



CLEARING

Marguerite Humeau

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Artist Marguerite Humeau reinvents the past to create the future

Skye Sherwin

The artist blends high-end design and minimalist sci-fi fantasy with Cronenbergian body horror

Marguerite Humeau's East London studio is packed with sketches, wildly annotated hand-drawn plans, printouts, bursting boxes, and bits of bubble wrap. Yet when I visit in early autumn, one figure, squatting in the corner, immediately commands attention. Only vaguely human, this boulder-sized model sits with its ample arms and legs crossed like a mandarin, or someone hunkered down around a campfire. Its surface seems to ripple, as if wrapped in a silk robe caught by a breeze or melting in a hallucinogenic whirl. Made from pale, green-tinged, hard foam, it's both solid and unearthly, ancient and unquestionably born of a contemporary world of computer design and 3D printing.

This is a prototype for *Queen with Leopards*, a sculpture ultimately realized in bronze that oversees a tribe of similarly amorphous works within Humeau's latest exhibition, *'Birth Canal'* (2018). Her first solo show in the US, it opened at New York's New Museum in September - Clearing gallery's presentation for Art Basel Miami Beach in December will feature an edited version. The voluptuous shape-shifters are the young French artist's meditation on some of the earliest and long-running forms of sculpture in human existence, the Paleolithic Venus figurines produced between 35,000 and 10,000 years ago and found in an area that stretches from Europe to Siberia. 'They're a big mystery,' says Humeau. 'We don't know their purpose or who made them.'

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Marguerite Humeau, studio view, 2018. Photo by Mathilde Agius

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Since she graduated from the famed experimental design department of London's Royal College of Art in 2011, Humeau has established herself as one of the most ambitious rising young talents of the international art scene, with projects that delve into life's conundrums and ask, 'What if?' To date, they have taken the form of out-there, but not utterly unfeasible, proposals that straddle the realms of science, technology, consumerism, ancient history, myth, and prehistory, and have been developed through conversations with experts in the relevant fields. What would have happened, she has asked, if elephants had evolved instead of humans? What did prehistoric animals, whose larynxes are lost to time, sound like? What if the sphinx were real and existed today? Realized with a team of collaborators, her installations typically blend the language of high-end-product showrooms and minimalist sci-fi fantasy with an undertone of Cronenbergian body horror.

Lining a long wall in Humeau's studio are her loosely sketched drawings and watercolors (which she translates into models for sculptures via her computer), as well as printouts of photos, of the instantly recognizable Stone Age enigmas, with outsize breasts, thighs, and genitals, but tiny heads and feet. Not all of these are the Venus sculptures themselves, though. Some are more abstracted, constellations of twinned circles and ovals that turn out not to be carvings at all, but photos and drawings of animal brains, including those of a mole, sloth, and alligator, a reptile whose blood is famed for its resistance to infections, including HIV. Their resemblance to the Venuses is startling.

There's certainly no shortage of research and theory about Paleolithic art. Over the years, it's been variously suggested that figurines with these overblown proportions are self-portraits, created with a skewed perspective by women

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Marguerite Humeau, *Birth Canal*, 2018. Installation view at New Museum, New York City, 2018. © Julia Andreone / Courtesy of the artist and CLEARING, New York and Brussels.

looking down at their bodies, paleo porn, or, most obviously, fertility goddesses. However, it was an intriguing offshoot from paths well-trodden that snagged Humeau's imagination. The idea of pairing the brains and the figurines came from a paper by an American researcher, Beth Hagens, who theorized that ancient shamans may have eaten animal brains for their psychoactive properties, believing that they would absorb a certain animal's qualities, to run fast or fly, say, even mixing different brains to create hybrid powers. According to Hagens, the sculptures might be recipes, then.

'It's an observation I truly love,' Humeau enthuses. 'What was not really resolved for me was why they gave them female bodies. The brains are much more abstract.' At the New Museum, Humeau's response to the puzzle is an all-encompassing experience. Within a space as dark as a cave or the primordial night sky, her Venuses of bronze or translucent alabaster have gathered. As the soundtrack builds from deep breathing to chirruping, indecipherable conversation and, finally, an intense bass trip that reverberates through your bones, these mothers of mankind, high on animal brains, embark on a psychic journey to their future and our now, bringing back visions. Caught in various stages of transformation, their forms seem to further change thanks to subtly shifting lighting. 'Each sculpture is a screenshot of one moment in mutation,' she says.

Spanning millennia, her latest reflection on the origins of our species is an unabashedly epic undertaking, though one hardly unusual for Humeau in its scope. For example, 'FOXP2', her exhibition staged in 2016 at Palais de Tokyo in Paris and Nottingham Contemporary in the UK, took as its starting point the random gene mutation that enabled language to develop in humans. Underscoring the terrifying role chance plays in our species' existence, in her alternative universe, it is not primates but elephants that have evolved. As rippling, ethereal, sometimes floating white sculptures, they have, sinisterly, been put on show in an ultra-clean white space that recalls the relentless, aspirational illumination of

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Marguerite Humeau, studio view, 2018. Photo by Mathilde Agius

an Apple store. 'I think Apple are selling light and the idea that you could become eternal by transforming yourself into light,' she says, locating our everlasting desire for immortality in the 21st century's defining brand.

'Birth Canal' flips this aesthetic, plunging us into the great unknown of the dark, where, rather than biomorphic white resin apparitions, we encounter sculptures that are earthbound, weighty, and carved or cast by craftspeople using traditional materials. As Humeau points out, 'Some of them look futuristic, but the materials tell a different story. I wanted the sculptures to feel that they could be worlds in themselves, that one is as evocative as if you had the whole series.'

They embody what she calls 'a full loop', making a circular journey in time. For all her playful freethinking, though, the bass line of her work can be strikingly somber. 'It's about worlds that could exist without us,' she says, referring to her interest in animals or the prehistoric. 'It's a way of acknowledging that humans could never have existed and the possibility of the complete annihilation of human existence.' In time-traveling to our now, is that, we must wonder, what her Venuses will see?

Marguerite Humeau's work will be shown by Clearing in the Nova sector of Art Basel Miami Beach.