



*Enter A Room Full Of Black Mamba
Venom With Marguerite Humeau,*
Sleek Magazine, June 2015
(author: Agnes Gryczkowska)
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Installation view, Marguerite Humeau, "Echoes", 30.4-6.6.2015. Courtesy of the artist and DUME, berlin

For this year's Gallery Weekend Berlin, DUVE has been transformed into a weirdly dark, surreal and slightly horrifying Disney fairy tale. It's an overwhelmingly hypnotic and exhilarating, yet toxic neon yellow cube habitat, where walls covered with poisonous black mamba venom provide a shelter for elegant, subterranean, gleaming white sculptures. These creatures will spend the next six weeks slowly oozing extraordinary pink fluids that have healing and life-enhancing capabilities.

Marguerite Humeau is an artist-explorer and an internet-native heroine responsible for this ethereal transformation where her solo show, "Echoes", opened in the space during Berlin Gallery Weekend; easily making it one of the best exhibitions featured in the event. In "Echoes", this London-based, French artist tells us a story of life and death, of the creation of contemporary myth and the transition from organic to synthetic.

I'm really interested to find out why you chose black mamba venom as a colour sample and ingredient for your mural?

Every time we think about venom, we think about it being deadly, but actually, the substance has many facets. In India, snake venom is a popular drug used recreationally. A substance that is so deadly, it can also be used as an antidote that could potentially cure cancer. I was very interested in these contradictions. I chose black mamba venom – the most poisonous on the planet – to create a pigment for the walls. It made sense to me to cover the walls with beautiful yellow paint containing a substance that is simultaneously a poison and an antidote – in order to create an experience that is hypnotic and exhilarating, yet at the same time, terrifying. It embodies attraction and repulsion.

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How did you source and prepare the potions from these extraordinary animal fluids – Alligator blood and hippopotamus milk from a Taiwanese zoo?

As a part of my research into ancient Egyptian Gods and their incarnations – often animals with human features or humans with animal features – I started looking into different fluids produced by specific animals that I was researching for this show: crocodile blood, hippopotamus milk and snake venoms. I looked into Sobek – an ancient Egyptian deity represented as a human with a crocodile head – and Taweret – a mix of hippopotamus and alligator with human breasts. I found out that in nature, these animals produce super fluids. Alligator blood is thought to be ‘super blood’. When it was exposed to 25 different viruses, it was resisted by all of them, including HIV. Scientists call it Muhammad Ali, because it’s so strong. Hippopotamus milk is a bright pink substance that contains natural antibiotics resistant to many viruses, again including HIV. Sourcing these wasn’t easy. I always start with Google and then I move on to emailing different people: scientists, zoologists, palaeontologists, etc. It’s always a long journey, but you eventually get there. It’s like an adventure; it makes my life really exciting and adds a layer of thrill.

The relationship between the human body and the synthetic substances and technologies we use to preserve our bodies and enhance their possibilities seems to be one of the reappearing themes within contemporary art. What is your attitude towards the subject?

To me, what is important is to juxtapose these contradictions. In my shows you see some highly designed creatures, highly finished and crisp. They become almost unreal, they are animals, but almost belong to the world that is not even ours any more. At the same time I use real materials and fluids, like the venom. I contrast these hyper real, highly designed objects that are animals, but become products, with real fluids sourced from nature.

What makes you attracted to the idea of ‘blending’ truth and myth, symbiosis between fictions and realities and creation of contemporary mysteries?

The more I researched these subjects, the more I realised that there is no more border between fiction and reality. We’re already creating our own myth; we don’t know what the source is. The question of the source is an interesting one, as we all check wikipedia and assume this is the truth. With the “Prehistoric Creatures” project, I was researching real things then I had to add gentle amounts of fiction because there were gaps in knowledge. It is interesting to embrace the possibility of creating a myth. I’m generally interested in topics that are hidden or difficult to research – it’s about speculation and creating a new story. Myth has always been used to understand the nature of humanity.

Sound is another element that is always present in your work. Where does your interest in this come from?

Actually, at the beginning it was about the voice more than the sound. There are different things about voice that interested me – a voice can talk about a body that isn’t here anymore. Separation between the body and the voice is something that we are confronted by because of communication technologies. I was interested in voice as I was working on the process of bringing back the voices of prehistoric creatures, voices from very far away, and more recently with the “Screams From Hell” project, where I was bringing voices from the middle of the earth. It was about voice and supernatural phenomena. In general for me, sound is an important tool to use, because you feel it in the space – it’s physical and it creates an immersive experience.

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I really love the formal qualities of your work. What determines your aesthetic choices – materials, colours, etc?

The forms and shapes are always strongly linked with the topic. My research determines the materials and shapes I choose for my sculptures. Even though I have completely moved away from design (which is my background), I would say the research between the shapes and materials comes from my knowledge of design – they always have specific functions. I also often look at medical equipment, such as artificial organs and their design. I look at how the body integrates with these machines – for example milking machines with this project. I also like using creatures or objects that are iconic and recognizable because the research and conceptual aspects of my work can be quite complex. It's important to have an element which is either iconic or comical in order to captivate the audience and draw them into my world. It's almost like creating a very dark Walt Disney tale...