It is also not purely explanatory, jumping as it does from subject to subject, a disorienting montage of vignettes and narratives.

IF THERE IS ONE UNIFYING SUBSTANCE to the proceedings, it's dust. It is tempting to see dust as failure, or to see it as forgotten history remaining stubbornly physical. But like the exhibition, dust is eclectic. Dust has its own vertiginous literature

run of photos for a government commission. The misaligned printing resulted in a stunning visual pattern the Swiss government failed to appreciate. The newspapers found it more amusing, and named the effect after Ostler's absent partner.

Moiré and Cros belong together, but Whistler is in strange company. His shows inaugurated the modernist exhibition in all its ascetic fussiness, a process finally finished, according to Moti's booklet, by Alfred Barr with the 1929 opening of the Museum of Modern Art. If anything, Whistler helped vacuum the dust out of modernism's spaces when salons became showrooms, and showrooms became clean rooms.

The booklet pulls things together. It lets us in on the Whistler backstory; it tells us that the Reynolds paintings are fading because of badly mixed paint, as are those new Moti watercolors, which have been mixed with the same unstable chemistry. cutting across scientific studies, poetry, fiction, cultural history. Read one health study and dust is blamed for inner-city asthma. Read another and dust prevents asthma. A cultural critic declares dust to be death's representative. A physicist explains that without cosmic dust there is no life. Read enough studies, and dust becomes decay, vitality, the invisible, the visible, sickness, health, weather, time. Dust becomes everything, and if it is everything, it is nothing.

Here, in Moti's show, is dust's paradoxical substance. Like Moiré, like Cros, dust's significance is open to reshaping. Some elements in Moti's exhibition may be marginal or overlooked, but then the artist is not interested in assigning them a permanent place in history. Like the jar of 19th-century dust, Moti is recasting the past. Moiré, Whistler and Cros are temporarily assigned new roles. Given another century, these

THE FILMS ARE HIGHLY CRAFTED, SHOT IN 35MM, TAKING MONTHS TO CONSTRUCT. BUT, AS WITH "FROM DUST TO DUST," THERE IS A LARGE GAP BETWEEN WHAT IS SAID AND WHAT IS SEEN.

roles could be remade again. For Moti, history is to be used.

It's a reshuffling the Dutch artist has done before. Prior to "From Dust to Dust," Moti, 33, who studied in Amsterdam and now lives in Rotterdam, focused on making short films, typically about 15 minutes long. Film was the protagonist in his exhibitions, supported by a cast of posters, photographs and documents. Despite a wide range of subject matter, the films are consistent, so much so that each can demonstrate Moti's use of the medium. Take *E.S.P.* (2007), a film based on the 1927 memoirs of John William Dunne, an Irish aeronautical engineer who claimed to have experienced precognitive dreaming. As told in the film's voice-over, taken from the memoir, the story begins simply: Dunne dreams that his watch stopped, and upon awakening discovers that his watch has, in fact, stopped at the exact moment he dreamt it had stopped. His dreams grow in complexity and terror. Dunne eventually dreams of workers burning in a factory and, knowing the drill, he spends a frantic day trying to locate reports of the actual fire in the press. Predictably, Dunne learns in the late edition that dozens of women were incinerated in a Paris rubber factory the previous night.

Above, view of exhibition, with *Moiré Fabric* (left), *Jacquard Wall Fabric* (right), and the film *Dust* (background).

Top, two stills from *Dust*, 2010, 35mm film, 12 minutes.

Opposite, three stills from *The Prisoner's Cinema*, 2008, 35mm film, 22 minutes.

Far right, *No Show*, 2004, 16mm on DVD, 24 minutes.

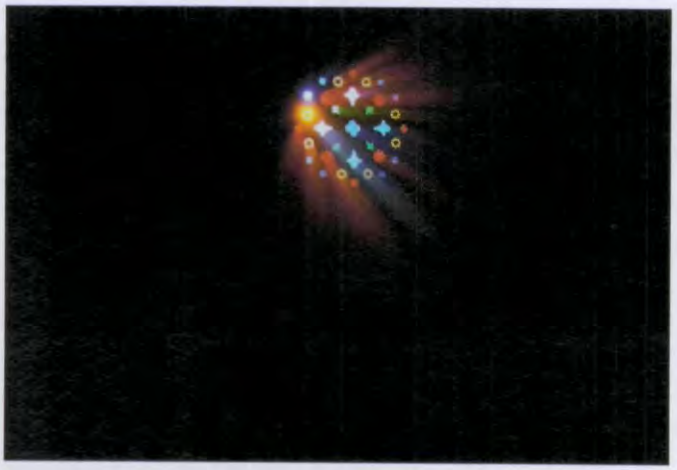
The voice-over is accompanied by an extreme slow-motion image of a soap bubble bursting. Walk in midway through the video, after the bubble has burst, and there is only a black screen. Even if you do happen to see the bubble, Dunne never mentions a bubble or explosions or slow motion. For most of the film, the acts of listening and watching are incongruous. Then the voice-over and image connect. Dunne tells us, "The moment in which a dream can be captured is but a mere instant. The blink of an eye." Dunne's dreams are not cryptic Nostradamus-like signs, intimations of the future. Dunne reports on the present. The events in his dreams are simultaneous (or near-simultaneous) with the events they represent.

