

# METRO PICTURES

La Force, Thessaley. "Artist Camille Henrot on Her Mesmerizing Installations at Metro Pictures," *Vogue.com* (November 11, 2015).

## VOGUE



If you are a child of the '80s, you might find yourself soothed by the colors and forms of the French-born multimedia artist Camille Henrot. Her use of bright, confectionary pastels—seafoam greens, seashell pinks, plastic yellows—and her command of idiosyncratic shapes and squiggly lines are so very deeply reminiscent of that particular time, recalling cultural references both high and low: the title credits to *Miami Vice*, the design work of the Italian Memphis Group, ski fashion. Henrot studied animated film when she was younger and she worked briefly in advertising (where she learned how to blow-dry a cake to make it look fluffier), and her experience does, at a superficial glance, inform the precision and allure of her work. But I suspect that the real appeal of Henrot's art—its innate pull, its poetry—comes from her fascination with ideas that are much harder to date, ideas that question the very premise of how we categorize knowledge and create order from the world around us.

Henrot's work involves complex installations, like "Is It Possible to Be a Revolutionary and Like Flowers?" her ikebana-inspired floral arrangements that were on view most recently as part of a multi-artist show at the New Museum last year. She's produced line drawings inspired by Nicki Minaj's 2014 "Anaconda" music video. But she is best known for *Grosse Fatigue*, a brilliant 13-minute video she made while living in Washington, D.C., as a Smithsonian fellow and which won her the Silver Lion prize for most promising young artist at the 2013 Venice Biennale. It is a cacophony of videos—some layered over each other, some occupying the entire screen—documenting the marvelously banal and strangely curious: an extinct animal preserved in drawers by the Smithsonian; an orange being rolled by a brightly manicured hand; books of art and African tribes being opened and flipped through seemingly at random; the ocean; the bald head of a man. Over it, with a simple beat, a man recites an origin story that Henrot composed with the poet Jacob Bromberg in the manner of spoken-word poetry. It's addicting to watch, mimicking the way we can spiral through information online. (People who were in Venice that year tell me they remember sitting in a trance, watching *Grosse Fatigue* play over and over again.)



Camille Henrot, Splendid Isolation, 2015



Camille Henrot, The Birthday Letter, 2015

This month, and running until early December, is a new show of Henrot's work at Chelsea gallery Metro Pictures. Jetsons-like telephones are mounted to the walls. The phones are intended to act like hotlines for the inquiring and lost. A series of prompts asks you questions, and you answer, but it quickly devolves. "Press 5 if your dog manipulates you with lies, contradictions, or promises," one instructs. In the next room are watercolor drawings by Henrot that explore themes of abuse and mythological narratives with cheerful, inane cartoon and animal imagery. The work touches on a relatively new idea Henrot has been turning around in her mind: dependency, whether on our iPhones, Susan Miller, or something far more sinister, such as our system of government. What do we need, Henrot suggests, when we accept authority? What are we looking for when we go looking online?

I visited Henrot in her studio on the Bowery the weekend before the show opened. She was busy with the last-minute details that go into any kind of complicated installation. But she was present and calm as she made coffee (just as we were discussing the difference between dependency and addiction) and served donuts from Doughnut Plant.

**This is your first show with Metro Pictures. When did the idea come into focus?**

I started in January. This is the beginning of a whole body of work that's going to be shown in the next two years. I'm going to continue working on this topic, which is the idea of dependency and the relationship people have with the things they depend on, may that be family, the government, technology, the Internet . . .

**Drugs, vices?**

Drugs, TV shows, even religions, national identity. It's from a book I read by a psychiatrist named Albert Memmi titled *Dependence: A Sketch for a Portrait of the Dependent* (translated by Philip A. Facey). I liked the book because he's exploring these topics through the gaze of a doctor trying to help people. He's not making any judgment or distinction between different types of dependency. He explains how one dependency can replace another.

**When was Memmi writing?**

Memmi was born in 1920 and began publishing in the '50s. *Dependence* was published in 1984. The book is a bit old-fashioned in the way the opinion is expressed. It's not provocative, it's very down to earth, almost obvious, but he has a lot empathy for people with dependency. I like Memmi's articulation of both the providers of dependency and the object because dependency is never a two-by-two relationship. It's always three things.

**Really?**

Yes. For instance, let's say you are dependent on your lover. In truth, you're not really dependent on your lover—you're dependent on the love your lover provides. It's always three things.



Camille Henrot, *Single Parent*, 2015

**What about with religion? How would the three things break down there?**

I would say that a dependency on religion is really a dependency on the feeling of community and hope that religion provides. This is the material, and the church is the provider of those feelings of being part of a community and your hope for a better life.

