



Marguerite Humeau: KUNSTVEREIN IN HAMBURG
Artforum, 2019
(author: Jens Asthoff)
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ARTFORUM



Marguerite Humeau, Venus of Frasassi, a 10-year-old female human has ingested a rabbit's brain, 2018, Portland stone, sound, 31 1/2 × 12 3/4 × 11».

The room was darkened, with ten vaguely anthropomorphic sculptures of various shapes and sizes illuminated by spotlights and scattered throughout—on plinths, on the floor, leaning against a column or wall. The sculptural and material qualities of these works—made of bronze; Portland stone; and pink, black, or brown alabaster—seemed to change with subtle variations in the light and shadows, which made their volumes both corporeal and abstract, and their surfaces fluctuate, almost as if alive.

Marguerite Humeau's exhibition "ECSTASIES" was a sequel to her traveling show "Birth Canal," which debuted at New York's New Museum in 2018–19; like its precursor, it was anything but an ordinary sculpture show. It was a stage opened up to its audience, a synesthetic environment to be experienced with several senses simultaneously. The sculptures were accompanied by a complex sound collage of female voices, while electric heaters installed on the ceiling created subtly perceptible islands of warmth. Black foam mattresses, some piled on top of each other, were loosely arranged around the room, functioning as minimalist syncopations upon the overall visual score. Their main purpose, however, was to be used. The soft material was easy to sink into, and conveyed the sense that this could be a sculptural act. The reproduction of the forms of your own body afforded an unexpected moment of self-awareness, and once you were lying down on them, your

perspective shifted as you became enfolded into the *mise-en-scène*.

"ECSTASIES" proposed a scenario at once atavistic and futuristic, a kind of dream time for prehistoric aliens, that Humeau based on a theory by the archaeologist Bethe Hagens. That the sculptures were reminiscent of (and often titled after) prehistoric Venus figures, such as the thirty-five-thousand-year-old Venus of Hohle Fels or the fifteen-thousand-year-old Venus of Courbet, was no accident. While most scholars believe these served a ritual function as fertility symbols, Hagens was struck by their formal similarity to animal brains. She conjectured that prehistoric female shamans might have eaten psychoactive components of animal brains in order to reach a state of spiritual ecstasy.

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Humeau's aim was not to stage a scientific theory, however, but to contemplate it as a fascinating mystery: "In all my work, I'm facing the impossibility of finding out how things really were. But I'm not trying to find the truth." The London-based French artist developed the show's core narrative as a speculative history going back 150,000 years, a séance composed of many different voices, where words and bodies exist as a shifting matrix in permanent transition. "Each sculpture is a screenshot of one moment in mutation," she says. The titles of the works also emphasized the fluid nexus between language, consciousness, and sculptural form: Those of *Venus of Frasassi, A 10-year-old female human has ingested a rabbit's brain* and *Venus of Hohle Fels, A 70-year-old female human has ingested a snake's brain*, both 2018, read like psychedelic recipes, and in fact the women mentioned in the titles are vocally present in the sculptures, each of which was animated by an a cappella soundtrack. In the room, the effect amounted to a fluctuating sonority of guttural, chirping, whispering voices, a sort of edging toward language, centrally controlled by the newly configured consciousness described in the title of a 2019 work, *Brain Activities, An artificial brain engineered to reenact the primal state of trance*.

One part of the exhibition distinguished itself sharply from the rest: a roomful of drawings, presented lying flat on tables. This space was brightly lit, the floor covered with a pink carpet. Intermingled with passages of text both poetic and prosaic, the works sketched out diagrams of synaptic processes, states of consciousness, and border zones between mind and body. Three numbered drawings titled *Brain Hypothesis*, all 2019, showed animal brains reminiscent of archaic figures, thereby closing the circle.