



ABOVE:  
Installation  
view of  
"Camille  
Henrot: The  
Pale Fox" at  
Chisenhale  
Gallery,  
London, 2014.

RIGHT:  
Camille Henrot  
in her Brooklyn  
studio, 2013.

# The Difference Machine

Camille Henrot delves into anthropology and technology

BY WENDY VOGEL

"THE FAMILY OF MAN," organized by Edward Steichen at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1955, was one of the 20th century's biggest blockbuster exhibitions. With financial support from the United States Information Agency, it traveled to 37 countries and reached more than 9 million viewers. The exhibition gathered together hundreds of images from around the world of people experiencing universal emotions, struggles, and joys. This sympathetic (if pandering) show epitomized the best and the worst of the last century's representational paradigm: that positive documentation of "the other" went hand in hand with the project of modernist progressivism, which helped propagate Western-style democracy and the ongoing spread of global capitalism.

If there is a totalizing experience of the 21st century, it's a very different one:

the Internet wormhole, that private experience of feverishly clicking from link to link, feeling one's body slip away while moving from a PDF of an article to a Wikipedia page to a film link to an MP3 song. Camille Henrot's work evokes this overwhelmingly subjective experience. Yet her output, which includes films, sculpture, installation, drawing, and text-based projects, remains anchored in the thorny questions of anthropology and historiography that obsessed the thinkers of the modernist era.

The French artist, now based in New York, creates essayistic meanderings around dense propositions, often plucked from ethnological texts. A show earlier this year at London's Chisenhale Gallery, for example, took its title, "The Pale Fox," from a figure in the mythology of the West African Dogon people studied by the



French anthropologists Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen. Her exhibition on view this summer at the New Museum, "The Restless Earth," borrows themes from one of the Martinican postcolonial writer Edouard Glissant's poems. Henrot mines archives, from her own library to

the Smithsonian's collection, to create narratives about the enduring themes of creation and difference. And so, while a tumultuous half-century of deconstruction by the intellectual projects of feminism, postcolonialism, and animal studies separates her work from Steichen's, Henrot is no less ambitious in her search for a capacious narrative.

Indeed, Henrot's *Grosse Fatigue*, recipient of the 2013 Venice Biennale Silver Lion, rewrites the entire history of the universe. The artist developed the 13-minute film during a three-month artist residency at the Smithsonian, where she was inspired by the debates around museology. "How do you display a collection? Do you organize a collection by different tribes or do you present them by topic, like hunting, fishing, or dancing?" she asks. "The whole organizational criteria—difference or resemblance—it seems that this is the question of *The*

*Order of Things*, by Michel Foucault, and the organization of science and language." Henrot's resulting film is lively, even dizzying. Scored by Joakim Bouaziz, with whom she has collaborated for the past few years, and narrated using a text she wrote with Jacob Bromberg, *Grosse Fatigue* presents a series of still images and film clips framed within a computer desktop with the familiar Macintosh Milky Way wallpaper. The half-sung, half-spoken voice-over interweaves different creation myths, beginning with the Native American story of a clay hill called Nunne Chaha from which the first humans were sculpted. Pictures whiz by: the artist flipping the pages of a *National Geographic*-like book; marbles and eggs; ancient sculpture; a Smithsonian curator examining a collection of tropical bird specimens. In the ninth minute, a series of windows nests one inside the other, with a woman's naked, headless torso framed

in the interior panel. The voice-over speaks of "promiscuity and monogamy and polygyny and polyandry and polygynandry," and the demons Mayshe and Mashyane fulfilling their desire. The film ends on a melancholy note of chaos and destruction: "The arrow of time / Heat death of the universe. Pan Gu laid down / And resting, he died," a theme that the artist connects to the impetus for collecting. "This strategy of compilation, of collecting, is often increased when a culture is threatened with disappearance," she says. "It's often connected with death and someone dying. It's a morbid topic."

Among a generation of artists exploring the questions of technology, Henrot stands out in sharp relief for her exploration of difference. It's a term that can seem embarrassing, lost in the 1990s turf battle over identity politics. In today's cultural landscape, difference is either flattened by technological utopianism (design your



*Tropics of Love*, 2012. Nine Chinese ink on ink-jet prints, each 8 x 11½ in.





A Woman's Hairpin Under the Manly Hat, Anonymous Author, Translated from the Chinese by Andre Levy, 2012, an ikebana work from the series "Est-il possible d'être révolutionnaire et d'aimer les fleurs?"

own avatar and write your own world) or reinscribed in celebratory micro-communities. Henrot, an autodidact of anthropology, productively links the terms of sexual difference, anthropological difference, ecological ethics, and technology in her projects. In the installation that comprised "The Pale Fox," for instance, she commingled sculptural bronzes and analog photographs with digital slide shows of objects and items purchased from eBay. *Grosse Fatigue* points equally to the digitization of knowledge and its limits, partly through the explicit use of the computer desktop as a framing device. "I'm unable to make a value judgment about technology," Henrot insists. "I'm more interested in what role it plays in human culture. What relationship do we have with it? Do we anthropomorphize it, or do we objectify it or externalize its otherness?" She maintains that technology is tethered

## Henrot's work is anchored in questions of anthropology and historiography.

to "writing, belief, and the relation of exoticism—the same way there's a connection between exoticism and gender."

