

Tobias Czudej, 'Catharine Ahearn', Kaleidoscope, Winter 2015

CATHARINE AHEARN

59

BY TOBIAS CZUDEJ

On 12 September 1940, in the midst of the Second World War, four young boys and their dog Robot set out on a treasure hunt near the village of Montignac in France. The small white terrier ran ahead of them, disappearing into the overgrowth. The boys called after him—"Robot!... Robot!"—his name echoing through the forest with a bizarre strangeness considering that it was coined merely twenty years earlier in Karel Čapek's sci-fi play *R.U.R.* Hearing Robot's muffled barks, the boys squeezed themselves through a tight passageway in the rocks and, peering through the inky darkness by the light of their single oil lamp, they set their eyes upon a strange sight. Robot had uncannily led them to discover the Lascaux cave paintings, 17,000 year old expressions from the very birth of human civilization.

Viewing Catharine Ahearn's paintings recalls this moment of encounter, a discovery of the artifacts of human fantasy cloaked in darkness. Encased in highly polished blue-black plexiglas, *Snake Mother* (2014) is at first reminiscent of the monolith in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, or the minimalist sculptures of Californian artist John McCracken. Yet when viewed closer, a complex layer embedded beneath the surface reveals itself. Two big black eyes peer back through the dark mirrored surface—they belong to a serpent-woman with the body of a glamour model, rendered in loose tangled brush strokes of neon gouache. Like the other works in this series of paintings titled *Women of the Cosmos*, Ahearn has borrowed the image from the cover of a 1940/50s pulp science fiction magazine. Playing with fetishistic modes of cultural production, this absurd sexual imagery of male fantasy subverts

Catharine Ahearn (South African, b. 1985) lives and works in Los Angeles. She is represented by Ramiken Crucible, New York and Office Baroque, Brussels.

Ahearn's first major institutional solo exhibition will be at Peephole, Milan in 2015. Office Baroque will organize the artist's first solo show with the gallery in 2016.

Tobias Czudej is a curator based in London. He is the founder of CHEWDAY'S and currently holds a position at Pace London.

Pretzel Bar Stool, 2013
Courtesy of the artist and Ramiken Crucible, New York

the cool minimalism of the painting's exterior form; the once mass-circulated image is taken out of circulation, its highly-reflective surface rendering reproduction and online distribution near impossible—frozen in time much like the cave paintings of Lascaux.

Inverting canonical tropes and properties, Ahearn often pitches form and content against each other to humorously destabilize power structures. Her first solo exhibition "Bite into that soft ass" presented in 2013 at Ramiken Crucible brought together pretzel furniture laboriously constructed from rebar, aqua resin, acrylic and salt; a series of sci-fi inspired doodle paintings dyed black and rendered near illegible; as well as formalist sculptures cast from melted Dollar Store soap and sculpted with bath tools—sponges, loofas, etc. The exhibition space was dimly lit by homemade lava lamps, that occasionally exploded and caught fire.

Shortly following, the artist's solo presentation at Art Brussels 2014 for Office Baroque Gallery was awarded the Pirelli Prize. Teetering towers of cast paper towel rolls resembling ancient columns of a fallen civilization, and ornately carved pineapple plinths (previously paper towel holders) were topped with casts of *Incredible Hulk* fists and arranged to mimic a famous 1991 chess game that took place in Brussels between Vassily Ivanchuk and Artur Yusupov. In Ahearn's work unassuming objects and domestic materials are dressed up in drag. Like the timing of a joke—what at first presents itself as familiar, quickly unravels into absurdity—the situation is destabilized to reveal a cackling sinister humanity that has pervaded since the birth of consciousness. ♡

"UNASSUMING OBJECTS AND DOMESTIC MATERIALS ARE DRESSED UP IN DRAG"

HIGHLIGHTS