

# METRO PICTURES

Gavin, Francesca. "Camille Henrot's animal obsession," *DazedDigital.com* (February 20, 2014).

## DAZED



Photography Kathy Lo

At last year's Venice Biennale, Camille Henrot's film *Grosse Fatigue*, produced during her fellowship at the Smithsonian in Washington DC, was the work people wouldn't stop talking about. It tells the story of the creation of the universe via layers of pop-up boxes on a virtual screen, and won the French New York-based artist the Silver Lion for new talent. It continues a series of films Henrot has created about the artist as an outsider, a foreigner. Pieces like *Million Dollar Point* explore the concepts of nature, history, exoticism, anthropology, archaeology and global culture. As she prepares for her first London solo show, she discusses obsessive collecting, super-computers and taking monkeys to the moon.

### **Dazed Digital: What have you got planned for your London show?**

**Camille Henrot:** The exhibition is called *The Pale Fox*, the title of a book by Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen written in 1965 (derived from the myths of the Dogon people in Mali). It's an extremely complex story depicting the creation of the world as a messy, chaotic process. There are a lot of moments when Amma, the creator, has to start over. The *Pale Fox* character plays an important role by always bringing disorder to the world because he's impatient. He's restless and always unsatisfied. To me, the *Pale Fox* refers to the sickness of curiosity – how curiosity becomes a malady. So the exhibition refers to the urgency to reconstruct a coherent system in which everything can

be included and explained, but also the necessity of disorder to the creative process.

### **DD: It sounds like an extension of *Grosse Fatigue*, continuing those ideas about creation and nature.**

**Camille Henrot:** Yes. While I was doing research at the Smithsonian I made lots of ideas and discoveries. I'm very attached to objects. I think the arrangement of a domestic space is very much connected with building up your own mental order. Collections, accumulation and hoarding are ways to build up a barrier between yourself and the other world, like an auto-immune system made out of objects. That's what museums are about, but also an artist's studio or your home.

### **DD: Your work reflects an idea with an in-built sense of failure –the desire to capture the universe. Was that your aim?**

**Camille Henrot:** Of course. I'm very intrigued with the whole process of impossible global ambition in terms of an artistic project, a philosophic project or a scientific project. The idea of having to accept the limit of one person's knowledge, even one person's physical capacity. The title *Grosse Fatigue* is also referring to this in a very vulgar way – admitting that there are limits to what a human being can do.

### **DD: It's a good metaphor for the limits of an artist!**

**Camille Henrot:** Yeah, exactly.

### **DD: *Grosse Fatigue*'s aesthetic draws from the way we look and accumulate information on a computer desktop. How did that emerge?**

**Camille Henrot:** I was doing a lot of internet research on the Smithsonian database. I often had a lot of windows open on my desktop. When you look at a cluster of windows on a desktop, your mind makes these connections, not because there is a connection but because your brain needs to resolve the images. I encountered a very interesting text about the invention of hypermedia publishing, which talks about the pop-up window and the scroll and the ideas behind these designs. I found that the whole design of the computer, the way computers organise information, is connected to the original ambition of the computer to be an extremely powerful machine potentially capable of dealing with everything – starting with immense numbers. The very first computer was a calculation machine. From the beginning, the computer tries to answer Archimedes' The Sand Reckoner's very old question of determining limits of number and operations: what is the size of the universe?

**DD:** Your references seem to come more from philosophy and theory than art historical references.

**Camille Henrot:** Distance is inspiring. When I look at art I feel admiration for other artists, but it doesn't put me in the mood or ignite the urgency to do something myself. But when I read anthropology, philosophy or literature, I have the urge to express my feedback to these theories and ideas. The way I can respond to ideas is through making a film, drawing, collecting objects on eBay, or making objects when I can't find them – and I put these objects together in a line so that it starts to be a sort of narration without words.

**DD:** How did you first start making videos?

**Camille Henrot:** I started by making music videos. When I was in art school, most of my friends were musicians. I was a huge music fan in general and my dream was to do music videos and only do that. I was also very interested in experimental cinema and took inspiration from painting and music rather than literature. The avant-garde of the 30s – Germaine Dulac, Epstein – were very interested in trying to work on the idea of cinema as a totality. As a student, that was the kind of film I wanted to make. I did a lot of videos for musicians – some good, some bad.



Work from The Encyclopedic Palace  
Courtesy of Camille Henrot

**DD:** How did you cross over to showing in an art context?

**Camille Henrot:** One of the music videos I made was selected by the Fondation Cartier for a big exhibition called J'en Rêve ('I Dream About It'), an exhibition of young artists. It was really noticed by some people so that's a little of how it started.

**DD:** So you fell into the art world?

**Camille Henrot:** Well, I had also been working for a few months as an assistant for Pierre Huyghe. After seeing the way he was working, I felt a lot of personal affinity and it made me realise that actually this environment could be easily adapted to my own way of thinking.

**DD:** Do you shoot or use mainly found footage?

**Camille Henrot:** Everything that's a moving image – including the turtle giving birth – I shot for the film. The only found footage is the animated gif with the monkey going to the moon and the image of my computer in my living room playing (Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1973 SF classic) World on a Wire.

**DD:** Parts of Grosse Fatigue felt like National Geographic.

**Camille Henrot:** National Geographic was a huge inspiration. There's this awareness of the disaster man is making in nature, but then there are these bright colours saying, 'Get a subscription!' and, 'Amazing pictures of the world by Canon!' We continue to consume the gorillas disappearing. We even find a way to consume destruction.



Work from The Encyclopedic Palace  
Courtesy of Camille Henrot

**DD: What interests you in animal references? Fish, foxes, turtles have all appeared in your work.**

**Camille Henrot:** Animals are perceived as more mysterious because we don't understand their language, and what we cannot quickly put into words is projected on them and they become an answer, a sign on the road. It's the anthropomorphic way of seeing the world. In every culture, animals become concepts. It's the way mythological stories are formed. For example, the turtle is a representation of the universe, the heaviness of creation. Atlas carrying the world.

**DD: What was it like at the Smithsonian? Was it a wild place?**

**Camille Henrot:** To be honest, there were a lot of moments when I thought I would not be able to make my way into the institution. It was extremely difficult to do the research and get permission to film. Some of the researchers and curators were very suspicious because my research of the history of the universe is basically research on everything and that's the opposite of scientific research's spirit of division and specification.

**DD: No one speaks about your work in the context of being a woman. Do you feel you get to bypass gender issues?**

**Camille Henrot:** I hope that woman artists are now at a point where they don't have to react to centuries of humiliation but can just do what they feel up to. The experience of being a woman has an impact on the way you see the world, but I've always been interested by the idea of the neutral.