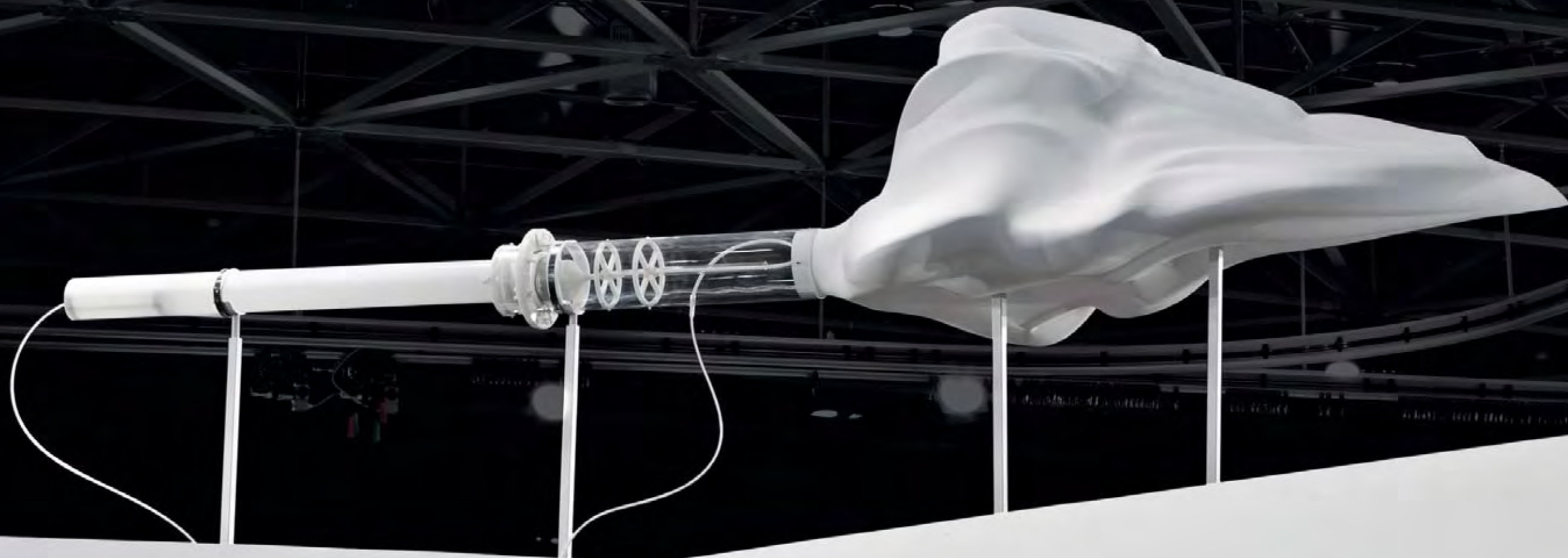


Marguerite
Humeau

HIGH
DEFINITION
HORROR





MARGUERITE HUMEAU, PHOTOGRAPHED IN LONDON BY JONNIE CRAIG



THE OPERA OF PREHISTORIC CREATURES, 2011, MIXED MEDIA, 700×405×900 CM
From left to right: ENTELODON 'HELL PIG', AUSTRALOPITHECUS AFARENSIS 'LUCY', AMBULOCETUS 'WALKING WHALE'

STARK CONTRASTS ARE HER THING: THE FUTURE AND THE PAST, MAGIC AND TECHNOLOGY, ELEPHANT TEARS AND 3D PRINTERS. HER VISION: TO REENACT THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD. PLEASE MEET MARGUERITE HUMEAU

Marguerite Humeau is wearing Cleopatra jewelry today because it's good for her nerves. The stuffy hipster café in London's Dalston district we meet in is like a cheap imitation of a trendy bar from Berlin's Kreuzkölln, the only difference being that the wild herb salad is twice as expensive. The people here all seem young and important, budding start-up entrepreneurs or designers who use this alternative-type atmosphere as a hedonist backdrop for their business dealings. She doesn't really come here all that often, Humeau laughs, it's just that the journalists always wanted to meet with her here. You have to wonder why: the music is so loud that we have to yell at each other. At first glance, with her long skirt and Doc Martens, Humeau fits perfectly in these surroundings. She's always travelling, her Berlin gallery, Duve, announced ahead of time; she doesn't have a studio, she works in a small office and plans out her exhibitions on a computer.

