

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

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CAMILLE HENROT *The Restless Earth*

by Becky Brown

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Camille Henrot's solo exhibition *The Restless Earth* made full use of the New Museum's second floor, leading viewers through a loop of rooms with diverse characters, plots, and settings. A sharp contrast to the gestalt experiences presented by Ragnar Kjartansson and Roberto Cuoghi on the surrounding floors, Henrot covered broad expanses of time and space in four videos, 46 flower-assemblages, a 135-plate adaptation of a jewelry auction catalogue, numerous mixed media drawings, engravings, and two sculptures. All works were accompanied by extensive wall labels that traced and analyzed each project's evolution, providing facts and details usually absent from the works themselves that added useful layers to a progressive unfolding of meaning. Without names, dates, and places, our assumptions and associations run wild, as they are wont to do in today's media landscape where seductive pictures are often detached from, or misaligned with, factual information. Consider Google image searches, Facebook, Instagram, and even NYTimes.com, where a slow load or a pop-up ad might obscure or stagger our absorption of the most reputable journalism. These questions of how stories are told, how information is gathered and assembled into knowledge, and how rapidly this process is changing, are central to Henrot's project.

"Grosse Fatigue" (2013), which earned Henrot the Silver Lion at this year's Venice Biennial, is an epic film compressed into 13 minutes. Its title, translated as "Dead Tired," is shared with a 1994 French satire about celebrity identity theft. In Henrot's opening sequence, the phrase "in the beginning" introduces a torrent of interwoven creation myths presented in response to a Google search: "the history of the universe." This dream-like composite is accompanied by a succession of images: flowing veils of ink, rushing



Camille Henrot, "Coupé-Décalé," 2010. Video (color, sound), 3 min 54 sec, © ADAGP Camille Henrot. Courtesy the artist and Kamel Mennour, Paris.

water, the Milky Way, a “Buddha’s Hand” citrus fruit, all of which send us thinking back eons in pursuit of the ultimate beginning. The familiar Biblical phrase repeats again toward the middle of the film while an image of an early computer lingers on screen. Here, “the beginning” is connected to a cumbersome machine that feels as ancient as an early species. This artifact illustrates the origin of the digital age, which has accelerated in its relatively short history, and will only accelerate more. Even the Energizer batteries neatly lined up by fingers with matching blue-polished nails are like an archival display, once marketed to “keep going and going” on a scale that shrinks in comparison to today’s unbroken connectivity, at least for *parts* of the world’s population.

But Henrot is no stranger to other parts of the population. Many of her films are set in locations remote to Western society where rates and patterns of acceleration are different. “Coupé/Décalé” (2010) records a tribal ritual on 35mm film, giving it the appearance of historic footage. While watching N’gol land-diving (a precedent to Western bungee jumping), the viewer is lead to make many half-conscious assumptions about the subjects and the environment, all of which are called into question when a girl in a T-shirt and jeans with a digital camera comes into view. “The Strife of Love in a Dream” (2011) offers a similar moment of surprise, when a bonfire ritual begins and hundreds of glowing screens pop up to document it. Only when assumptions are refuted do we become aware of them: why do Western viewers often confuse distant places and distant times? And what happens when we realize, as we must, that one or the other is not so distant after all? Most of the exotic objects showcased in “Grosse Fatigue” are in fact located right here in our nation’s capital at the Smithsonian Institute, where Henrot held an Artist Research Fellowship last year. The debris shown resting at the bottom of the ocean off the Vanuatu island Espiritu Santo, which couldn’t be farther from our shores, was actually left by American troops during World War II.

Notions of otherness are further complicated in “The Strife of Love in a Dream” as the footage, shot in the southern Indian province of Tamil Nadu in 2011, offers conflicting associations. While crowds climbing a mountain for a ritual seem set back in time, factory workers packaging the anti-anxiety drug Atarax feel flung into a dystopian future. These scenes have the eeriness of a science fiction film: all characters covered entirely in white except for their eyes; gloved fingers operating controls on plastic-wrapped dashboards; larger-than-life machinery; masses of white pills; expressionless faces. The factory, shown in fast-moving, clinically anonymous fragments, recalls the immaculate outer-space interiors of Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where the line between human and machine famously dissolves.



Camille Henrot, “Is It Possible to be a Revolutionary and Like Flowers?” 2012. Installation view. Courtesy New Museum, New York, 2014. Photo: Benoit Pailley.

2001 was made in 1968, a prophecy of the future that is now the past. That same year, Leo Steinberg gave a lecture at MoMA introducing the “flatbed picture plane,” a change of “psychic address” in which the painted surface was “no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature, but of operational processes.”* He cited newspapers, maps, tabletops, and studio floors as models of pictures that collect data instead of representing worlds. This theory may be as easily applied to “Grosse Fatigue” as to Rauschenberg’s work of the early 1950s, only we might now replace the flatbed with the screen, our new interface that addresses the body from any position. By moving between the physical desktop (with drawing tools, rulers, and X-acto knives) and the computer desktop (with icons, folders, and windows, and windows, and windows), Henrot explores this same matter of “psychic address” and its relation to perception. Phones, GPS devices, tablets, and TVs address the body/mind at increasingly close range. With the rise of Google Glass, the “desktop” (or picture plane) merges directly with vision itself. Data-collecting surfaces have evolved and proliferated since Steinberg, and Henrot shows us the results in 2013: somewhere between euphoria and madness, empowerment and exhaustion.



Camille Henrot, “Grosse Fatigue,” 2013. Video, color, sound, 13 min. Original music: Joakim; Voice: Akwetey Orraca-Tetteh; Text: written in collaboration with Jacob Bromberg; Producer: Kamel Mennour, Paris, with the additional support of Fonds de dotation Famille Moulin, Paris; Production: Silex Films. © ADAGP Camille Henrot. Courtesy the artist, Silex Films, and kamel mennour, Paris.

Upon entering *The Restless Earth*, one is immersed in an installation of flower-assemblages that translate texts from Henrot’s library into the language of Japanese *ikebana*. It is a poetic play on the shifty relations between text and object; to identify the logic of each match demands close reading and looking, which might be Henrot’s mandate for all forms of interface.

* *Other Criteria*, 1972

CONTRIBUTOR

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