When asked if this persistent draw to anthropology has anything to do with her French heritage, Henrot says that anthropology and ethnology have always seemed to be self-reflexive sciences, though they have not always aligned neatly on the side of political progressivism. "I think that in a way the question of the guilt of colonization in France has always been there from the beginning. Even before colonization, with Montaigne's essay 'Of Cannibals,' or even *Supplément du voyage de Bougainville*, by Denis Diderot in the 18th century. These texts are already very

critical." She adds, "What is not politically digested is very often where artists tend to draw from." In France, as in many parts of Europe, the ongoing consequences of colonization are one point of departure. "I think artists are often connected to the dark areas of their own culture. And so they express what is repressed."

Some of her past films have explicitly drawn on this repression of the anthropological other, like *The Strife of Love in a Dream*, 2012. Prefaced by a quote drawn from the psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, "India Is the Unconscious of the West," the film traces a nonlinear narrative between what appears to be a religious pilgrimage in a rural area in India and the

Essay on  
Exoticism, Victor  
Segalen, 2012,  
an ikebana  
work from the  
series "Est-il  
possible d'être  
révolutionnaire  
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fleurs?"



"What is not politically digested is very often where artists tend to draw from."

manufacturing of a Western antianxiety drug in an Indian factory. It is interspersed with images of Asian snakes, a seductive Orientalist motif. Accompanied by a haunting industrial noise soundtrack, the film evokes a sense of foreboding. *Coupé/Decalé*, 2011, destabilizes questions of cultural appropriation. The five-minute film of a cargo cult in the remote Pentecost Island, part of the Vanuatu archipelago between Australia and New Caledonia, depicts a coming-of-age ritual that inspired the sport of bungee jumping. It is now performed for tourists. "It's one of the films I like the most because it asks, What does it mean to make an image of something?" Henrot says. With a jagged vertical cut down the center of the film, there are two broken images that lag one second apart. Other than this cut, the footage appears completely ethnological—that is to say, aged and undatable—apart from the contemporary camera equipment viewed at the end.

Henrot's work also borders territory considered provocative; she does not shy

away from discomfiting images of colonial and gendered violence but, rather, exposes its lingering cultural effects. Consider *Psychopompe*, 2011, a manifesto of sorts about the monstrous effects of alienation. The almost hour-long film includes inter-titles from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* mixed with images of various cinematic and theatrical adaptations of the story, along with other gruesome images of female captivity and sexual assault in related horror films. "Tropics of Love," an ongoing series, collages found images and drawings by Henrot that span the coy to the pornographic, "the idea of the tropics being a region of the world that is also mental," the artist says. "It's an area of fantasy, also, an archetype of otherness that is related to gender. Because gender is our first experience of otherness." The drawn elements include sexual couplings of vegetal, animal, human, and robotic subjects. Her installations based on the ikebana tradition of Japanese flower arrangement also broach the anthropomorphizing of nature.

"Est-il possible d'être révolutionnaire et d'aimer les fleurs?" a series initiated in 2012, pays homage to books in her library. Each delicate floral composition references a specific volume that she has read. Vinyl wall labels with quotations from books are displayed alongside the flowers. She describes each installation in the project as "culture-specific in a way"—although she says you don't need to know the books intimately to appreciate the work. Past iterations have included a riff on George Bataille's *Ma Mère*, which was represented by the datura plant used as a poison and as part of Tantric Buddhist rituals that Bataille studied. "I realized I was very French in my library, so I decided for the show at the New Museum to try to add more American authors," Henrot says. In March she was working on installations based on *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing; *Absalom Absalom* by William Faulkner; and *Reality and Dream: Psychotherapy of a Plains Indian* by George Devereux, among others. She also hoped to include a salute to Donna Haraway, whose treatises on feminism as a cyborgian concept—including non-essentialist alliances, a critique of capitalism, and a rethinking of naturalistic theories around reproduction have proven influential to Henrot's thinking.

On a formal level, the ikebana might appear surprising for someone invested in the evolving and charged question of image production and circulation. Yet the sculptures serve a taxonomic function, which relates them to Henrot's overarching research. She easily transitions from speaking about this series to Wiki-Project Feminism, a complex initiative to generate more articles about female subjects on Wikipedia. She says she had a similar idea to create more Wiki articles about women in France years ago. In fact, when the French minister of culture called to congratulate her on winning the Silver Lion, she pitched the project to him. "The problem is not only that women are less represented on Wikipedia, but also the lack of links," Henrot says. "For instance, if you want to know about Surrealism, you have almost no female-artist pages. The only way to change that is to talk about what you remember, and you remember what has been circulating as a name."

For Henrot, the end goal is simple, if daunting: Producing knowledge comes down to conceiving the right architecture—the best interface. Technology, as well as art, writes our world. She envisions using the tools at her disposal to create more complex stories about it. **MP**