



*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
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(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
1/14

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TRUE BELIEVERS

# An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species

In an age of uncertainty, the mysterious, highly imaginative work of the sculptor Marguerite Humeau embodies the precariousness of contemporary life, with an eye to the distant past.



Marguerite Humeau, photographed in Abney Park Cemetery in London on June 2. Will Sanders

*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
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(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
2/14

ON A RECENT April afternoon, [Marguerite Humeau](#) set out to see some dinosaurs.

A long bicycle ride took the French artist from her East London apartment to Crystal Palace Park, where the first life-size sculptures of prehistoric animals debuted in 1854 and now loom out of the lush greenery with an air of incongruous self-importance. “They were supposed to be cutting-edge science at the time, and now they’re used to make fun of the Victorian era and its inaccuracies,” Humeau said on video chat, tilting her phone to better frame two potbellied, wildly off-base depictions of iguanodon. The bulky mausoleum-size reptiles stared back defiantly from an overgrown island, seemingly oblivious to their obsolescence. A few ducks waddled by as a nearby cellphone released a tinny ringtone — contemporary incursions on the pseudo-primordial scene.

The temporal mishmash amused the 33-year-old, whose eerie, biomorphic sculptures and installations often feature extinct species, ancient gods, ultramodern technology and mythical creatures of her own design. In exhibitions that variously evoke luxury cloning facilities, alien blood banks and primeval caverns, Humeau confronts viewers with bizarre sights: pink hippopotamus milk pumping through artificial veins; rose-colored carpets dyed with every chemical in the human body; bulging, voluptuous tangles of bronze inspired by manatee brains and Paleolithic Venus-style figurines. With their severe ridges and sensuous grooves, the works alternately evoke medical equipment, internal organs and distorted bones. “I always think about my projects, or the process of making them, as time machines somehow, and maybe space machines as well,” she said. “It’s about creating transitions between things that happened deep in the past, into the present and far in the future.”

*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
The New York Times Magazine, July 2020  
(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
3/14

Humeau is attracted to enigmas — the origin of consciousness, the emotions of other species, the evolution of love — and her projects deliver seductive, science-fiction reveries on these and other riddles. What if elephants had become the dominant species? What if sentience could be chemically engineered? What are the sounds at the center of the earth?

“For me, Marguerite is someone who focuses on ‘ifs’ and really tries permanently to push the limits of our knowledge,” said [Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel](#), the curator who organized Humeau’s 2016 [exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo](#) in Paris. Humeau’s approach flouts a centuries-old obsession with logic in Western Europe, “this tradition of rationality, of certainty, of totality, of categorization, of divisions,” said Lamarche-Vadel. “She’s exploding all of these by saying, actually, there is another way to understand the world that is much more about entanglements, about collaboration, relationships, complexity, doubts.”

Humeau has long embraced big questions, but her paeans to uncertainty feel particularly provocative now in the midst of [a global pandemic](#) that eliminated clarity as one of its earliest casualties. The virus has become the architect of an unpredictable new world, in which apocalyptic headlines deliver fresh sources of confusion, and unknowable outcomes inspire wild speculation. Of course, there was already plenty of amorphous dread on tap before the disease hit, but Covid-19 has sent many of us groping for reliable information like shipwreck victims grasping at whatever flotsam drifts our way.



*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
The New York Times Magazine, July 2020  
(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
4/14



An installation view of Humeau's "Echoes" show at Duve Berlin in 2015. Marguerite Humeau/DUVE Berlin

Nine years ago, when Humeau first incorporated extinct creatures in her art, the Anthropocene had yet to become the established concept it is today. “With the coronavirus crisis, I’ve been thinking that now it’s a fact,” said Humeau. “It’s not a speculation that things will change ... Now we are in it.” Our daily existence is haunted “by a question mark on the idea of permanence,” she said, casting a glance at the dinosaurs behind her. “When we were born, there was not this question mark.”

