

HYBRIDIZE OR DISAPPEAR

Museu do Chiado, Lisbon

When invited to organize a show in the temporary exhibition room of Lisbon's Museu do Chiado, the curator João Laia decided to add another dimension to his curatorial concept – hybridity – by expanding the show into other areas of the small museum, which house works from the permanent collection. The result was a group exhibition of nine contemporary artists whose pieces spilled out from the designated contemporary space and shyly mingled with the (mostly neoclassical) sculptures in the museum's main entrance and rooftop garden. If hybridization – of past and present, figurative and abstract, physical and virtual – was the key principle, this was more of a co-ed mixer than a full-on mating dance.

The exhibition's title, 'Hybridize or Disappear', is a double-quotation. They're the final words spoken by the narrator of Oliver Laric's video *Versions* (2012), which was displayed in the entrance; Laric himself lifted the phrase from a 2001 poem, 'Citizen', by Canadian poet Fred Wah. Whereas in Wah's usage the words are a clear political lament with an ominous clang, referring to the eradication of difference in postcolonial societies, Laia's exhibition focuses on the formal, sensory and technological aspects of the term.

Installed amongst athletic bronze nudes in the upstairs sculpture garden were three digital prints on thin aluminium sheets by Katja Novitskova: *Approximation (Toucan)* (all her works are from 2014), is a giant bust of a bird, and two works from the series 'Branching (green forest)' are cut-outs of trees against sky. Like shop-window displays used as a shorthand for 'nature', in context the trio reflected the hybridization (read: homogenization) of global culture and its effects on the diminishing diversity of nature. The 'or disappear' option here is literal extinction.

In the darkened contemporary gallery, one wall was dominated by Magali Reus's wall-sized video projection *Highly Liquid* (2013), a shower scene mimicking commercials in which close-ups of water droplets

splash and roll down a man's chiselled body. His features could easily be compared with those of the bronze-cast reclining nude faun upstairs in the sculpture garden. Yet, while a faun is a hybrid goat from the waist down, here the human figure is practically inanimate; the image resolution is so high he looks 3D-rendered, and the water is more active than he is. If a man-animal was once the hybrid of the spiritual imaginary, is the equivalent now a man-avatar?

In the entrance hall of the museum, Shana Moulton's video *Swisspering* (2013) further reflected the mystical aspects of the relationship between body, identity and product in consumer society. Using a face-wipe called *Swisspers*, the main character erases her own face to reveal a clay vessel she has decorated at a paint-your-own pottery shop. Likewise, Neil Beloufa toys with the commodification and rationalization of spirituality and sexuality in his engrossing film *Data for Desire* (2014), which is installed within a steel-frame sculpture. For the work, Beloufa interviewed a group of young seasonal workers in the Canadian outdoor-sports mecca of Banff and then passed the footage – as well as some partially fabricated biological data – to a group of young French mathematicians for them to analyze and predict who will hook up with whom.

A group of giant 3D-printed white plaster teeth by Cécile B. Evans on a plinth (*Lost, Teeth*, 2014) was camouflaged by a series of marble, granite and wood figures from the museum's collection, but the three aforementioned video works on the edges of the room – and a fourth by Antoine Catala, *Empathetic Paul* (2015) – sucked all of the attention away from them, leaving the figurative sculptures to become signifiers for the 'physical' side of the ostensibly dissolved virtual/physical divide. The fact that such divisions, including new/old media and image/object, were reinforced rather than deconstructed by the arrangement highlighted the double-bind of essentialism alluded to by Wah in his poem: to hybridize concepts can be to bolster their categorical distinction. The ratio of power between new and old is slightly off-kilter here. Somehow this felt completely appropriate: hybridization is not seamless; if it were, we should be worried.

ELVIA WILK