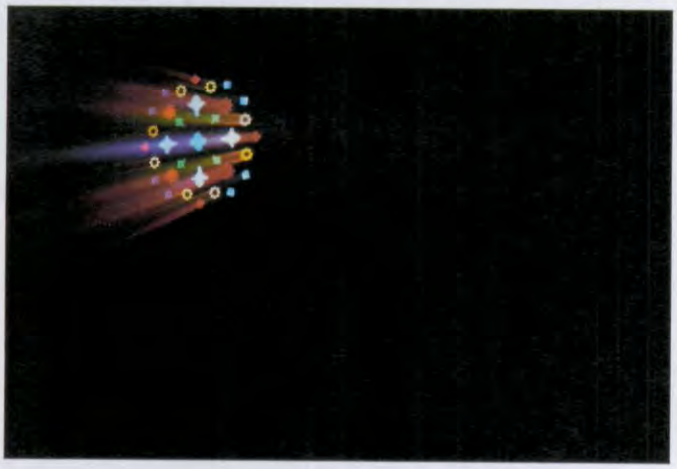
A Freudian might rush to make a connection with the case study in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which a father dreams his living child is burning as the child's body actually burns in the next room. The child had died the day before, and as the father slept, a candle fell onto the body. In his dream, the child, still alive, implores, "Father don't you see I am burning?" The body burns for some time before the father awakens.

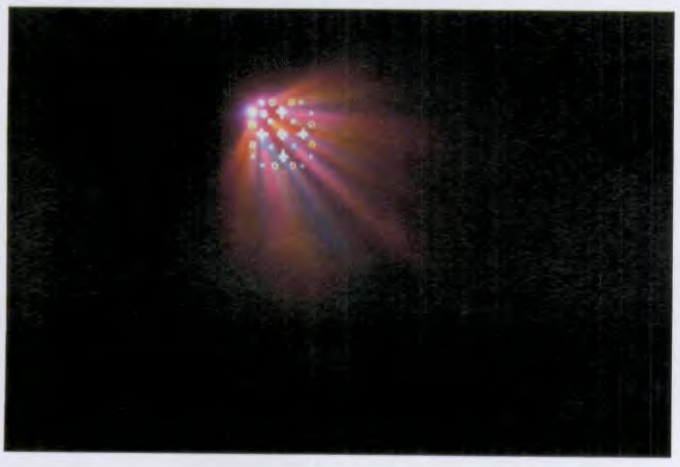
Freud's interpretation of the dream is uncharacteristically mawkish. He contends that the father wanted the child alive, and the dream continued the child's life. (The father probably could smell the fire—he was sleeping near the body. At some level, he "knew" what was happening.) Published in 1900,

Freud's landmark volume contributed the major narrative of 20th-century dream life. Dunne's narrative is comparatively minor, but perhaps more terrible. His dreams received no signals from the immediate world. He lived far from the burning factory. His dreams were faultless depictions, but he remained locked behind the fourth wall of spectatorship. "[I am] merely a bystander. A witness. Neither able to take part or affect the horrors surrounding me," he states. Dunne was prisoner to what he dreamed. He was able to watch horrors, perhaps even agonize over them, but remained unable to influence the events.

DUNNE IS A TYPICAL MOTI PROTAGONIST: educated, inquisitive, solitary. Most importantly, Moti's Dunne is verbal. Words are a defense. Dunne's speech, as read by the voice-over actor, is sure and articulate, barricading his waking life, protecting him from his terrible dreams. For Moti's characters, visions come from within and without, and the words suggest an attempt to control these visions. Likewise, in Moti's *No Show* (2004), a video set in 1943, a tour guide at the Hermitage describes to soldiers the absent paintings that have been placed in storage to protect them from bombs. In *The Prisoner's Cinema* (2008), a test subject describes personal hallucinations over which she has no power. Speech disengages from image, and threatens to supplant image completely. The device is common to many postwar filmmakers—Straub-Huillet, Hollis Frampton and Marguerite Duras, in particular. Each of Moti's films is a single shot, some lasting up to 20 minutes; sometimes the camera is stationary, at other times it moves slowly on tracks. Typically, an action is allowed to play out, take form, dissipate. Bubbles explode, light shifts, geometric forms come into view. Speech replaces images when there is nothing left to see.







That's not to say the films are anti-visual. They are highly crafted, shot in 35mm, taking months to construct. But, as with "From Dust to Dust," there is a gap between what is said and what is seen. In *No Show*, the relation between what we are watching—the slowly fading light pouring through the tall windows of an empty gallery—and the voice-over describing missing works is apparent. But in the other films, sound and image are joined by one fleeting moment.

"From Dust to Dust" multiplies those fragile points. Instead of one narrative accompanying an image track, the show creates a maze of narratives. The exhibition's booklet mimics the show's dizzying complexity; the booklet is not a plaintext. In the absence of a comprehensive narrative, the viewer is left to make up the difference. One is free to complete everything, to walk in and start anywhere. ○

"Melvin Moti: From Dust to Dust" debuted at the Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, Feb. 19-Apr. 25. The show is on view at the Fondazione Galleria Civica, Trento, Italy, June 25-Sept. 5. Another Melvin Moti solo exhibition appears at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Mass., Oct. 10, 2010-Jan. 2, 2011.

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