**Is dependency a post-Freudian conception? You've read more than I have about this, but I can't imagine reading, say, Thoreau and finding a passage where he would discuss dependency in this way.**

Dependency is everywhere. It's fundamental. It concerns relationships, attachment, obsession, delusion, deception. What is more contemporary is exploring a broad definition of dependency—using one dependency to explore another. For the show, I'm mainly interested in our dependency on both family and technology. For example, the figure of the father is being used to talk about our relationship with authority, especially the type of authority that we take for granted without a complete understanding of it, such as the government or the very big companies like Facebook or Google, even the computer. For me, I've always been interested in examining the same problems at different scales: on the individual level, on the societal level, and on the universal level. I like how they connect. It's interesting to talk about something that's very universal, such as your relationship with authority, through something that is very intimate, like the relationship you have with your father. So perhaps it's this relationship between the intimate and the universal that is the method.

But I would also say—with regards to technology—that we have to examine the dependency we have on our cell phones or the Internet. There's an increased awareness of being dependent on your friend, your lover, or your family because of this piece of technology. It's more obvious because it's embodied. It's in the flesh of an object. When this object breaks or it doesn't work or it's been stolen—you realize in a very physical way that you are dependent on not just the device, but the relationships it enables and represents.

This constant contact we have with other human beings doesn't allow us the possibility to build a feeling of happiness made from being alone, from meditating. And I don't mean "meditating" in a very religious or even very deep kind of way, I'm referring more to the act of sitting with your ideas. This is the easiest way to be happy, but we are losing this ability more and more because it's like a muscle, you have to keep it in shape. Losing the ability for independent, personal self-fulfillment is increasing our feeling of dependency on other human beings, and this is worrying, because we don't have control over other people—fortunately and unfortunately.



Camille Henrot, Bad Dad, 2015

**It is terrifying. My friends are little bubbles on my iPhone. I don't see them, but we're in touch constantly. I think a lot about how I need to tell my friends, if I'm upset, what went wrong with me today. But I try to stop myself, to walk myself through the exercise of remembering that I'm fine—I'll wake up tomorrow and I'll be fine. I'm wondering, however, if you see a distinction between dependency and addiction?**

Addiction is an increased dependency. With dependency you can decide when to stop. So, say, if I'm dependent on the affection I'm getting from a certain person, but I am also experiencing pain and suffering from this relationship, I can decide whether or not I want to break from this dependency. But addiction is more chemical—I need to satisfy my desire because I cannot survive, I cannot go throughout the day without doing so. Of course, the way I understand this, it's not as an academic.

**Are dependencies to be managed? Or is there a goal?**

It's impossible to live without being dependent on something. And when two countries are dependent on each other, they are less likely to have a war, so dependency is not necessarily a negative thing. What I like about this topic is that you can address it without judgment, although there is a critique in the show at Metro Pictures.

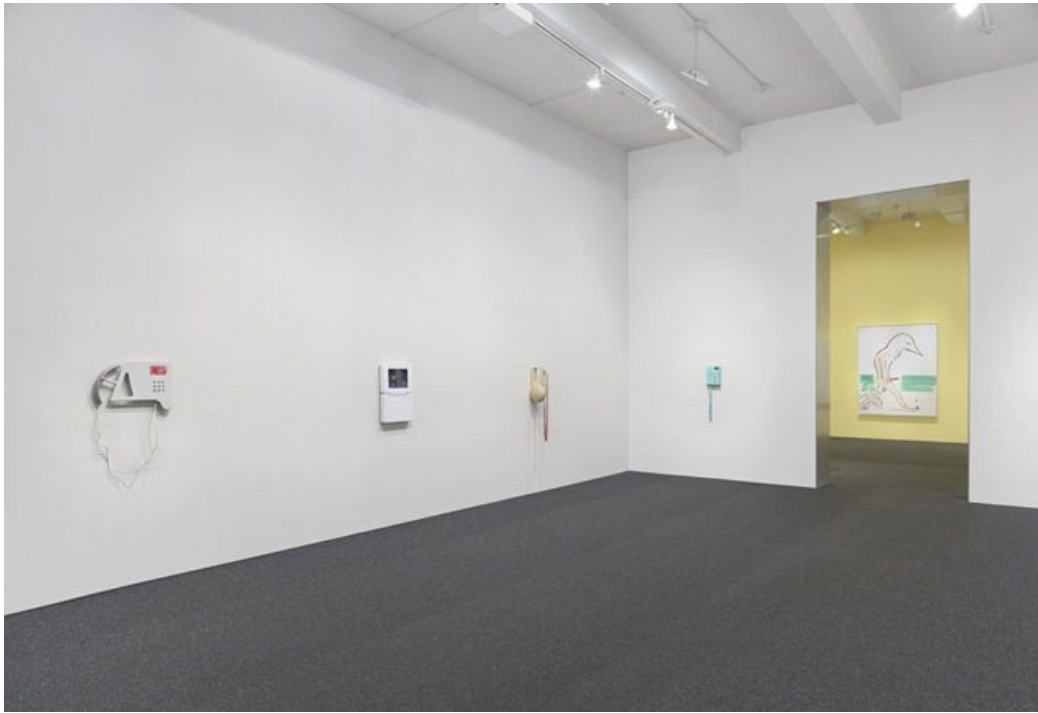
In most societies there is access to technology, to the Internet. But when the dependency is very strong, you start to feel more and more powerless, and it can seem as if you have no alternative to that dependency. Having that feeling of freedom is very important. Even though you could remove yourself from an abusive love relationship, it's hard to imagine removing yourself from, say, your relationship with the government or Google. It's a very important frustration to acknowledge.

