

Joey Holder

TIM DIXON

The London-based artist explores the limits of the human by looking at how we experience the non-human and alien

‘The moment we invent a significant new device for communication – talking drums, papyrus scrolls, printed books, crystal sets, computers, pagers – we partially reconstruct the self and its world, creating new opportunities (and new traps) for thought, perception, and social experience,’ writes Erik Davis in his 1999 book *TechGnosis*. Online culture, the working methods it makes possible, the aesthetic possibilities that arise from it and, more broadly, the implications for science and humanity as well as its cultural, social and physical effects, are all explored in the work of British artist Joey Holder.

Holder’s working method is resolutely rooted in a connected and networked present, examining and exploring the limits of the human by looking at how we experience the non-human and alien. Like Davis, Holder frequently fuses this rationalised, hyper-technological existence with the mythological and mystical leanings of the human imagination, utilising the full gamut of digital media in her expansive and distributed practice. The world she conjures is a world of parity and interconnectedness, where the technological and the organic mingle on the same plane. Bodies absent, humanity’s presence is frequently felt indirectly through its systems of observation, manipulation and measurement.

In *Ophiuchus*, 2016, recently shown at London’s IMT Gallery, scientific research into serpent species and their DNA, the mythology and symbolism of the snake, and robotic engineering come together in a densely edited video collage. Its soundtrack flips and reverses electronically processed sounds in an almost mournful minor key.

This coalescing of interests is typical of Holder’s practice, in which multi-platform artworks gather, entangle and disintegrate across an ecology of videos, images and objects found in galleries and on her numerous websites. Holder demystifies her process, carrying it out in the open. She gathers her research materials publicly across myriad Tumblr pages and shares prolifically on social media (14 live Tumblr accounts are currently listed on her website). As she frequently deploys CGI and 3D modelling in her work, the viewer is as likely to encounter finished virtual objects as screen-captures of their creation. In *MULTIFUNCTIONAL GEL FERTILIZER*, 2015, presented at ‘Plague of Diagrams’ at the ICA in London, a wall-sized digital print of layered found images combines tessellated reptilian eyes and skin, handwritten census records, biological diagrams and illustrations appropriated from Luigi Serafini’s epic artist’s book *Codex Seraphinianus*, 1981. Projected onto it is a video capturing

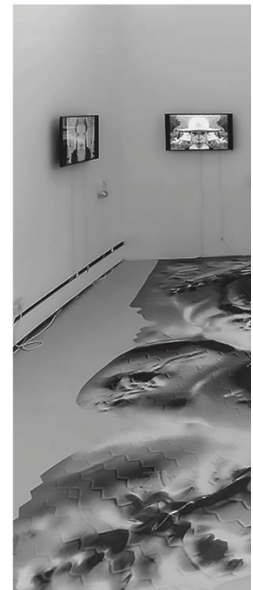


the artist’s desktop as she carefully draws what looks like a microscopically enlarged seed cell using Sculptris 3D.

The works when they appear in the gallery space gather, treat and secrete the artist’s materials in complex assemblages that remain fleeting moments within a longer trajectory. Holder’s is a body of work that gains consistency through accretion: elements are reused and found again in new assemblages, themes recur and are revisited in combination with other recurrent themes and a picture gradually builds. The density of the information presented belies the specificity of its constituent elements; the works operate affectively and aesthetically in calling to mind forms of representation, systems of measurement or the scientific enterprise in its totality.

The deep sea, its inhabitants, its environments and its power over the human imaginary recur with obsessive regularity throughout this mercurial practice. *Feldspar (Hadal Zone)*, 2015, dominated the floorspace of the ‘Uncanny Valley’ exhibition at Wysing Arts Centre. ‘The Hadal Zone’, writes Holder, ‘is the delineation for the deepest trenches in the ocean and is named after the realm of Hades, the underworld in Greek mythology.’ Holder’s oceanic fascination surfaces frequently. In her ‘Dark Creatures’ Tumblr, for example, she deposits images of strange, fascinating and occasionally horrifying creatures, and in *ikezukuri*, 2014, the video installation culled clips relating to the human consumption of (sometimes living) sea creatures. Holder’s fascination with the deep sea revolves around the close proximity between the apparently otherworldly and the human. The most amazing, bizarre and seemingly alien forms of life dwell within the waters of our own planet.

Works including *NEMATODE*, 2015, *P R O T E U S*, 2015, and *Ophiux*, 2016, incorporate footage of deep-sea scientific explorations showing the robotic sampling of creatures from environments so close and yet utterly hostile to human access. For *Ophiux* this has been provided by Katrin Linse, senior biodiversity biologist at the British Antarctic Survey, whose research into extremophiles living around underwater



Orphiux 2016

Feldspar – Hadal Zone 2015

Joey Holder & Viktor Timofeev
Lament of UR 2015



volcanoes has captured the artist's interest. Holder refers back to her own experiences of diving and how fundamentally different it is to terrestrial existence: the creatures and their indifference to human presence, but also the strange sense of space and movement when submerged.

It was through her involvement in the Multiverse residency programme at Wysing Arts Centre in 2015 that Holder's conversations with scientists, including Linse and computational biologist Marco Galardini, began. In her most recent body of work, Holder combines this research into a narrative built around a fictional pharmaceuticals company called Ophiux. Echoing the claims and promises of big pharma brands, Ophiux claims to have mapped the genomic data of all life forms on earth. In Holder's speculative future this information has been used to accelerate human evolution. Holder takes her explorations towards innerspace through

keyhole surgery, robotic species sampling and genetic sequencing to explore human evolution, fears of our extinction and the possibilities of posthumanism. Inflected with touches of cryptic techgnostic symbolism, the work has an undercurrent of menace, giving it a subtly unnerving dystopic or even postapocalyptic edge. This is certainly art for the Chthulucene (see Jamie Sutcliffe's 'Art and the Chthulucene' in *AM394*).

Central to this body of work is Holder's sense that 'everything has become a branch of computer science'. The emergent field of computational biology and projects such as the Google Genomics project (which deploys the algorithms of Google Search on petabytes of 'big genomic data') lend gravity to the sense that bodies are just another dataset ready to be mined. Projects for creating synthetic life are already under way – Holder points us to the work of the J Craig Venter Institute which is working to decode and recombine DNA in order to develop new medical applications. This Promethean impulse is not new, she is quick to point out; we have always looked to animals, plants, the earth and the sea for medicines and treatments for human ailments and this is just the next step in that process. Thinking that humans are just streams of code, however, like a programming language ready to be learned, is simplistic and this is where Holder's interests in mythology and mysticism arise.

Mythological references abound in the titles and imagery of Holder's works and also in her recent collaborative projects. *TETRAGRAMMATON*, 2016, with John Russell, refers to the Hebrew name of God, while *Lament of Ur*, 2015, with Viktor Timofeev at Plymouth's KARST drew on a host of online conspiracy theories built around the Sumerian legend of the alien Annunaki race's enslavement of humanity. In both instances the works of the artists overlap in immersive environments in which distinctions between practices blur. The installations reference and utilise the power of myth and science fiction to interpret and explore the human condition.

Holder's work captures a feeling of perpetual instability as it constantly shifts and redefines itself, refusing to be pinned down to any form of finality. Through this, she examines what it means to be human in an age of genomics, big data and networked existence, which are changing us not only culturally but also physically. ■

'Ophiux' is on display at Wysing Art Centre, Cambridge until 20 November.

TIM DIXON is a writer and curator based in London.