

TimeOut London: 'Taryn Simon: An Occupation of Loss review', by Eddy Frankel, 20 April 2018

Taryn Simon: An Occupation of Loss review

Art, Contemporary art



TIME OUT SAYS

★★★★★

Deep in the bowels of an empty underground concrete cavern in Islington, a dozen-odd professional mourners are singing their lamentations. If watching that sounds like a weak way to spend a gorgeous spring evening, I feel you. For context, I left a group of friends and a whole night of beer on the warmest day of the year to watch Taryn Simon's subterranean Artangel commission. I went, obviously, under tipsy duress. But what I saw left me overwhelmed, shocked, emotional and heartbroken. Forget the weather and the friends and the beer, Simon's work is everything art should be, and it's the best show of the year by far.

The mourners enter through gates of neon and head to their stations in this barren concrete bunker in total silence, sitting in alcoves illuminated by bare light sculptures. Then the noise starts. A blind man with an accordion sings, two African women cough and cry and splutter, two men wail over a stinging drone note, a single woman leans her head against the bare, cold concrete wall. The space is freezing, the sound harsh and echoing. It's minimal and beautiful with its monochrome world of concrete and black clothes, it's chaotic and tense. You stumble from mourner to mourner, trying to capture a sense of the heartache they're bellowing.

You're left in a daze. You can't concentrate on any of it. Some are too quiet, others are too loud. All the sounds clash and crash against each other, echoing through the space. This isn't one single mourning event, this is a torrent of sadness ripping away at you. You want to tell yourself that these are performers, that they're just acting out the tragedy of death, that it's fake, it's money for mourning, but it doesn't help. It's a feverish cacophony of agony and it totally envelops you.

Even if you, like me, aren't mourning anyone particular, the work drags you down into the sadness. You think of loss and sorrow for whatever you're going through, or might soon go through. I wanted desperately for it to end, it was too much to feel. But when it did and the mourners filed out in silence, it felt like it had gone by too quick, I wanted to beg them to continue so I could find more catharsis.

All the visitors climb up into the warm air of the real world without uttering a word. They've just been drowned in a whole globe's worth of sorrow. And that's good. Art is meant to affect you, it's meant to hit you and have an impact, it's meant to leave you reeling. 'An Occupation of Loss' is full of nuances and conceptual nooks and crannies to fill your head with if you want – the economy of grief, the anthropology of the mourners – or you can just go with it and feel it. But whatever happens, I'm telling you: go. Buy tickets, steal them, whatever you have to do, just go be destroyed emotionally, go be annihilated by art. You won't regret it.

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Note: the space is accessed via a private entrance by Islington Green, check www.artangel.org.uk for info.

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