

FRIEZE

Kenta Murakami on Why the Conception of Human Is Based in the Alien

The curator speaks to Terence Trouillot about the inspiration behind first group show, 'Alien Nation', at von ammon co.

TERENCE TROUILLOT AND KENTA MURAKAMI IN INTERVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 15 JUN 21



Terence Trouillot: Can you tell me a little bit about 'Alien Nation', the exhibition you're curating for von ammon co.? This is your first time organizing a group show, right?

Kenta Murakami: Yes. It's interesting because I've now worked as a curator for a little more than two years, but I've never done a group show. In fact, the two exhibitions I've worked on to date have both been solo shows for Red Bull Arts New York: Akeem Smith's 'No Gyal Can Test' [2020] and 'Gretchen Bender: So Much Deathless' [2019]. I dedicated a year or more to organizing each of those shows, so 'Alien Nation' has been a very different experience – a lot of fun, but also a little more challenging working with so many artists.

TT: 'Alien Nation' is inspired by the work of Gretchen Bender?

KM: Yes. To give some context: the gallerist Todd von Ammon and I met because he's a big fan of Bender's work. Prior to that, I had been working on the artist's archive with Cay Sophie Rabinowitz, who manages the Gretchen Bender Estate, for about five years. Later, I met Max Wolf, chief curator at Red Bull Arts and, three months after that, I was part of the curatorial team for 'Gretchen Bender: So Much Deathless'. So, it was a very fast transition that only could've happened at Red Bull Arts because, as a corporation, they move very quickly, only really planning one show per year. In the end, we had a good team and managed to organize a great show. Anyway, I met Todd through working on that exhibition, and I really appreciated him wanting to do a group show with me. I thought it was just such a generous offer.

TT: When was this?

KM: About two and a half years ago. The show was supposed to open last spring but it was delayed for a year because of COVID-19. The postponement gave me more time to think through the exhibition. Initially, I had been playing around with this idea that was more closely tied to Bender but, ultimately, I became more interested in doing a show that included a range of artists – from the 1980s to the present – who shared a similar aesthetic. Someone that Todd works with a lot is Catharine Czudej. She does these casts of televisions [‘The TVs’, 2018-ongoing] that look exactly like the ones Bender used in her work. But I don’t think Czudej’s sculptures are derivative at all. I was just interested in tracing these moments of collision and I ended up carrying that through to ‘Alien Nation’.

TT: The exhibition is also inspired by the work of the Jamaican writer Sylvia Wynter, in particular her 2003 essay ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom’, and this idea that humanism is inextricably linked to outmoded notions around race and gender. Can you talk about how post-humanism plays into the concept of this show?

KM: That was a big shift for me because I was reading Wynter last year, around the time of the police murder of George Floyd and the protests that followed. I was thinking about the complete devaluation of human life in relation to the absolute prioritization of capital. ‘Alien Nation’, however, really isn’t about post-humanism or counter-humanism, which is Wynter’s project. What I’m interested in is how our conception of the human is fundamentally based in the alien or nonhuman. From the outset, humanism has never been interested in an ecumenical understanding of humanity. Rather, it’s always focused on a specific kind of human – the cis, white male – and its livelihood at the expense of the other. That’s why the work in ‘Alien Nation’ starts in the 1980s, when – particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union – capitalism and infinite expansion become the norm.

TT: Can you talk about the artists you decided to include in ‘Alien Nation’?

KM: In addition to Bender and Czudej, the artists in the show are Colette, Tishan Hsu, Pope L., Helmut Lang, Peter Nagy, Kayode Ojo, Jade Kuriki Olivo – who goes by Puppies Puppies – Julia Scher, SoiL Thorton and WangShui. The title is a pun on Brechtian alienation, with each artist presenting normal objects in a way that makes you look at them anew or have an altered relationship to them. A lot of these artists do not overtly deal with the alien or nonhuman: I superimposed that idea onto the work.

I also drew inspiration from the 1980s curatorial duo Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo, who exhibited works by Bender, Hsu and Collette in various projects. They curated these sprawling group shows that would move from one gallery to the next, involving mostly the same artists. For me, Collins and Milazzo’s curatorial approach echoes my own feeling that I could re-create this show ten times over. Not that I necessarily would, but I do feel that the content is so rich that it deserves several iterations.

‘ALIEN NATION’ runs 20 June - 1 August 2021