



*Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn, and caldron bubble; Fillet of a fenny snake, In the caldron boil and bake; Eye of newt, and toe of frog, wool of bat, and tongue of dog; Water pump and endorphin, acrylic, paint and oestrogen, Adrenaline and dopamine, elephant tears, vasopressin.*

Marguerite Humeau's new body of work is a witches' brew of contemporary pharmacology and synthetic industrial materials. Through unnatural conjunctions and sculptural effect, the artist endeavours to cast a spell over the apparent origins of sentient life—to conjure a world without mankind. This is a world in which, following evolutionary mutations affecting anatomy, elephants possess the capacity for complex spoken language. This is a world in which every human who has ever lived is but a background soundtrack, a ghostly chorus from who knows where. This is *FOXP2: Showroom Biologique*, the artist's latest installation-cum-opera, fusing the visual language of design boutiques, natural history displays, CGI renders and biotech.

What is opera without overblown sentiment, without the dramatic vectors of life, death and love? We expect a pageant, and Humeau wouldn't have it any other way. The installation is conceived as a showroom from a parallel universe, in which modes of biological consciousness have become an industrial product line. Astringent and creepy, the boutique features various prototypes of pachydermic being. An elephant matriarch, dying in agony, is the unhappy star of the show. Her slow passage unto death is the trigger for the "birth of sentience" in a surrounding herd. Creaking into animation, the various figures come to "life" by crying, by watching, by getting drunk, by acting out aggressions, moaning their despair

Marguerite Humeau (French, b. 1986) is an artist who lives and works in London. She is represented by CLEARING, Brussels/New York, and DUVE, Berlin.

Humeau's solo show "FOXP2" will be on view at Palais de Tokyo from 23 June–11 November. She will also take part in Manifesta 11, Zurich, running through 18 September.

Nadim Samman is an independent curator and art historian based in Berlin. He is curator of the 2016 Moscow International Biennale for Young Art and director of Import Projects, Berlin.

*Sobek (Muhammad Ali)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist; CLEARING, New York/Brussels; and DUVE, Berlin.

and, hopefully, falling in love. It is a death wake, of sorts, and the rebirth of the world as something very strange.

If this sounds like a rather heady concoction, it is not without reasonable ingredients. For the last year, Humeau has developed her post-elephantine prototypes in consultation with zoologists, palaeontologists, biologists, explorers, elephant specialists and psychologists. She started by inviting them to imagine a world in which elephants evolved into highly developed beings and became the dominant species. From there, each expert was asked to describe, drawing on their specialist field of knowledge, what evolutionary trajectories could have brought about this state of affairs. Following their lead, the prototypes that make up Humeau's cast are a collection of cyborg sketches for *othered* animals. The artist's method is conceptual retro-engineering. It is the construction of a speculative present, a science-fiction reverie made new-flesh. Following Bruno Latour's comments on the theatrical character of laboratory work, Humeau's conjuring trick amounts to more than a set of pseudo creatures. Beyond weirdness and melodrama, it is a monument to the technical and disciplinary staging of life under the reign of biocapitalism, and a grotesque portrait our knowledge systems misdirected.

All witches are attended by "familiars," animal-shaped spirits who work as servants, spies or companions. According to folklore, such spirits possess the ability to change shape, and may assist their master in casting a spell over chosen victims. Humeau's elephants are part of the artist's magic, a performance aimed at mastering and redirecting the flows of specialist knowledge in the service of an otherworldly yet strangely prescient drama. ☺

## REDIRECTING SPECIALIST KNOWLEDGE IN THE SERVICE OF AN OTHERWORLDLY YET PRESCIENT DRAMA