

3 2

# Marguerite Humeau: Two-Headed Venus

Installation view of *Venus of Frasassi*, A 10-year-old female human has ingested a rabbit's brain, 2019, Portland limestone, a cappella voice, 32 x 28 x 86.2 cm, at "Ecstasies," Kunstverein Hamburg, 2019.  
Photo by Julia Andreone. All images courtesy the artist and Clearing, New York/Brussels.



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

BY NADIM SAMMAN

Two-headed Venus. A 25-year-old pregnant female human and herself as a 90-year-old have ingested a tortoise's brain. Shameless Venus. A 20-year-old female human has ingested a mole's brain. Queen with Leopards. A 150-year-old female human has ingested a manatee's brain. Seated Lady of Çatalhöyük. A 40-year-old female human has ingested the brain of a hedgehog. Venus of Frasassi. A 10-year-old female human has ingested a rabbit's brain. Venus of Hohle Fels. A 70-year-old female human has ingested a sloth's brain.

These descriptions read like headlines of imaginary tabloids or clickbait from the maelstrom of sensationalism and misinformation gestating in the darkest corners of the internet. Eerily specific, descriptive, and concrete, they form pictures in the mind that tug at one's curiosity. Could these events be true? What would they look like? The lines activate our morbid interests in novelty, taboo, and gore; our shameless impulse to be in the know, whatever the topic. A desire (under the sign of the love goddess, Venus) to *have* them; to consume what is other and different; to ingest more and thus *be* more. They are titles for Marguerite Humeau's reimaginings of said goddess, rendered as drawings, as well as sculptures that flesh out the stories. These works are reports on what Venus could be now, assuming that we believe in her. Perhaps she *is* real. For, we have been told, she is not just goddess but all too human.

Anywhere else, the litany of shocking situations might be deemed fake news, but within what Humeau calls the "ecosystem" of a project, they are very real indeed. What is to philosophers a thought experiment or a hypothetical alternate universe could be considered a kind of bubble. Once one enters this speculative domain, one is subjected to all manner of seductions within this virtual reality. All that matters is the internal consistency of this world, its seeming plausibility. The more Humeau's virtual universe ingests, digests, and reworks everything beyond it, the more powerful it becomes.

Such is the logic of the total installation, a term apt to describe artworks that are spatially and conceptually all-encompassing, requiring that the audience enter into them; capturing the visitor in terms of body, attention, and belief; surrounding them; staging a constellation of objects, images, and propositions as a kind of planet unto itself. These ecosystems, to use Humeau's term, are uncanny in the degree to which they overlap with the realm beyond the gallery, incorporating elements from real life such that frisson is provoked by how much the visitor, almost unwittingly, enters their insane order.

### Of Monsters and Mutant-Researchers

Humeau's projects are "Ecstasies," to borrow the title of the artist's recent solo exhibition at the Kunstverein Hamburg. Just as their content often centers on the topics of intoxication and transformation, alluding to the consumption of some sort of mind-altering substance (a brain taken as a drug, precipitating a change of consciousness or identity in a Venus, for instance), they lean on compulsive affects activated by sensory triggers, including bespoke scents. These experiences of Humeau's works are always intertwined with the notion of something coming into being. The show at Kunstverein Hamburg, for example, involved a smell that apparently mimicked the odor of birth. What emerged at Humeau's exhibition "FOXP2" (2016) at Paris's Palais de Tokyo was a speculative species of elephants bestowed with an unlikely capacity for complex speech. In essence, these forms and metamorphoses mark the creation of new historical subjects in Humeau's oeuvre.

What is most intoxicating about her worlds and the beings that inhabit them—what carries visitors further into fictional lacunae—is the artist's apparent deployment of science in their





Installation view of *Echo, A matriarch engineered to die*, 2016, polystyrene, white paint, acrylic parts, latex, silicone, nylon, glass artificial heart, water pumps, water, potassium chloride, powder-coated metal stand, sound, installation (including stand): 120.2×449.6×136.1 cm; glass heart: 30×60×30 cm, at "FOXP2," Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2016-17. Photo by Spassky Fischer.



Installation view of *HARRY II (BODY)*, 2017, polystyrene, resin, fiberglass, white paint, acrylic parts, sprayed metal stand, water tanks, raptors sourced on an anti-climbing security systems website, cast in artificial human skin, rubber, glass artificial blood-sucking organ, artificial human blood, sound, 254×474×245 cm, at "Riddles," Clearing, New York, 2017. Photo by Stan Narten, JSP Photography.

production. Humeau develops concepts in the manner of a sci-fi author, consulting with experts in varied fields—from paleontology and biology to ancient history and anthropology—and probing the outer reaches of their expertise in search of fissile material. Having gathered these exotic fruits, she goes on to mix, splice, and embellish with wild abandon. Much emphasis has been placed on this extensive research process by eager critics. However, the force of her results stem not from her competency within any one discipline but rather her wild, mutant, and sometimes monstrous bridging of many. A composite body is her objective—a shocking bricolage that moves beyond anything these specializations might accept within them. As a researcher she is less Victor Frankenstein and more his monster, taking on intellectual appendages harvested from various disciplines and thrown together in ways that some may find horrifying. What she creates, too, are monsters.

