

NINA CULOTTA

Antoine Catala: “I See Catastrophes Ahead”

by ninaculotta

I SEE CATASTROPHES AHEAD

Antoine Catala: "I See Catastrophes Ahead" at 47 Canal. February 22 - March 25, 2012.

Entering Antoine Catala’s show inside 47 Canal’s second floor space at first feels like entering the hospital room of a slowly dying patient: a distinctly Darth Vader-ish *hiss, hiss* of air being sucked in and out of some mechanized pump sounds from some dim corner; a disk drive spins furiously; the blinds are drawn. You almost expect to walk into the middle of the room to turn and see an unfortunate scene involving a bed outfitted with an iron lung, or strung up with IVs, one of those heart rate screens and a lot of incomprehensible machinery. Catala, after all, is foreseeing some catastrophe — but what you see in the room is not this at all.

Five sculptures line the space. A hologram of a cat with its cartoonish head spinning, detached, atop its shoulders reveals itself to be a confusing compilation of ceramics, television monitor, two-way mirror and lighting effects. It’s impossibly flat and voluminous, both an image and an object, but completely neither. Across the room, another hologram shows a glowing sports car spinning over an un-melting backdrop of ice cubes. What is being projected onto what plane, and what occupies three-dimensional space, is remarkably unclear.

Another work hangs on the wall: at first it’s a photo of a slide, then it’s a photo of a slide with the outlines of trophies engraved into it. The hose of a vacuum protrudes from the bottom of the stretcher, sucking air out of the space in between the surface of the photo and the embossed trophy-shapes below it. Again, the division

between the two optical spaces is confused, and it takes a moment to resolve the elements of the piece, mentally packing them back into their respective dimensions.

The vacuum makes a loud vibrating sound. Wires spill and run over the floor, connecting each sculpture to its counterparts. A Mac Mini whirs from inside a clear plastic mannequin's ass, the kind you see modelling swim shorts outside Chinatown bodegas in the summertime. The hologram cat occasionally gives out a loud *mew*.

The most interesting work in the show, by far, is also the source of the Darth Vader-ish assisted breathing sound that consumes the ambiance of the room. Here a tiny projector faces a small, freestanding screen hooked up to a mess of wires, equipment and metal supports. The projection on the screen shifts back and forth between a photograph of the back of a woman's head and a bright orange letter 'a', engraved into the surface behind the screen. The images fade in and out to the tempo of the machine's inhalations, becoming the engraved 'a', and exhalations, transforming into the head. It is only after a moment that you realize that the breathing sound is the sound of air being pushed into and out of the screen, causing it to expand and contract like the chest of some animated, heaving creature. The effect is uncanny. In it Cronenberg's *Videodrome* meets a kindergartner's pictogram: a, head, a, head. *I see catastrophes ahead*.

'I See Catastrophes Ahead' is part tongue-in-cheek visual pun and part sincere probing at the paradigms informed by digital technology. On the one hand, Catala proposes that these technologies are breaking down an understood relationship between words, images, and the material world, increasing the fluidity with which a word invokes an image or an object, or vice versa. He proposes a re-structuring of language into keywords, terms classifiable by computers and resulting in an infinite variety of definitions in the form of search results: 'In an internet search, typing a word opens the [door] to an infinite universe of stories, pictures, sounds or videos,' the press release reads.

Thus the confusion between 'slide' and 'trophy', 'car' and 'ice', 'a' and 'head', 'cat', 'ass'. *Icee catasstrophies a head* – sound familiar? The ultimate arbitrariness

of these signs, and of their ultimate prophecy, reflects the breakdown in language ushered in, at least in part, by the Internet's tendency to form links and associations between disparate and arbitrary subjects. The computer's [limited understanding of human syntax](#) has provoked a concerted effort on the part of those invested in online visibility and mobility to make our language comprehensible to machines through the classification of language and images alike into keywords and hashtags. Signification functions via a fluid system of associations determined by links, search results, and popularity.

All this confusion in the works between three-dimensional space and the screen brings the point home: the paradigms that inform the space of the Internet don't stop at the edge of a touchscreen or in the faltering of a WiFi connection. The systems that organize the space of the web spill out and into the fabric of our daily lives, our conversations, conventions and memories. Connections and associations attain a vital importance to productivity. Visibility trumps comprehensibility: *I speak, therefore I am*. Maybe a catastrophe in communication can be seen, after all?