



*Artist to Know: The 29-Year-Old Effortlessly
Melding Science and Romance*
T Magazine, June 2016
(author: Kat Herriman)
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FOXP2, the 29-year-old artist Marguerite Humeau's solo exhibition on view now at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, centers on the death of a fictional elephant matriarch. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by André Morin.

A wall-shuddering heartbeat reverberates down the pitch-black hall that leads to Marguerite Humeau's solo exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. An ominous lit sign reading "FOXP2," the name of the show, marks the entryway into the surgery-bright antechamber that the 29-year-old artist describes as her "biological showroom." Inspired by car fairs and grocery stores, the extreme environment sets the tone for Humeau's fourth-ever solo show, spurred by her interest in what she calls "luminous horror." "It's trying to create things that at first look very bright and attractive, but are actually horrific. Luminosity is something I think of when looking at the Apple store; they sell light," Humeau says. "To me, it's the same premise that many religions have sold: to become immortal, you have to become immaterial."

Schooled at Design Academy Eindhoven and the Royal College of Art, Humeau's ambitious graduation project was an opera performed using epoxy models she created of dinosaur vocal cords — which landed her in the Museum of Modern Art's collection. A collaboration with a panel of specialists including paleontologists, engineers and surgeons, the research-heavy project demonstrated Humeau's penchant for collapsing science and romance. "I'm interested in pushing the limit of existing systems of knowledge and confronting the experts that I'm working with to their own gaps in knowledge to see what happens when science stops and speculation starts," she says. "I think that is where you find poetry."

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Exhibition view of FOXP2.
Courtesy of the artist. Photo by
André Morin.

A voracious reader, Humeau is often inspired by books. FOXP2, which gives this new exhibition its name, is a gene associated with the beginning of language — which, as Jared Diamond argues in “The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal,” is ultimately responsible for humanity’s domination of the planet. Diamond’s book, paired alongside a researcher’s personal account of an elephant death ritual, led Humeau to delve into the fantasy of what would happen if elephants had beat humans in the evolution game.

Humeau brings this idea to life with a funeral procession of 10 to-scale pachyderms, which occupy a platform in the center of the space. Like her past projects, the sculptures are incredibly stylized, working as both functional and symbolic objects. Each elephant represents an emotion, and Humeau has injected substances into each structure to evoke them — ranging from real elephant tears, to alcohol, to hormones associated with euphoria. “I like the idea of high-definition sculpture. It’s more about creating ghosts rather than creating beings,” she explains. “I always want my sculptures to look like they have traveled through time and space, and maybe they are just apparitions and that they could fade at any time.”



Weeping sculpture that contains elephant tears the artist sourced from Thailand.
Courtesy of the artist. Photo by
André Morin.

The elephants stand upon an even more incomprehensible object: a rug dyed with all the chemicals contained in the human body. “It’s like a soulless body, or humans before they actually evolved, a primordial soup,” Humeau says. There is an audio component to the tableau: a chorus of reenacted early Homo sapiens’ voices fills the room, representing the first mutation of FOXP2. As with her prehistoric opera, the sound creates another disembodied presence in the space.

The theoretical questions presented at “FOXP2” are only complicated by the artist’s presentation at Manifesta, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, the 11th edition of which is on view now in Zurich. For the biennial, Humeau partnered with the autonomous systems engineer Mathias Bürki on a pair of lovesick robots, who emit hormones and mating calls through a fog of chemically castrating, anti-love drugs. The installation explores the origin of love much in the same way “FOXP2” looks at the beginning of language and consciousness. “My work is about engineering ideas, so that each show, each sculpture, is a proposal for something new. Since they are all contrary to one another, there is never one straight answer,” she says. “I’m hoping to create more mysteries and enigmas, rather than point to solutions or the right way to think.”