The Cosmopolitan Art Clown

In my childhood home, we never played Monopoly or Scrabble or any of these kinds of games. These things were forbidden. Existential packing-peanuts, my mum would say. Empty fillers of time. You have free time? Go clean your room! Instead we would play a series of informal games that could and would pop up at a moment's notice. Anywhere, anytime. In one variant, my dad would turn on SBS radio and demand: "What language are they speaking?" An instant and accurate answer was expected. Summer road trips were dominated by Capital Cities of the World quizzes. Passing a mosque would mean we'd have to recite all the countries in which Islam was the dominant religion (don't forget Bosnia and Herzegovina, all you people playing at home!). Being good at these sorts of games wasn't simply a point of pride or a sign of good geographical knowledge. It was a matter of morality. For my parents, travel and cosmopolitanism were the ethical and sacred responsibilities of humans; an exalted position no doubt forged during their own youth in socialist Poland with its restricted opportunities for travel. For me, growing up in this atmosphere, the notion of travel has become imbued with a deep romanticism and an almost religious seriousness. The most basic trip to a tourist-riddled international capital is an act of pilgrimage. Dropping a relative off at the airport is an opportunity to breathe the airs of whole new worlds.

At its core, Beth Dillon's work contains a similarly solemn attitude towards travel. Her exhibition *Been there, done that* is filled with the traces of a contemplative vagabond. She collects the band aids of epic art walks like a pilgrim collects relic medallions. The aesthetics of passports, visas and citizenship documents decorate the correspondences of that most sacred of romantic entanglements: the long distance relationship. But her art personae have a much less serious expression. It's not the human-as-void blank-face neutral/not neutral adopted by many performance artists; there's too much humanism in her bearing for that. Dillon's characters are less Marina Abramovic on the cat walk and more Charlie Chaplin on molly. This serious but ever-so-slightly ironic persona is a hard balancing act to maintain. Too much pathos, and you risk bathos. Too much curl in your smile, and you might as well be making fart jokes. And yet she keeps her steady. And when she arrives in Paris for an artist's residency she's intensely aware of how loaded it is to be specifically in that city, specifically for the purpose of making art. And so she laughs at it. But it's not a mocking laugh; it seems like she wants to be friends with The Idea of Paris. And why not? Marcel Marceau, and baguettes, and red wine, and the Jardin de Luxembourg are cliches for a reason. It's a tourist magnet for a reason. Sometimes the best way to overcome a challenge is to surrender to it.

While it's advisable to travel light, it's also all too easy and convenient to forget the baggage that comes with travel. Dillon, however, is acutely aware that travel is a problematic beast that can't pretend that it isn't loaded with stinky little political smears that mirror all global relations since Marco Polo. Questions of colonialism and "home" are underlined and highlighted whenever you hop on that 747. As an art traveller especially, what does your travel do to reinforce notions of centre and periphery? Does our jet-setting between residencies, biennales, art fairs and conferences do anything to ease the passage of those who are fleeing war, oppression and imperialism? (A sub-chapter of Dillon's Masters thesis is titled *Have Privilege, Will Travel*.) In *This is all going to be worth something, someday*, Dillon sets her sights on globalism, that hybrid monster of internationalism and capitalism. Taking on the persona of Micheline, she plays the role of art-detective, Inspector Clouseau-ing her way around the Geneva Free Port, far away, yet so close to exposing the critical role played by the art market in the international flow and stockpiling of capital. Even here, she rides a fine line between political commentary and clowning around; Buster Keaton, early in his career, realised that the greatest number of laughs come from his melancholy, straight face, and the saddest feels are felt when he begins to smile.

But underneath the mechanics of humour and the sincere irony of her love for the tourist trap, Dillon's work is about the seriousness of travel. The artist nomad, perhaps more than any other traveller in the 21st century, has the power and privilege of reflective detachment, as well as the unique burden of a critical audience, that forces their work to address the core impulses of human movement. With a set of sturdy boots, a couple of languages in her pocket, a joke up her sleeve and her heart on it, the traveller does important work.

Kuba Dorabialski, September 2018