You could imagine Humeau as a post-Internet pro, one of these millions of creatures skyping in places with free wireless or hammering away at their notebooks, people who look as though

they were having a great time, but were exploiting themselves more than anything else. And it's true: we meet here for work, too, just like everyone else. If you look closely at Humeau, you detect a measure of exhaustion. But she also has this other, almost romantic aura: with her lavish silver chain, her powdered face, red lips, and wavy hair, she seems like a character out of the poetic films that Jean Vigo and René Clair made in the 1930s. One of these heroines that work in a department store, but have a big dream. She just cut her hair, she says in this offhand, sultry voice that French women have when they speak English.

For Humeau, our conversation comes as a welcome break from her preparations for her first major solo show in an institution, at the renowned Palais de Tokyo in Paris, which opens in June. In contrast to the women in the old black and white films, Humeau doesn't dream of a man or a better future. Her vision, she explains without batting an eyelash, is to reenact the origin of life, particularly that of sentient and intelligent life forms. Humeau is interested in stories of lost or remote worlds, prehistoric monsters, the Egypt of the pharaohs, extraterrestrial spaceships, and the secret burial rites of elephants. She calls herself a kind of "Indiana Jones of the Google age."

The Cleopatra necklace as she calls it, is a reference to her project *Cleopatra – That Goddess*, which she realized in 2014 for the *Extinction Marathon*, an event curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist in London's Serpentine Gallery that explored extinction and visions for the future. What particularly fascinates Humeau about Cleopatra is that there are numerous accounts of her incredible beauty, but none on the sound of her voice. Humeau's plan was to resurrect her as a 21st-century diva – through her voice. The pharaoh Cleopatra is said to have spoken nine languages, long-extinct dialects in addition to Ancient Greek, Aramaic and Ancient Hebrew. Humeau travelled around the world in search of experts able to translate these languages, and she invited the Speech Research Group of the Machine Intelligence Laboratory, a special department at the University of Cambridge, to reconstruct

Cleopatra's voice. Prior to this, she gathered precise descriptions from historians, scholars of language and communication studies, surgeons and researchers of vocal organs. The love song that Humeau's Cleopatra sings originated in the Egyptology Department of the Institute of Archaeology at the University College London. The idea of bringing voices back to life, of attempting a kind of digital reincarnation, is crucial to Humeau's work, which is as fantastic as it is philosophical.

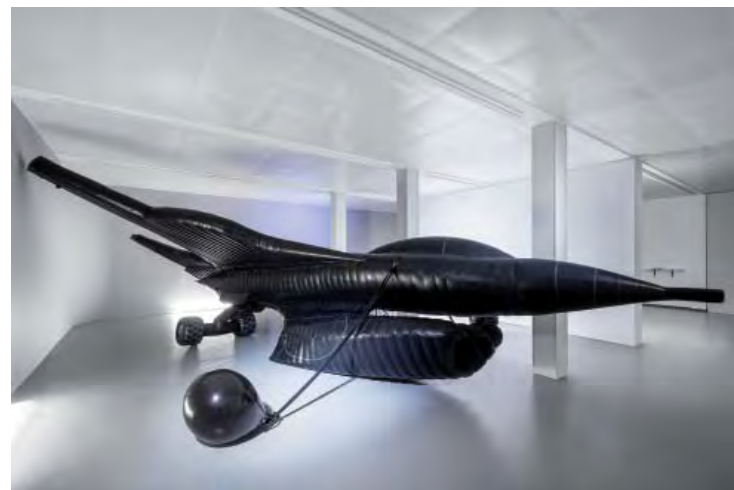
"How abstract can life be?" asks Marguerite Humeau. And: "how figurative does it have to be?"

