

Things we found in the fire



Dariush Zandi and Shaqayeq Arabi found sculptures in the wreckage of last year's Al Quoz fire. *Chris Lord* picks his way through the debris

As the final stalls were packed away at Art Dubai 2008, a heavy plume of smoke appeared on the skyline. It hovered ominously over Al Quoz, as the smoke bellowed from an old warehouse that had been illegally storing fireworks. A fire steadily tore its way through the warehouses. It reduced whole buildings to a collapsed heap of twisted plastic. It blackened metal and fused debris into new and terrifying shapes. Two people were killed in the blaze. And, all the while, the scene was punctuated with the bangs of fireworks, which caught light and flung themselves around in the chaos.

Artists Dariush Zandi and Shaqayeq Arabi went in just as things were starting to cool down. They began sifting through the debris and collecting the strange creations that had been formed in this great kiln of plastic and metal. They found a batch of scissors, permanently fused

together into a mass of compressed metal. They discovered, in a drawer, thousands of safety pins condensed into a solid brick. They even took the roof of the warehouse, which had melted around the building's structure into a soft and malleable rag.

Scraps is the semi-permanent exhibition the artists have created to display their finds. There's a smell like earth as you pass through the black curtain that separates the show from the rest of Total Art at the Courtyard. A lingering odour of burning wafts over the items. They've recreated a collapsed steel girder that they found swathed in detritus. They've even projected a photograph of the warehouse onto one of the walls of the gallery and enacted, with more found materials, the apocalyptic scene of exposed wiring and hanging metal that they stumbled into.

But you can't escape the burning smell. For all the metal and plastic, Zandi and Arabi seem to have selected these sculptures for their organic appearance, and the woody smell only adds to this. The mass of scissors, the most impressive item they have recovered, has the density and rigidity of coral, while the melted tin roof, when photographed with the blue sky in the background and projected onto the gallery wall, looks almost like a

terraced mountain, or a dry riverbed.

There is also a fascination with the act of destruction itself. The sound of intermittent fireworks has been piped into the gallery, and the dark space, with its sweep of rusty browns and blackened sheen, has a sense of containment and internal obliteration much like the heart of a volcano.

Among the items, there are Singer sewing machines and old cash registers gutted and fossilised by the fire. Turned on their side, as they were found, the objects no longer resemble anything of their original form. Exposed mechanisms, burned a deep orange, take on a bark-like or sinewy appearance. It's as if Zandi and Arabi are marvelling at the creative senselessness we can find in destruction. Both are exuberant about the shapes that have emerged, but also about the nihilistic effect of the fire, the way that destruction can literally transform an object, scrap its meaning and make it a useless thing, evocative

of nature. There's no doubt that a number of the objects in here, with the right lighting, have something organic about them – but it's also as if the artists are suggesting that if you remove the use of an object, through destruction, if necessary, an aesthetic transformation takes place. There's something elemental in this process, in terms of creation arising from destruction, of course, but it is also

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evident in the way we interpret these objects, because our instinct is to equate them with pureness, baseness. Simply put, when we cannot make sense of something – when it's been mauled beyond comprehension – we can only turn to examples from the natural world to understand it.

A year on, you would never know that the fire had happened. But *Scraps* stands as a chaotic memento to the event. Al Quoz is Dubai's dusty anomaly, it's also, oddly, its creative hub – not in terms of the galleries that have moved in, but the materials, the manufacturing, even the cement that fixes this city together all comes out of this shabby nook. In the

aftermath of the fire, the clean-up was predictably swift.

Perhaps *Scraps* is a response to a city that fails to acknowledge decay. Aged areas are pulled down, all things old are thrown away – in a relentless bid for newness, only Al Quoz remains, a somewhat forgotten and indecorous mass on the edge of all that glamour. Al Quoz, both artists seem to suggest, is itself a found object, if we can only take the time to really look at its incongruity in this city.

Total Art at the Courtyard (04 347 5050). Until June 30

