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EveningStandard.

Taryn Simon – An Occupation of Loss review: Heart-rending mourning and grief is all part of a day’s work for some

Ben Luke



Hugo Glendinning / Taryn Simon Projects

In a cavernous concrete lair beneath Islington Green, something remarkable and transportive is happening.

Taryn Simon has invited professional mourners from 11 countries to perform on specially built stages at the periphery of a vast central, circular pit.

The mourners enter the silent gloom. Then their chants, wails and songs begin, their voices merging — a cacophony punctuated by unexpected crescendos and harmonies.

We walk among these diverse peoples, whose backgrounds are not clear: a small booklet tells us that they hail from Greece, from the Yezidi community, from Venezuela. From Simon’s installation photographs, I learn some of their names: Marisol and Ana Luisa Montiel, for instance, who gesture and sob plaintively beneath patterned shrouds.

But while they’re individuals, they’re also symbolic of cultures, communities and their rituals. And it’s this that makes Simon’s work so powerful and tense: these people normally appear in the context of grief, giving voice to others, reflecting their pain, connecting the living and the dead.

By isolating them, Simon reiterates that these are performances, and yet, so often, emotions appear genuine and raw: tears streak down the anguished face of a Ghanaian woman; the soaring song of a Yezidi man is so devastatingly beautiful it’s like a blow to the solar plexus. I felt intrusive and beguiled, yet so often deeply moved.