"How abstract can life be?", asks Marguerite Humeau. And: "How figurative does it have to be?"

At the beginning of her career, she not only showed in the Serpentine Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum, but also at MoMA, which acquired her degree work from her design studies at the London Royal College of Art for its collection. This summer, her work will be shown at *Manifesta 11* in Zurich, curated by Christian Jankowski. To jump-start her career, Humeau took out a large bank loan and bet everything on one card. "I really believe if you don't trust in your own dreams, how can someone else trust in them?", she says.

At the age of 29, she built organic/technoid machine sculptures of enameled Styrofoam that look like aliens. Their surfaces are as glossy as the white helmets of the storm troopers in *Star Wars*. They stand on metal legs and resemble prostheses. These creatures are equipped with vocal chords produced by 3D printers. For *The Opera of Prehistoric Creatures*, they generate sounds from prehistoric times, from the future or from the beyond. The creatures have names like 'Lucy,' 'Mammoth Imperator,' and 'Terminator Pig.' "I wasn't always interested in prehistory at all," Humeau says, "but I was working with voices for a long time. When I began my project for the RCA, I was thinking more of the future of performance. I saw this video by a Japanese engineer who was actually able to print organs in 3D. And I asked myself what would happen if you printed your larynx and could talk or sing in different places at the same time – what that would mean for performance?"

At the very latest since her show *Echoes* at Duve, which caused a small sensation at Berlin Gallery Weekend in 2015, Humeau is considered a brilliant sculptor and installation artist. For the exhibition, she created primeval beings named after ancient Egyptian divinities that produce poisons and antidotes, elixirs of life and death, in artificial circulatory systems. Humeau painted the walls of the exhibition space in fluorescent yellow, to which she added a homeopathic dose of mamba venom. A 'liquid body,' as she calls the layer of paint, a 'fresco'. This principle of the deconstructed body, which is only ethereally present or in reanimated form, like a ghost, will also determine the exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo. "The biggest question in my work is what life and death are, where



THE THINGS? – A TRIP TO EUROPA, PROPOSAL 2 FOR SERENADING OUTER SPACE CREATURES WITH STUNTS, VIBRATIONS, CHEMISTRY, LIGHT AND LIVE MAGIC, 2014, PVC AND AIR, 300×150×300CM



ALIEN SIGNAL (BLACK POWDER), EXTRACT FROM DIRECTOR'S CUT, 2013, DIGITAL HD-PRINT

one begins and the other ends," explains Humeau. "What's most interesting is the state in between. How do you construct it, design it? Where is the boundary? What does existence mean? And what do you need to exist? Is a voice enough? In the film *Her*, Scarlett Johansson is no more than a voice, but does she exist? Is she alive or not? Is it another form of life? How abstract can life be? How figurative does it have to be?"

The point of departure for the Paris show is the hypothetical question of what it would be like if evolution hadn't allowed *Homo Sapiens*, but rather some other mammal, to develop into a sensitive, self-aware, intelligent being. Humeau got the idea while reading the book *The Third Chimpanzee. The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal*, in which Jared Diamond proposes that it was the entirely accidental transmutation of a single gene that so changed the larynx of the first humans that language suddenly became possible. In an allusion to this, Humeau, together with the scientist Pierre Lanchantin, created a primeval sonata for the 21st century: a synthetic choir of 108 million voices that plays through all conceivable variations on a prehistoric language. In

the piece, Humeau uses a special program to not only simulate the languages that are actually spoken, but also those that would have been possible and have only now been called to life through her work. The sound piece is accompanied by a truly psychedelic installation, an evolutionary showroom.

For this work, the artist investigated the number of chemical elements a 176-pound human body consists of, for instance hydrogen, oxygen and sulphur. She then made several kinds of pigments from the solid forms of these elements, mixed them together and added poison from the jimson weed, the symbol for the 'forbidden fruit' of the Garden of Eden. She then dyed a carpet using the colour she made from this mixture – another 'liquid body' in which the origin of the human species and the fall of man are materially united.

