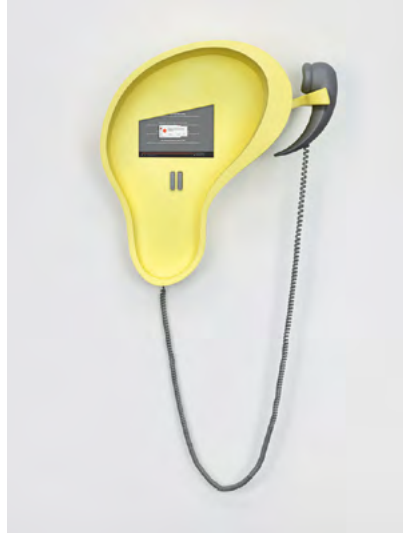


Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

JANUARY 2016



Camille Henrot: *Bad Dad & Beyond*, 2015, 3-D resin print with video and telephone components, 44 by 20 by 9 inches; at Metro Pictures.

CAMILLE HENROT

Metro Pictures

Entering French-born Camille Henrot's first solo show at Metro Pictures, I recalled a vivid early memory: my first time hearing an answering machine. I stood in the kitchen in the late '80s, clutching our outdated avocado-colored rotary phone, while my mother dialed my grandparents. Instead of answering my chipper greeting, the canned voice on the line recited the leave-a-message-at-the-beep spiel. "It's not them! What's happening?" I shrieked, my mother confused until she grabbed the receiver and laughed.

The strength of those fleeting feelings—frustration and alienation in the face of technological mediation—remains clear to this day. Henrot's nine new telephone sculptures, created in collaboration with writer Jacob Bromberg, evoke a similar sentiment. The mostly wall-mounted corded objects, made of 3-D-printed resin or nylon polyamide and incorporating sound and video components, assume retro or absurd shapes: a teal phone with triangular orange buttons, a keypad in the shape of an ear, even an oversize receiver resembling a purple dildo. Listeners respond to a series of prompts on subjects including career goals and their bank account numbers. All the button pushing leads to dead ends. As with many of Henrot's crowd-pleasing works, the phones' nostalgic appearance belies a larger inquiry into questions of control and shifting social relations.

Henrot's previous works, such as her 2013 Venice Biennale Silver Lion-winning video *Grosse Fatigue*, have examined systems of scientific knowledge and creation, as well as legacies of colonialism. The successful artist has been criticized, however, for her treatment of "otherness." Recently, e-flux's digital forum "Conversations" hosted a debate about her remarks in a September *Guardian* interview, in which she called the choreography of rap superstar Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" video (the subject of a recent series of drawings) "shamanistic and entrancing," adding, "She is challenging us to embrace our primal nature."

This exhibition focused mostly on the thorny subject of

patriarchy via the gendered patterns of service labor. Several of the phone sculptures provide faux-self-help lines on topics such as male infidelity (*Is He Cheating on You?*), psychological evaluation (*Splendid Isolation*) and interpersonal complaints (*Enough Is Enough*). These works feature female voices alternately stern and flirty, asking increasingly personal questions. Most searing is *Dawg Shaming*, also voiced by a woman. Posed as a help line for pet problems, the service offers 31 menu options, outlining scenarios ranging from dogs messing on the carpet to instances of domestic abuse by male partners—metaphorical "dogs." Men are on the phone lines, too, but in roles such as an elderly grouser (voiced by Willem Dafoe), masochistic historical figures looking for love, and an automated service provider addressing father/technology problems (*Bad Dad & Beyond*).

A series of large sketchy watercolors (all 2015) occupied another room of the show. Here, Henrot used the medium of painting to illustrate bizarre fantasies (in the psychoanalytic sense) hinted at elsewhere. *Killing Time*, for example, depicts a cannibalistic male office worker, while *Sad Dad* shows a human/bird figure with an erect penis dragging a baby by the arm. A bronze figurine related to the West African Dogon creation myth and a multitiered zoetrope animating miniature resin sculptures of assorted motifs, like cascading pills and stretching Buddhas, by strobe light, completed the show.

At first, the various types of work seemed disparate. But all the pieces reflect a sense of alienation produced by the commodification of spirituality and relationships in our data-mined, automated world. For the show's youngest visitors, accustomed to swiping and texting on smartphones to meet their needs, even picking up the phones must have felt like an anachronistic gesture. The thought of being so disconnected from live voices made me long for the days of landlines.

—Wendy Vogel