Perhaps most shocking is that Humeau, as mutant-researcher, produces hybrid forms that make sense. They are compelling, sympathetic at times, like *Echo, A matriarch engineered to die* (2016), the sculptural elephant hooked up to an artificial heart at “FOXP2.” Standing before us in physical space, in sculptural forms whose smoothness and clinical stylization suppress any question of intellectual inconsistency or doubtful plausibility, these forms demand assent and recognition of their being. Instead of spelling out how they make sense, they bear down on us as *riddles* (the title of Humeau’s 2017 exhibition at the Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin) that the viewer may not even solve. Updating the ancient myth of the sphinx, Humeau staged at Schinkel a nexus of borders and power, pursuing the issue of what polices a threshold. While speaking to the politics of security in social affairs, her object series addressed *discipline* in general. In fact, through her own hybridizing indiscipline, playing fast and loose with various source materials but having them cohere in monumental forms, Humeau’s creatures frequently present us with an awesome unification that has crossed all thresholds—only to stake out an inscrutable boundary before us.

In this respect, Humeau’s works can be read as a dramatization of the potency of the fanatical autodidact: the one who cobbles together eclectic methods, sources, and conclusions, no matter how incompatible they may be, making them one. Conspiracy theories are typified by being able to incorporate all contradictions. Now that anyone with a computer has access to an abundance of (mis)information, and the ability to splice and publish whatever they wish, monsters proliferate in our cultural and political life. Conspiracies run rampant—one of the most widespread being that the world is run by a cabal of politicians and aristocrats who are lizards. In this media landscape of mutant-researchers and their monstrous ideas, Humeau’s poetics capture this atmosphere of folly and fascination.

Notwithstanding a possible lizard takeover, Humeau’s work is attuned to the concern shared by many regarding how social, cultural, and economic life is governed by hyperspecialized proprietary knowledge. Today’s systems of narration shape the real world as much as they reflect it. In so doing, they both enable and circumscribe our existential possibilities. It is a simple fact, however, that it is impossible for anyone to be fluent in every discipline that orders our experience. Obscure functions, principles, and vocabularies govern the everyday lives of rocket scientists and street cleaners alike. This is to say, the contemporary mechanics of techno-capitalist-science are, for most people, occult—a paradoxical condition that lies coiled at the heart of contemporary life like a worm.

Occluded operation lies at the heart of Humeau’s sphinxlike practice. She herself holds the key, and her sculptures are the totems of the black box. Revealing just enough about how they have come into being, but nothing more, Humeau’s objects are shrouded in mystery. In a way, they are also totems for the science-fiction of scientism, spuriously guaranteeing the legibility of the world we live in, a world saturated with specialized constructs though we are

long past being able to read the book. In the presence of Humeau’s totems, the visitor contemplates visions of their own prostration, attending to their mania for proprietary truth and their fetish for the commodity’s secret.

The magic starts with naming, and Humeau’s titles flip between being descriptive (*qua news*) and humanizing. While the former offers a narrative, the latter outlines character. In giving person-like names to some of her creations, Humeau consolidates dramatic action within the world described. Given that her sculptures and their putative lived-being are entirely constructed, a contrast with the organic and human(e) is at issue. The strangeness of this “human face” on an impersonal system—often seen in savvy commercial marketing—draws one in while seeming to critique the commodity. As the artist once commented, perhaps the most banal and widespread example of this technique is IKEA’s naming convention for its products. Devised by the company’s founder, the allegedly dyslexic Ingvar Kamprad, who apparently found it difficult to remember the order of numbers in item codes, the system gives all of the company’s desks, chairs, and shelves Swedish boys’ names. Following the naming conventions of Billy the bookcase, Fredrik the desk, and Gulliver the baby crib was Humeau’s grotesque *HARRY I (EYES)* (2017), a suspended metal structure featuring three pairs of artificial glass lion eyes embedded with motion sensors. Meanwhile, *HARRY II (BODY)* (2017) is composed of polystyrene, resin, fiberglass, white paint, acrylic parts, a sprayed metal stand, water tanks, so-called raptors—sourced on an anti-climbing security systems website—cast in artificial human skin, rubber, glass, an artificial blood-sucking organ, artificial human blood, and sound.

### Phases of Change

Humeau’s methodology dates to her days as a student at the Royal College of Art in London. While undertaking her master’s degree in Design Interactions, the artist gathered 3D scans of fossils, including those of extinct mammals such as a woolly mammoth, an ambulocetus, an early hominid, and a saber-toothed tiger, as well as of these species’ descendants. By amalgamating the respective data sets for each species, she constructed hypothetical 3D models of their sound-producing anatomies, and with a computer-controlled milling device, sculpted these models out of silicone, attached them to air compressors, and resurrected the roars of these creatures never before heard by humans. Staging the crossing of great distances in time and space, the transition between the biological and the digital, and the encounters between personal desires and natural forces, this project staked out a wildly new terrain for sculpture.