**Tell me a little about the work itself for the show. You're making a hotline?**

It's a series of hotlines. Sort of like customer service or crisis hotlines, although instead of offering assistance, they are maps of problems or intrusive questionnaires. The scripts are in some ways inspired by real advice I was looking for in my life: I had a lot of problems with my dog—she is very aggressive—and I started going online and looking at what to do when your dog bites. I found all these messages from people who were in the same situation as me. They were telling extremely dramatic stories: There was one man whose dog bit his 2-year-old kid, and then there are other people who are reacting to the stories, asking, "How can you keep a dog that's bitten a kid?" And then there are even more people who are telling you stories, like, The dog of my brother is very aggressive and has been biting the whole family, but my brother has cancer and my sister is very depressive, so she doesn't take care of the dog correctly, and then you have bop bop bop.

**I know what you're describing—I had a minor medical issue that I needed to address, and I was Googling what to do. It was very bizarre to do that and then go to the doctor.**

Exactly. I think any time we have a problem, we type it on the Internet and we see what the results are.



**It doesn't seem healthy.**

No, but it's interesting. It's very similar to some dignitary saying, "I'm going to count how many birds are going through the sky, and if there are more than seven, then it means I have to do this." I think they both demonstrate our instinctive need for answers.

**That's a way of imposing control, though, isn't it? What you have described, well, I think sometimes we rely on other people and dependencies as a way of allowing decisions to be made in our lives, and to avoid responsibility for the choice. So, take the seven birds—it now becomes not your choice. You were instructed to do so.**

It is an avoidance of responsibility. I feel this way to a certain extent about astrology, although that might be too strong a judgment. I think astrology remains so popular because of the way it's written, being directive but open enough that you still have a space of freedom and can interpret it as a general guidance. The feeling of relief comes as you identify with other people in a similar living situation, more so than instructive you-have-to-do-this advice.

**I see. Prescription.**

The feeling of relief comes more from identifying yourself in the situation rather than finding advice. The hotlines I'm making are based on this idea. Take "Bad Dad & Beyond." It's a hotline that finds inspiration from all the problems you have with your father and articulates them in language inspired by how people complain about their computer and Internet. Has your father been eating your sibling and deleting files without permission? Does he lack self-critical sense and restarts randomly? It's written with this idea of putting it together as a sort of map. Some of the problems that I took from mythology are real problems, some of which are very extreme—like, Agamemnon murdering his daughter to win the war. Another hotline is called "Is He Cheating?" It's partly inspired by this website called [Instant] Checkmate. Have you heard of it? There are several like it. They allow you to spy on your partner when you suspect him or her of being unfaithful.

**Oh, gosh, yes, I've heard of these sites.**

And so it begins somewhat benignly, asking you, Have you noticed anything special? What is your partner's name? Then it slowly begins to intrude into more intimate details of your life. When is the last time you saw a doctor? What is your astrological sign? When were you born? Have you ever seen a psychiatrist? Do you have a genital disease? It starts to be very mean, very intrusive.

It's not only that you have a superstitious attitude when you're trying to find the answer on the Internet, but that there's also this phenomenon of what you concede—whether privacy or dignity—to find support, comfort.

**Do you think the Internet exacerbates this state of anxiety that we feel about being, well, alive?**

In a way, you can say that of any artist's work, because it's so rare to see an artist's work that is just an expression of a feeling of happiness and joy.