

Pierre Huyghe (born 1962)

France

Untitled (Human Mask) 2014

film, colour, sound

Courtesy of the artist; Hauser & Wirth, London; and Anna Lena Films, Paris

The worlds that French artist Pierre Huyghe invents are full of puzzles, conundrums and destabilisations. They perplex any sense of rationality or reason and yet they captivate the audience with their internal logic and plausibility. Huyghe creates scenarios, visions, environments in which things form a solipsistic relationship to the exclusion of external reality. His worlds make and take on their own sense of being and nothingness to replace the known world with one that provides gaps and speculations, hearsay and rumours, inversions and reorientations.

There is no point in deciphering the universes of Huyghe, and yet one is compelled to do so. Humans want to know; we are comforted by knowledge and sceptical of that which falls out of the pattern of certainty. We lie to ourselves that we control everything. The proof of this lie is found in the uncontrollable forces of nature, which Huyghe harnesses as part of his protagonist cast in realms which are submerged and swept away, which roam aimlessly, or are buried fathoms deep – ecosystems formed from civilizations in microcosmic life. For instance, his aquarium tank, ***Zoodram 4, 2011 (After Sleeping Muse by Brancusi)***, 2011, in which Brancusi's famous sculpted head becomes a monumental deity, toppled amid liquid viscosity. A lost civilization, sunk to the bottom of a miniature ocean in which lives a colony of microbes and life forms – a lost world, or perhaps a world in waiting for the changes in circumstances that will find it the first inhabitants of a new world.

There is something of Jules Verne in the works of Pierre Huyghe – his exploratory fictional adventures of Earth containing endless hidden stories. But Huyghe's visions belong to the end of things, where Verne's are optimistic, man-conquering quests and discoveries. Huyghe's worlds are created from the circumstances of our world out of balance – environmentally brutalised by the carelessness of humans. He suggests alternative worlds, but also shows worlds so deranged as to be fatally tragic.

The human mask that stoically, impassively, moves around a restaurant – empty, decimated, turned topsy-turvy, and abandoned to be a ghost place by the catastrophic Fukushima tsunami of 2011 – registers none of the weirdness that we observe. Instead, its serene countenance continues to deliver a silent service, not judging, nor admonishing, simply existing – playing its role as servant.

In the surreal colour of deep aqua, the white smoothed face hovers in space, supported by a form that only asserts itself gradually. Jerky, spasmic movements live under the mask, a swift parry to the side alerts us to the life form – the furry body – that wears the human mask. We gradually come to understand we are witnessing a monkey whose face has been covered by Huyghe's styled disguise, one that suggests a legacy in manga comics and Japanese anime – perhaps even the geisha. We become immediately concerned for the monkey made to perform its service choreography. The mask hides any possibility we might have to observe its real expression, which as we know from Darwin's research, closely resembles that of the human animal to express emotions. How are we to know if the monkey, trained to perform the function of waiting on tables, is happy, sad or indifferent to its situation? We are not. We will anthropomorphise our thoughts onto the creature and we will make assumptions and judgments about the human intervention that creates this pantomime. We might also contemplate the wreckage of a world swept away, made bizarre and inhabitable now but by hybrid creatures such as J G Ballard predicted.

Huyghe's work is deliberately surreal and worrisome. It is open to any number of speculations. Some minds will drift to the tsunami and its causes linked to volcanos, seismic shifts, and wonder if Earth is fighting back against the ravages of human exploitations. This might be one of the things we think. Another thought might focus anguish on behalf of animals displaced and put in service to human entertainment, and, yes, art. Another might ponder our capacity to know with any certainty about the fulfillment of animals and whether being trained to work as a gimmicky restaurant stooge gives them satisfaction or causes them to feel trapped, living against their own nature.

Whatever we think, we are bound to register that this is an uncertain and perplexing scenario. One we cannot control and one that eludes our capacity for rational thought. We have been submerged into the serene turmoil of soundless deluge and float and move holding our breaths in this weird new world.