The fate of other species is even more tenuous: In the past 50 years, humans have destroyed 60 percent of vertebrate life — mammals, birds, fish and reptiles — and scientists predict that most endangered species won’t survive the next century. What if animals faced with these odds are developing spiritual beliefs to contend with mortality, wondered Humeau, and certain

*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
The New York Times Magazine, July 2020  
(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
5/14

unexplained behaviors — chimpanzees throwing rocks at particular trees, elephants supposedly waving branches at the moon — are rituals aimed at achieving some kind of spiritual transcendence? The idea led her to create a series of new works, some of which appeared last year [at Centre Pompidou](#) in Paris in the solo presentation “High Tide.” With their cadaverous pink and gray skin, spindly petals and twisting lobes, the sinuous abstract sculptures commanded the gallery like creatures from a [David Cronenberg](#) film. These “beings” (as Humeau often refers to them) were meant to suggest the poisoned lungs and respiratory tracts of marine mammals performing a fictional religious dance in response to pollution and rising sea levels.

As fanciful as Humeau’s more mystical scenarios might be, they’ve won her some unlikely allies among scientists. [Pierre Lanchantin](#), a Los Angeles-based specialist in artificial intelligence who creates speech technology for machines, first met Humeau in the summer of 2014, when he was a research associate at Cambridge University. She explained that she wanted to conjure the voice of Cleopatra singing a love song in nine dead languages — would he be interested in making that happen? He was, and since then the pair have collaborated on other sonic works, including a multilingual chorus composed of 108 billion synthetic voices representing every human to date (“The History of Humankind”) and a marine creature narrating, in whistles, clicks and moans, the first nonhuman tale of a catastrophic flood (“The Myth Teller”).

Their projects usually begin with Humeau giving Lanchantin a stack of books to read. “Her way of working, I would say, is quite close to what I do with research, except that it’s speculative work,” he said.

*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
The New York Times Magazine, July 2020  
(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
6/14



An exterior view of Humeau's "FOXP2" exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary gallery in England in 2016. Courtesy of the artist, Clearing New York/Brussels

Some of Humeau's more outré requests have provoked a wry curiosity in experts. "I thought she was a little bit odd, but I was actually intrigued," said [Joy Reidenberg](#), a prominent comparative anatomist. Humeau first emailed Reidenberg in 2011 for her thoughts on the songs of prehistoric whale ancestors. Other inquiries have been more off the wall. In 2019, Humeau asked her for "a few drops of whale breath" or bodily fluids. Reidenberg could not send those for legal reasons, but she did hose off some humpback bones in her backyard, collect the sand and bring it to London in a carry-on bag.

It's easy to see how scientists like Reidenberg can help artists like Humeau, but more surprising is how an artist like Humeau can help scientists. Creating new languages and voices for Humeau has sometimes inadvertently helped Lanchantin with his own methods. "Scientists see things in very restrictive ways," Reidenberg said.



*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
The New York Times Magazine, July 2020  
(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
7/14

“They like controlled situations where they can just examine one thing at a time and see how this one thing behaves, whereas artists are really on the other end of the spectrum; they want to see the blend of everything around them.” The synthesis of such opposite perspectives, said Reidenberg, “gives us a better perception of the world.”

Reidenberg also believes that, by addressing extinction, prehistory and evolution in her art, Humeau plays a subtle, subversive role in disseminating these ideas to people who find them controversial. “I think it brings science to people who would not otherwise look at it in any other way,” she said.

HUMEAU WAS RAISED in Beaupréau, a rural village near Nantes. Her great-great-grandfather was a cobbler who built his craft into a major business — a shoe company famous for the plastic jelly sandals synonymous with summertime for thousands of French children — rooting the family to the town. Humeau’s mother, a painter, took Humeau to museums and was as likely to marvel at natural wonders like autumn leaves as she was to talk about art history.

At 14, Humeau made a formal declaration to her family: She was done going to Catholic church. As an adolescent, Humeau felt that she “needed to find a space that would include spiritual beliefs with scientific developments and technological advancements.” Her artistic practice can be read as a means of creating that space, a realm in which she is able to explore the mysteries of existence through the lenses she lacked. In addition to scientists, Humeau prides herself on consulting telepaths, dowsers and conspiracy theorists. Speaking from her London apartment about a week after the dinosaur jaunt, Humeau was surrounded by jam-jar bouquets of medicinal weeds and edible wildflowers she had picked on the advice of a “mystic forager.” She wants to uncover “muted” forms

*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
The New York Times Magazine, July 2020  
(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
8/14

of knowledge and combine them with mainstream perspectives, she said. “I think this is my drive,” said Humeau. “I think that all my projects connect to questions about origins and ends and our place in the cosmos and our place in the ecosystems.”

