



ALIEN NATION

Curated by Kenta Murakami

20 June - 01 August 2021

von ammon co

Gretchen Bender, Colette, Catharine Czudej, Tishan Hsu, Pope.L, Helmut Lang, Peter Nagy, Kayode Ojo, Jade Kuriki Olivo (Puppies Puppies), Julia Scher, SoIL Thornton, WangShui

Washington DC: von ammon co is pleased to present “ALIEN NATION,” curated by Kenta Murakami. “ALIEN NATION” brings together 12 artists whose work investigates the alienation inextricable from Western culture, proposing the alien as something that is produced by and that produces our conception of the human itself.

The exhibition draws upon the writings of the Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter, in particular her later work contending with the rise of humanism and the bio-evolutionary origin myth of Western culture. For much of our history, societal organization has been understood in relation to the cosmos; a view retained in Christianity, in which we are made in the image of an extraterrestrial being. While God may have died with Darwin, there remains a narrative logic built upon extrahumanly forces that attribute certain degrees of humanness along a progressive line. Since the Enlightenment, the West has charted its history as something that is evolving: from hunter-gatherer societies to agriculture, and now, to a commercial-industrial, capitalist world. Wynter argues that this neo-liberal-Darwinian understanding has normalized the distribution of inequality and violence as something *natural*, a secular-scientific surrogate for the sinners and the saved, now measured in strictly economic terms. While we often easily accept the notion that culture is evolving, what exactly are we evolving towards?

The notion of the alien has been theorized by Afrofuturists and cyber feminists alike, and throughout, there is a persistent trope of humanity as something to be left behind. While the Big Bang may have been our narrative beginning, why are those who refuse, or are unable to be acculturated into, heterosexist and white supremacist Western bourgeois capitalism left with no alternative but to be abjected into space? Perhaps the fantasy of starting as settlers anew, off the planet, is really a way to escape contending with the horizon of humanity on the planet in truly ecumenical terms. As Judith Butler made clear with gender, Wynter proposes being human as performance, as praxis. This exhibition does not contend with the more difficult question posed by Wynter as to what a counter-humanism may look like, but rather merely wonders whether the human, as defined by “Western civilization’s globally and territorially incorporating planetary-imperializing world system,” is actually following an ideal rooted in the alien.

Avoiding overt figuration of the body almost entirely, this exhibition is not interested in redefining the human along identity-based lines, nor in referring to some culturally-derived nostalgia for the natural. Instead, it looks to artists who are investigating the ways alienation is internalized and how the inhumane mechanisms of our society are overlaid with human skin. SoIL Thornton’s painting compiles a list of top fifty US baby names, divided by sex, and collages them together; Gretchen Bender’s small aluminum light box takes the title of a scifi blockbuster, now forgotten, and invests it with a spark of the divine. Colette’s lamp, a fragment from her *Living Environment* installation (1972-83), was once a beacon of bodily warmth in an interior insulated from the violence of the outside world, now forlorn; Tishan Hsu explores this line between body and object as its blurred through ergonomic design. Arranging a constellation of mid-century glasses, fashionable relics from a time of American segregation, Pope.L then fills them to the brim with seltzer so that they overflow—they are at once metaphors for bodies of water crossed, the human body, or perhaps life-bearing planets whose atmospheres have passed their prime.

As our reptilian leaders prepare themselves to leave our over-extracted planet behind, our species’s soon-to-be-literalized alien-ation poses the question: Why frame our inhumanity in terms of the human at all?

von ammon co is a contemporary art gallery based in Georgetown, Washington DC and founded in 2019. The gallery’s agenda is to exhibit important exhibitions on a project basis by international artists. *ALIEN NATION* is the twelfth project in its current location. The gallery is open Friday through Sunday, 12pm to 6pm and by appointment. Please email info@vonammon.co for additional information.