

Art in America

Byrd, Cathy: Navid Nuur at Matadero Madrid

May 2012



View of Navid Nuur's exhibition *Hocus Focus*, 2012; at Matadero Madrid.

For his first solo exhibition in Spain, Navid Nuur (b. 1976), an Iranian artist based in the Netherlands, was invited to the Matadero Madrid art center (former site, as its name suggests, of the city's main livestock market and slaughterhouse). There he created "Hocus Focus," a mysterious laboratory filled with experiential projects—both intimate and monumental—that made magic with light.

"Hocus Focus" began and ended in obscurity. Wooden shutters on the windows permitted only a shiver of exterior light to outline their forms. Nuur divided the cavernous room in two with a curtain of shimmering emergency blankets. The first chamber allowed eyes to adjust to the darkness, presenting modest clues to the artist's process in a few vitrines and offering a map to a dozen optical encounters. Free for the taking, newspapers titled *El Rastro de la Luz/The After Glow* provided more insight through the artist's short, photo-illustrated texts. Nuur writes of his fascination with and consternation over light, and speculates on its ability to control, divide, embrace and alter both formal relationships and physical substance. A contemporary alchemist, he is devoted to exploring his theories through esthetic experiments.

Each work in the exhibition involved the viewer in Nuur's search and discovery. Light gave depth to crystalline patterns when, in *Ours*, a dried teardrop on a slide was projected onto a 10-foot-high scrim. On a table across the room, the detritus of spent fireworks lay scattered around a wooden box turned on its side. Projected into the box, a slide show illustrated Nuur's "Fire Painting" series. The abstract compositions flashed on and off inside the tabletop theater, alternating between silhouettes shaped from the fireworks' charred remains and their glow-in-the-dark blue ghosts. An audio track channeled through headphones provided sounds of exploding skyrockets and firecrackers. Perhaps the most lyric work was *Hitherto II*. Two sources of light brightened the interior of a translucent water-storage tank that lay on the floor. A loose cluster of fluorescent tubes—plucked, wiring intact, from the frame of a tanning bed nearby and placed inside the tank—flickered on and off intermittently. Unseen when the fluorescent lights were illuminated, a small cloud of thin wire, dotted with glow-in-the-dark paint, captured the fleeting illumination and shone like a miniature constellation each time the tubes went dark. Whether glimpsed through the mouth of the tank or observed from afar, *Hitherto II* created its own mystical realm of space-time. In this and other apparitions, Nuur subjected everyday objects to transformative situations, lending them a complex metaphysical aura and proving that art can indeed be the substance of light.