

## When Canaries Face the Cat – Flipping the Bird with Jack the Pelican

– Katherine Dolgy Ludwig

‘Amahoro’ – the title of Tom Bogaert’s first solo show, *a fit of rage* – means Peace. It is a word of African origin with special meaning in Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo, lately just some of the nations politically torn with carefree violence and genocide. It is said that when members of different tribes greet they wish each other hopefully ‘amahoro’ – but with artists like Mr. Bogaert popping up with carnage video games and mountains of rodents, how can any of the memories be so simply buried? The gallery Jack the Pelican in Brooklyn unapologetically shows artists that challenge political quiet. Well thank God for that.

Mr. Bogaert, who was the lawyer for Amnesty International and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, isn’t interested in disregarding what he saw. As UN Representative to Rwanda he documented genocide and human rights abuses in Africa and Asia for fourteen years. Five years ago he resigned to become an artist. There are only four pieces of his art on installation here at Jack the Pelican, each startling:

*This is Rwanda* stylish in its staged animations takes in the viewer on a little ‘90’s pop ditty pumping gameboy, only to slash down all hope with footage of witnessed machete butchery –the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, in which as many as 80,000 ethnic Tutsis and their moderate Hutu sympathizers were killed – it’s unforgettable. In the center of the gallery black licorice mice fight their way up a mountain obscured by the swarm, their smell unavoidably strong and sweet in the close gallery space. *Black Noise* waits at the wall nearby, thumping a deafening bleak beat into the gallery space produced by a stylus on the backs of a licorice mouse infested spinning turntable, titled in the ironic technical term for constructed silence. Lastly, two canaries sing live in an elaborate ad-hoc contraption built by clumsy hands, inspired by clumsy posters, hopeful for the little messenger birds in this *Canary Space Station*. In audience powered spectacle, with chilling sound and smart titling and appropriately high/low tech configurations, Mr. Bogaert delivers the message unflinchingly.

There are traditionally many venues in New York like this particular gallery that support the individual voices of artists who finally have a chance to speak, whether they have been witness to abuse or suffered abuse themselves. There are private and publicly funded institutions, like freeDimensional, also Brooklyn based, that not only show the artwork of political refugees – like Senegalese painter and installation artist Bara Diokhane, cartoonist and painter Issa Nyaphaga of Cameroon, fiction writer Iranian Moniro Ravinipour, and Congolese playwright and novelist Pierre Mumbere Mujomba – but provide them with temporary places to stay here while exhibiting and a network of practical help. As freeDimensional notes on its website: “independent art and media are communication tools that can be used to resist entrenched power structures. We understand that resistance often results in censorship.” Artists need support to make sure that atrocity is not forgotten, to testify to what they have seen, and they can’t be afraid to say so. Should canaries be hopeful when facing cats? Thanks to organizations like freeDimensional and Jack the Pelican, for supporting artists who want to take a chance to flip the bird.

(*Amahoro*, **Tom Bogaert**; Jan 11 - Feb 10, 2008, Jack the Pelican Presents, Brooklyn, Thursday through Monday, 12am-6pm, 718-782-0183)