You Promised Me, and You Said a Lie to Me – review

Alexie Glass-Kantor's thoughtful curation of this group exhibition at Anna Schwartz Gallery sets the tone in the leadup to her new role at Sydney's Artspace.

Visibility is a Trap by Laurent Grasso. Photograph: Edouard Malingue Gallery and Anna Schwartz Gallery

There's a bit of back story to the exhibition You Promised Me, and You Said a Lie to Me at Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney. It's curated by Alexie Glass-Kantor, one of Australia's most well regarded curators, newly appointed as executive director of Sydney's Artspace after a successful seven-year tenure at the helm of Melbourne's Gertrude Contemporary.

Glass-Kantor has an impressive CV and a long list of curatorial projects to her credit, the latest of which was her co-directorship with the Art Gallery of NSW's Natasha Bullock of Parallel Collisions, the 2012 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, and City Within the City, a show of Korean contemporary art as her swansong at Gertrude. It's unlikely Glass-Kantor would have predicted the uphill battle of being the first woman to head Australia's largest arts institution.

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Visibility is a Trap by Laurent Grasso. Photograph: Edouard Malingue Gallery and Anna Schwartz Gallery

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have known that her return to Sydney would be heralded by a show with Schwartz, a commercial space with a penchant for high-concept exhibitions, but perhaps as a mission statement You Promised Me … is an indication of things to come.

Featuring six international artists and one Australian, the idea of You Promised Me … is to put into dialogue work by artists whose practices “address instances of agency, resistance and vulnerability in the face of interpersonal and political authority”. This translates into as work that is, on first glance, decidedly ambiguous. Walking around the space it’s striking how much the individual pieces conform to the familiar styles and riffs of contemporary art but come together in a cohesive way – unlike, say the recent Primavera show that was similarly staged in a single room but looked like a hodgepodge of random stuff.

Heman Chong: Cover (Versions). Photograph: Edouard Malingue Gallery and Anna Schwartz Gallery

Quite how that happens is a little difficult to unpick at first. The room is dominated by Laurent Gasso’s huge sculpture that bears in neon the words “visibility is a trap”. It’s the first and last work you see in the show – you literally have to walk around it – and it simply means that what you see isn’t necessarily what is meant. Ming Wong’s video Persona Performa (Actress’ Entrance) sits next to it, a ghostly video collage of model’s bodies and faces moving toward the camera, which in turn sits next to Jane and Louise Wilson’s long line of images False Positives and False Negatives (2012), photographs of the artists’ faces painted with a kind of camouflage that confuses surveillance cameras.

The images are overlaid with frames from security footage of the Mossad assassination of a Hamas leader in Dubai in 2010. Sitting in front of these images, on a concrete pillar, is a bronze replica of a camera that belonged to Vladimir Shevchenko, a Soviet filmmaker who recorded images of Chernobyl. His camera became so irradiated it had to be buried – the Wilson’s bronze version is a tribute to the denial of seeing.

In Heman Chong’s Cover (Versions) the artist uses the rectangular format of the paperback, creating a series
of paintings that look like a vast array of book covers, complete with title and author’s name overlaid on an abstract, patterned background. They bring to mind the stylish reissue book covers commonly used by publishers, and Chong’s facsimiles are convincing.

But there’s a bigger project behind this work and the random textless paintings inserted into the sequence are the clue: this is more about an idea of abstraction and what it means for painting as an object. We may well regard a book as being something substantial – the weighty tomes of philosophy and literature found within – but could we say the same for a purely abstract painting devoid of text? In this case, you can’t really tell a book by its cover because it’s a painting.

Haegue Yang’s large installation Strange Fruit – a forest of silver stands adorned with lights and plastic plants – remains utterly unapproachable, even with a portentous explanation of its meaning in the catalogue. The siting of Susan Jacob’s delicate Ded Reckoning next to Yang’s work does neither any favours, while Jesse Jones’s video Predicament of Man (2010), similarly makes little rational sense, even with an explanation of its process. It does however have a undeniable presence – a long pan over the Australian desert with images flashing in the edit like a throwback to Eduardo Paolozzi collages, and a soundtrack with an eerie fragment of music repeating over a three-minute loop.

Although Grasso’s Visibility is a Trap towers over the exhibition, it is Jones’s work that I find most compelling – which is perhaps an insight into Glass-Kantor’s success as a curator. As much as we might want contemporary art to “mean” something, and do so deliberately, it’s also an aesthetic experience that connects to an irrational, emotional state; that goes beyond language to the experience of seeing.