Humeau arranged a group of sculptures on this carpet, works inspired by the mammal that could, according to worldwide surveys of experts and researchers, have taken the place of humans as the dominant species – the elephant. "I spent a lot of time studying them," Humeau says. "They have their own funeral rituals.



THE LIVING DESCENDANTS I (ELEPHAS MAXIMUS),
2011, DIGITAL HD-PRINT (3-D RECONSTRUCTION OF A CT-SCAN)

I read this amazing story of a researcher who saw a dead matriarch in the jungle that had obviously just died, and he described how her family was standing around her in silence. On the second day they went to gather leaves and covered her body with leaves and flowers and on the third day they started trumpeting and left.”

Like all of her objects, the sculptures that Humeau creates are prosthetic-like, deconstructed, hybrid – and resemble future life forms. The artist literally injected her sculptures with the elephants’ grief: she actually traveled to a Thai reserve to collect elephant tears, which she diluted with water and then infused into her works.

It is a materialism that evokes shamanism, and it forges an unmistakable connection to the current reevaluation taking place in art and philosophy that questions the unlimited primacy of humans. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s *Documenta 13* already investigated a non-anthropocentric worldview and the intelligence of bees and strawberries. The exhibition *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*, curated by Susanne Pfeffer in 2014, gave the go-ahead for the radical intertwining of art with ecology, the natural sciences, politics and philosophy, and gives expression to the influence of philosophical movements that grew out of Speculative Realism and Accelerationism.

And so, artists and philosophers alike are interested in an approach to the world that is independent of language and human perspective. The reason scientists’ statements concerning the millions of years of Earth’s history that existed prior to human consciousness are so fascinating for the New Realism is that they also apply to ideas about the future, which at some point will also take place without human consciousness. This type of ‘post-human thinking’ is still smiled upon, but Humeau’s art demonstrates that a universal existential suffering, and with it the possibility of liberation, resides within the materiality of an elephant’s tear made potent by art. The absurd odysseys and endless research efforts that she takes upon herself, the foolhardy experiments that attempt to catch hold of life, are necessary in order to devise a new kind of thinking that no longer works through the fixed parameters that define life and consciousness. Terms such as ‘I’ and ‘body’ lose their stability.

“I try to create this luminous horror,” says Humeau, “something very bright and shiny that attracts you. Like Cleopatra’s voice, you want to stay with it, you want to be fascinated by it. At the same time, at some point you understand it is horrific, ghostlike. When you get closer to my works you realize these are body parts and disembodied voices and the whole thing is far more unsettling than it looks.”

The voices and creatures Humeau channels from a distant prehistory or the beyond resemble the apparitions of spiritistic séances. She’s interested in precisely this spectral presence, she says. She talks about her fascination for the director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who links Thailand’s spiritual tradition with entirely new narrative forms in films like *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010). “To my mind, he’s super contemporary in the way that he shows presences from other worlds, like ghosts or reincarnated beings, and he shows them without any special effects – as if the supernatural could coexist with us with no question. If you look at Baroque churches it’s a bit the same. They try to create a real experience of the sublime. The Sistine Chapel is a crack from this world into another world.”

Humeau has often been compared to a crazy explorer, but as she speaks, the discoverer in her shines. What motivates her to take on all these exertions to locate the origin of life, the voice of a dead queen or the tears of an elephant? “I was always interested in big odysseys and adventures, like in Jules Verne’s novels,” she responds. “Explorers and navigators fascinate me. There are a lot of sailors in my family. My grandfather was a doctor on board big sailing boats and sailed to the North Pole. We have a house in the south of France with lots of palm trees in the garden, because the captains in our family brought them back from their travels. I grew up in this kind of environment; when we go on holiday and my mom says: ‘You see this palm tree – this is from your great-grandfather, he sailed around Cape Horn and brought it back.’”

TEXT: OLIVER KOERNER VON GUSTORF
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN BLAU NO. 11

EXHIBITION: PALAIS DE TOKYO, PARIS, JUNE 23 TO SEPTEMBER 11



TAWERET, 2015, MIXED MEDIA, 90 x 180 x 230 CM