

Aaron Bogart, "Andro Wekua: Kunsthalle Zurich," *Artforum*, October 1, 2018

# ARTFORUM

ZURICH

## Andro Wekua

KUNSTHALLE ZÜRICH

Andro Wekua often presents his haunting collages, paintings, sculptures, and enigmatic, nonlinear films in stagelike settings. In his largest exhibition to date, "All Is Fair in Dreams and War," the Georgian-born artist continued his multimedia approach with a *mise-en-scène* of imagery and objects that articulated a familiar yet strange story. The main exhibition space was filled with works that took up motifs and techniques, such as the head and body in sculpted and painted form, previously used by Wekua. The first work one saw on entering the show was *Blue Hold*, 2017–18, a hanging, glazed blue-green ceramic sculpture of a sexless figure with missing feet. Its shrouded head called to mind Christian iconography, as did the white lilies affixed to its arm and leg, a sign of purity in Catholicism. The uneasiness in the innocence suggested by this symbolic arrangement was heightened by a sculpture, *Untitled*, 2017, of a large black wolf with its snout just touching the back of an unknowing silver child. Made from bronze and aluminum, and standing roughly chest high, the work had a strong presence in the room.

More than Wekua's sculptures, however, the show's sixteen mid- to large-size paintings created its inscrutable atmosphere. The focal point of *Untitled*, 2018, was the blurred figure of a young, dark-haired boy on a fire-orange background, blacked out from the eyes up. The image of

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a dark palm tree with a hot-pink backdrop—a recurrent motif suggestive of the subtropical climate of Wekua's birthplace, Sukhumi, a city on the Black Sea—is superimposed on part of the kid's shoulder, its trunk extending almost to the bottom of the canvas. Wekua created this work, like all the paintings in this show, by screen-printing onto aluminum, then overpainting the ink. The printed images (from personal photographs, collages, and drawings) are often framed by bright, vibrant colors, resulting in a layering effect. This buildup of layers and framing of an image—a process that mirrors our own memory formation—could also be found in another *Untitled*, 2018, which shows a young boy wearing a tucked-in pink boss T-shirt and early-1990s-style baggy trousers. He stands awkwardly with his head cocked and arms hanging straight at his sides. The fingers of someone who has been cut out of the



Andro Wekua,  
*Untitled*, 2018,  
silkscreen ink and  
varnish on aluminum  
panel, 51 × 49 1/4".

picture rest on his shoulders, implying the presence of an adult standing beside him. Surrounding the image is an expanse of deep blue, which gives way to whitish blue toward the bottom and above the boy's head, creating the impression that he is underwater. The hand touching him could either be holding him under or helping him out; there is so much ambiguity and specificity in this painting that strict interpretation is bound to fail.

The mysteriousness of meaning in this exhibition found its most lively expression in a film, located in an upstairs gallery in a room within a room. *All Is Fair in Dreams and War (Burning Palm)*, 2018, contains a hodgepodge of imagery: a bright-red sky with a blinding sun, a dancer on a stage, a high-rise building, a flat sea with a container ship, and a burning palm tree whose lighter-than-air ashen fronds float upward. The montage is set against staccato electronic music incorporating what sounds faintly like a riff on a tune from Sergio Leone's spaghetti Western *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). One of the main themes of that film is the value of land; it's worth noting that Wekua fled his homeland because of violent territorial disputes. (Sukhumi is now the capital of the breakaway republic of Abkhazia.) This history does not overburden Wekua's works, but imbues the repetition of his imagery and objects with personal memories and narratives that resemble our own in their imperfection, their incompleteness, and their ability to awaken a sense of a boundless future, if only for a moment.

—Aaron Bogart