After studying textile design in France and industrial design in Holland, Humeau decided that she would rather be an artist, but her attempts to receive formal training came to an end when all of her applications to art academies were rejected. “OK,” she remembers thinking, “maybe I need to find a way to do it without doing it.”



Humeau's "biological showroom" at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2016, where the "FOXP2" show originated. Photo by André Morin for Palais de Tokyo. Courtesy of the artist, Clearing New York/Brussels



*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
The New York Times Magazine, July 2020  
(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
9/14

She found the side door she was searching for in the form of an experimental program at the [Royal College of Art](#) in London called Design Interactions, which treated design as a speculative medium for considering the impact of new technology on everyday life. The program encouraged students to splice unlikely disciplines without the pressure to make practical products.

Humeau still smiles at the memory of those two years, during which she discovered the methods she has been using ever since. One assignment, at the end of her first year in 2010, more or less catalyzed her whole career. “I saw this video of a guy who was 3-D printing organs, like living organs, and I thought, ‘Oh my God, if we can print organs, maybe we can print larynges, maybe we could start reproducing the voices of dead people,” said Humeau. She wondered what it would be like to replicate the vocal tracts of specific singers, whose disembodied organs could go on giving post-mortem performances, and began thinking about the vanished voices she would love to hear.

Topping the charts was Lucy, the early hominid whose remains were discovered in Ethiopia in the 1970s. The problem was that pretty much everything Lucy and modern humans use to produce sound — the lungs, larynx, trachea, nose, mouth and sinuses — is composed of soft tissue and leaves no fossil record. But the imaginative act of filling in the scientific gaps would prove to become a form of myth making for Humeau. After contacting a slew of experts — paleontologists, veterinarians, linguists and robot engineers among them — she analyzed CT scans of comparable human and chimpanzee organs, as well as Lucy’s skull. From these, she created a streamlined computer model of the voice box and had it 3-D printed to scale in flawless SLA resin.

*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
The New York Times Magazine, July 2020  
(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
10/14

The result was an elegantly concise fusion of science and speculation tethered to a monster of a title: “[Lucy From the Series Back, Herebelow Formidable \(the Rebirth of Prehistoric Creatures\)](#).” The vocal box — a smooth, white abstract form vaguely resembling a misshapen fish — was mounted on a severe black metal pole at the height it would be were it inside Lucy’s body. A black motorized air compressor on the floor acted as surrogate lungs, pumping artificial breath into the device to produce high-pitched cries. Humeau chose to leave these expressionless mechanical elements starkly exposed — there is nothing warm or relatable about them — and their effect is unnerving. By resurrecting one of the oldest human ancestors as the sum of reproducible parts, Humeau distilled an ongoing debate about what makes us human. The installation harkened back to “[Frankenstein](#),” [Mary Shelley](#)’s 200-year-old tale of technology gone too far, at the same time that it evoked the current quest of big tech companies to elide mortality by preserving or creating consciousness.

A curator at the Museum of Modern Art caught wind of the project and, as soon as Humeau finished one version for her graduation show, she immediately began making a sleeker second edition for a communication-themed design exhibition at the museum called “[Talk to Me](#).” Humeau was on vacation when she got the news that MoMA wanted to acquire the work. “I just jumped with all my clothes on in the pool,” she said. Placing a work in the collection of one of the most important institutions in the world is, for young artists, a bit like winning an Academy Award — something plenty of 25-year-olds might dream about but only the most ambitious (or deluded) would actually think could happen.

*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
The New York Times Magazine, July 2020  
(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
11/14

Humeau's career took off from there. Her next big work, "The Opera of Prehistoric Creatures," an expansion of her thesis, came in 2012. Three large abstracted beasts, including a woolly mammoth, each with their own reconstructed vocal devices, performed a dirge of droning rumbles, grumbles and earsplitting whines.

