

EXHIBITION REVIEW - ART GUIDE AUSTRALIA

I'm new here - Beth Dillon and Anton Benois.
Firstdraft Gallery, Sydney, Australia.

by Tracey Clement | Posted 20 Oct 2015

In their collaborative exhibition, Beth Dillon and Anton Benois took an irreverent look at the pleasures and discombobulations of travel.

Neither artist is a stranger to the notion of moving around. Benois was born in Moscow and educated in Buffalo, New York, and Sydney; Dillon is an Australian, born and bred; and they both now live in Berlin. *I'm new here* was a response to a two month-long residency they undertook together in 2014 at Listhús in Iceland. And it wasn't just any two months: Dillon and Benois were in the cold north during skammdegi, the "dark winter".

Because of its location in Olafsfjordur, where it is ringed by mountains, Listhús is darker than elsewhere, and the short days reputedly have a particularly eerie quality. And, naturally, the scenery is snow-covered and spectacular. But Dillon and Benois neatly sidestepped the seductive pull of the sublime and opted instead for the silly.

In *I'm new here* they presented both still and moving images of stunning icy landscapes. And every single time they subverted these potentially majestic, possibly uplifting images by including a fake pot plant in the scene.

This weird juxtaposition was particularly effective in their video work, which was also titled *I'm new here*, 2015. In this work, scenes of dramatic snowy landscape are partially obscured by a fake pot plant. Occasionally a pair of hands parts the leaves to expose the white mountains behind, a gesture that is a heady blend of striptease coy and comic-book-jungle-explorer bold. Meanwhile, a soundtrack of canned laughter punctuated by applause and cheesy lounge jazz lends the whole thing an absurd, slightly louche atmosphere. Instead of letting us sink into the beauty and terror of the natural world, Dillon and Benois put the artificiality of the tourist experience front and centre.

This video was displayed on a flat-screen surrounded by a pair of curtains called *Dieffenbachia Dream Veil*, 2015, named after the species of (fake) plant that it depicted. With its shiny white surface and all-over repeating pattern of a pot plant, this textile element resembled a shower curtain more than the traditional heavy velvet drapes of the theatre, but its function aligned much more with the latter. This veil was designed to reveal rather than conceal. It framed the screen with a cheeky theatricality that reinforced the artifice of our forays into nature, searching for picture-postcard memories.

In our snap-happy culture, most of our memories are now generated and reinforced via digital photographs, but for those who still like something tangible to hold on to, Dillon and Benois thoughtfully provided souvenirs featuring their intrepid fake pot plant and dramatic Icelandic scenery. Resembling slabs of etched crystal, they channelled the clichéd charm of snowdomes. And, like all souvenirs, they functioned as mnemonic devices and evidence of an experience. Titled *Implant Memory 1* and *Implant Memory 2*, 2015, these kitschy-cool mementos highlighted the fact that Dillon and Benois are well aware that memory is tricky and that travelling is a trip in more ways than one.

I'm new here was at Firstdraft, Sydney, from 1 July to 24 July.

