

ARTFORUM

Wilfrid Almendra

LES ÉGLISES | CENTRE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE LA VILLE DE CHELLES

rue Eterlet

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Wilfrid Almendra operates in the space between modernist architecture and its best intentions, the utopian promises it failed to keep in the literal no-places of suburbia. The artist sets his latest body of work in Chelles, a Parisian suburb rebuilt in the 1970s under an urbanization plan that envisioned a streamlined future (via a series of social housing projects) with room for relics of the past: namely, two adjoining chapels, ostensibly the last remnants of Notre-Dame-de-Chelles, a seventh-century abbey destroyed during the French Revolution. Having spent centuries as storefronts, barns, and living quarters, the two chapels were rebuilt as neo-Gothic “historical monuments” in 1984, only to be conjoined twenty years later as a modernist-inflected art center, all poured concrete floors and plaster walls.



Wilfrid Almendra, *Between the Tree and Seeing It*, 2014, glass, silicone, concrete, soil, plants (philodendron, croton, irésines), butterflies, 24' 3/4" x 12' x 79 1/2".

Almendra restores a sense of mystery to the austere interior with *Between the Tree and Seeing It*, 2014, an installation riffing on suburbia's discontents. Vacillating between a communal allotment and a corporate lobby, the piece consists of a dimly lit indoor garden, fenced off by thick textured glass. Office-friendly philodendrons, mimosas, and mosaic plants appear as ghosts in the vitrine, their brightly colored foliage improvising abstractions against the glass. The idea of a static composition—much like that of a planned city—is an illusion; as the plants grow and their roots expand, they will eventually destroy their constraints.

Almendra bisects the second chapel vertically with a suspended ceiling, made from cheap materials and hung by the standards of the surrounding public housing units (at more than eight feet, the ceiling barely hits at a third of the soaring height of the apse). Underneath, the artist sets a simple wooden table in *September 25th 2013 at Night*, 2014, a “cake” of copper, salvaged by the Roma population of Almendra's village in Portugal. Every fifteen minutes, a radio sputters up a series of Portuguese poems by “George,” a mason worker who writes metered verses about “the potent blend” of “sand, water, and cement” and houses “constructed to be demolished.” The poems are broadcast over the pirated frequency of the local pop station, poking at the complacency of the very social classes to which modernism made all its most fervent vows.

— Kate Sutton