In 2015, at an exhibition in Berlin, Humeau took up the concept of eternal life, creating a pair of curvaceous white sculptures inspired by ancient Egyptian gods and medical equipment. Alligator blood, which has been found to resist various bacteria, coursed through clear plastic tubes connecting the works to large plastic drums, as though the deities were being milked for elixirs. The walls were painted an almost radioactive shade of neon yellow, a color partly derived from black mamba venom, that gave the room a bilious glow.



From left: "The Dancer II", "The Dancers III & IV" and "The Dancer I" in Humeau's "High Tide" exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2019. Photo by Julia Andréone. Courtesy of the artist, Clearing New York/Brussels



*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
The New York Times Magazine, July 2020  
(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
12/14

SOME CRITICS HAVE dismissed the artist's work as glib or superficial. "The installation is provocative," [wrote The New Yorker](#) of her 2017 show in Brooklyn, "but so slick that its critique ... is obfuscated by its camp." Supporters argue that Humeau's clinical biomedical aesthetic speaks to our cultural obsession with facts. "We want clarity on every topic, we want absolute cleanness and so on, and I think that Marguerite is addressing that," says Lamarche-Vadel.

Regardless of these appraisals, Humeau may need to find new ways to work, now that the coronavirus has rendered the idea of people jetting to distant cities to experience immersive art installations quaint in the space of a few months. She was supposed to present a large sculpture at the [Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art](#) in May, for instance, but neither works nor visitors could travel to Latvia, and the physical exhibition is being reconceived as a film. Humeau adapted by creating a performance — a single person will stand in the dark cavernous warehouse where the piece would have been and deliver a script describing it — and said she enjoyed the challenge of trying to create an emotional experience for viewers without her usual high-production means. "This, to me, is maybe like my first step into acknowledging this new world," she said, "and what happens to making physical sculptures, what happens to art, when many of the things we could do before we can't do anymore."

Humeau had already been questioning her practice for ethical reasons when the pandemic hit. "I've felt for a while now that maybe sculpture will become irrelevant at some point," she said, citing the environmental impact of fabrication and international travel. During lockdown, Humeau has restricted herself to buying food and basic essentials. "If I don't buy clothes anymore, then why would I produce new sculptures?" she said.

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The New York Times Magazine, July 2020  
(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
13/14

In another sense, however, the pandemic has reinforced Humeau's conviction in her practice. "I don't know about you, but this whole lockdown has made me realize that we need sculpture because we need physical presences," she said. "I've been feeling so depressed, not being able to see my friends — to just feel human heat. And in a way, this lockdown has shown me a prototype for a society in which we would only become digital entities, and I have found that highly terrifying and completely inhuman." Still, Humeau (who usually works with industrial plastics) says she plans to use more recycled materials going forward and investigate cleaner fabrication methods.

Another consequence of the lockdown, says Humeau, is an urge to "be more local" — to be more involved in her community, to buy locally grown produce — and she wants to extend that philosophy to her art, making pieces that directly relate to the places in which they are shown. She is testing this approach in a new commission for [Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo](#), an Italian art organization that has invited Humeau to create her first permanent outdoor installation in a town not far from Turin. "I wanted to use this project as a sort of prototype for a way of thinking," she said. Unable to visit the site in March as planned, Humeau focused her signature obsessive research on the Piedmont region from afar, familiarizing herself with local agricultural traditions, poetry and folklore. "To tell the truth," said [Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo](#), the head of the foundation, "I knew that she was an artist whose work is always very deep, very precise, but I was amazed by the scope of her research interests ... from local soil to magical traditions through botanical science."

Humeau envisions the piece, slated to open during the fall harvest, as a creation myth for the prehistoric origin of wine. Two sculptural grapevine deities — one male, one female — will stand at the center of a garden.

*An Artist Who Reanimates Extinct Species*  
The New York Times Magazine, July 2020  
(author: Zoë Lescaze)  
14/14

Given her fascination with primeval origin stories, Victorian oddities and radical futures, I asked Humeau where — or when — she would go if she could time travel. “I’m really happy to live now,” she said. “I feel like what we’re experiencing is quite special, in a very dark way.” The response was surprising and also exactly what one might expect of an artist whose imagination runs on mystery, and who prefers her riddles without answers.