Combining prehistory, occult biology, and science fiction, Humeau’s graduation work resuscitated the past, conflated the subterranean and the subcutaneous, and updated the quest genre for the information age. Given the epic sweep of her idea, it is little wonder that she named the work *The Opera of Prehistoric Creatures* (2012), perfectly capturing her endeavors of performance and grandiosity. Before the commencement of any actual physical construction, she created performers out of material closer to the nonexistent than being in the popular imaginary. Created concurrently with philosophical interest in neo-materialist Quentin Meillassoux’s concept of the “*arche-fossil*,” an objective trace of an ancestral reality, Humeau’s project was apt for its engagement with the out-of-time. It also marked the birth of her art.

Having fixed upon a need to construct characters, or performers, Humeau moved on to the question of props in *The Things? - A Trip to Europa* (2014)—a series of objects exploring the possibility of communication between worlds and the means by which knowledge is generated through the impossibility of reaching an object of investigation that is extinct, unknown, or physically inaccessible. Posed as an imaginary Earth analogue expedition to Jupiter’s icy moon Europa that in reality took place in Antarctica, the narrative of



Detailed installation view of *Ecstasies*, 2019, black ink pen on layout paper, dimensions variable, at "Ecstasies," Kunstverein Hamburg, 2019. Photo by Julia Andréone.

Humeau's work focuses on the strange new life forms found around subsea volcanic fumaroles, with each sculpture proposing a way to contact them.

Humeau left behind things that have lived for those which have yet to be at her milestone exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo. It was here that she turned her attention to what a stage might be from the perspective of her performers. Moreover, it was here that she concentrated on opera, in the sense of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. "FOXP2" took as its starting premise a world in which, following anatomical mutations, elephants evolve to develop a capacity for complex spoken language. One entered this world through a corridor suffused with a choral soundtrack of supposedly 108 billion voices—one for every human who has ever lived—performing the birth of language. After some sputtering, word-like sounds eventually come together in groups. In fact, this is a speculative ur-language generated by algorithmic analysis. Humeau and a collaborator translated one of the earliest existing texts of the Book of Genesis into every language available on Google Translate, then used a custom program to search for shared linguistic forms. As random as the process of evolution itself, the reverse-engineered meta-language identified was just one of many possible results. If the program had been fed slightly different data, it might have delivered something entirely different, suggesting that the search for origins is an inherently creative and imprecise process.

The installation as a whole puts forward a showroom with modes of biological consciousness presented as an industrial product line, a reference to consumerism. Eerily, the boutique features various prototypes of elephants, with the sculpture of the matriarch *Echo* dying in agony featured as the centerpiece of the show. Her slow passage toward death triggered the performance of "birth of sentience" from the surrounding herd, with animated portrayals of them crying, watching, acting out their aggressions, moaning in despair, and, ironically, falling in love. It was a death wake of sorts, replete with a carpet dyed with chemicals that supposedly make up the human body. Following Bruno Latour's comments on the theatrical character of laboratory work, Humeau realized a pageant of the technical and disciplinary staging of life under the reign of bio-capitalism.

Having crossed the line between her quixotic persona and stylistic tropes of science fiction, before developing an iconography of control as in "Riddles," Humeau's recent series of cosmological drawings and Venus sculptures register a more hopeful outlook. Expansive and visionary, the works invoke the optics of outsider art. In their conceptual scope and speculative range, they appear to not just will the birth of other worlds but also lay out the universal laws governing them. Her sculptures, while borrowing structural forms of the prehistoric Venus, also strangely share similarities with animal brains. Inspired by the archaeologist Bette Hagen's observations concerning this morphological overlap, Humeau took a strange idea and dreamt it, reimagining new brains, new women, new fetuses—new life. When one meditates upon her modestly sized sculptures, which in no way look down on the viewer, their inscrutability appears less an imposition than an enticement to gestation—of an idea, within, that might only be ours. An idea of the good. Of love.

Marguerite Humeau was born in 1986 in Cholet, France, and currently lives and works in London. She received her MA from the Royal College of Art, London, in 2011. Solo exhibitions of her work have been held at the New Museum, New York; Tate Britain, London; Haus Konstruktiv, Zürich; Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin; Nottingham Contemporary; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; and Clearing, New York. Her work has been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including at the High Line, New York; Château de Versailles; Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen; the Serpentine Galleries, London; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and FRAC Midi-Pyrénées, Toulouse. She has upcoming solo exhibitions at the Museion, Bolzano; and Clearing, Brussels. Humeau's works are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate Britain, London; the Aishti Foundation, Beirut; the Zabłudowicz Collection, London; and Modern Forms, London.

Nadim Samman is a curator and art historian. Between 2012 and 2019 he was the director of Import Projects, Berlin, where he presented Marguerite Humeau's first solo exhibition outside the design world. His recent projects included the 1st Antarctic Biennale and the book *As We Used to Float* (Berlin: K. Verlag, 2018), co-authored with artist Julian Charrière. [www.nadimsamman.com](http://www.nadimsamman.com)